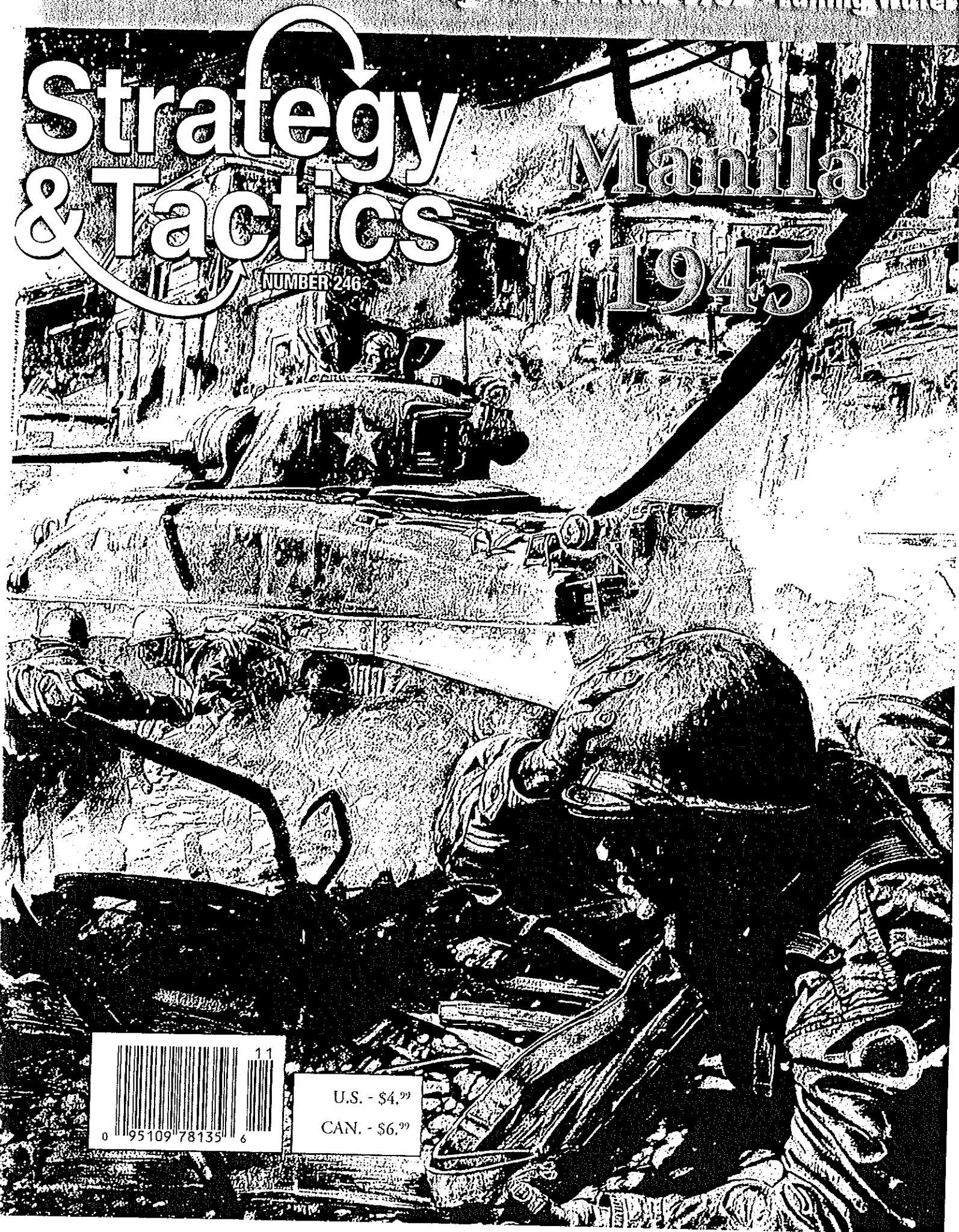


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On the cover: "The 37th Infantry Division in Manila" by artist James Dietz. Used with permission; American Art & Antiques, Inc. [www.jamesdietz.com](http://www.jamesdietz.com)

# The Final Battle of the Gettysburg Campaign: Falling Waters, Maryland, 14 July, 1863

By George F. Frank, III



Confederate units are in *italics*. Union units are in plain text.

The Gettysburg campaign did not end with the battle fought in the environs of that town on 1-3 July 1863. The final fight between Lee and Meade was at Falling Waters, Maryland, on 14 July 1863. Though not the climactic battle of the war anticipated by Abraham Lincoln, it is a story of miscalculation, bravery and tragedy.

## Morning of 14 July:

### Disposition of Lee's Rear Guard

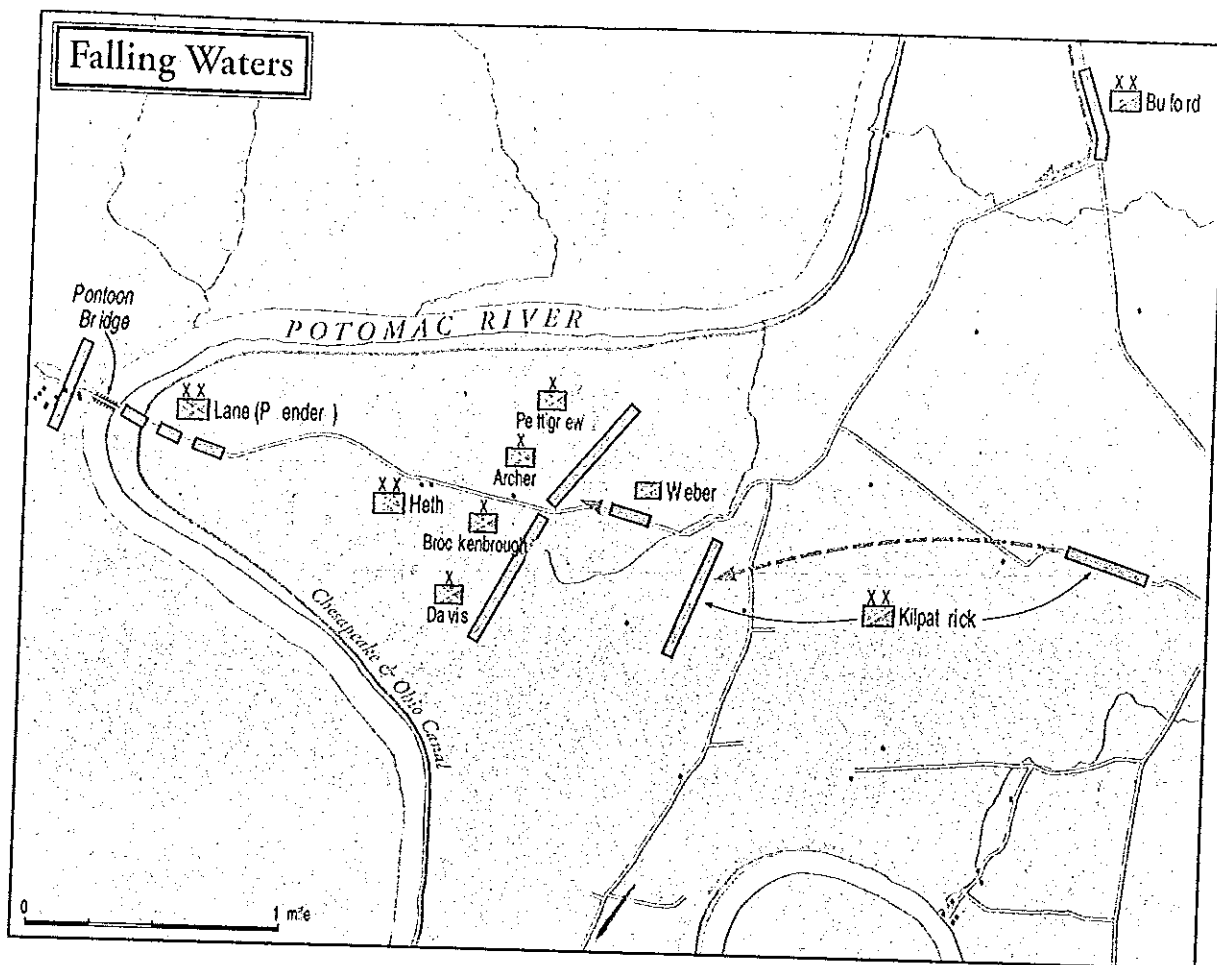
Following the defeat of the Confederates at Gettysburg, Gen. Robert E. Lee ordered his *Army of Northern Virginia* to fall back to Virginia. Union Army of the Potomac commander George Meade carefully pursued the Confederates.

Lee ordered Maj. Gen. Henry Heth's division to act as rear guard. (Confederate divisions were usually known by their commander's name.) Lee's men crossed the Potomac River on their way back to Virginia by way of a pontoon bridge at Falling Waters. During the night and early morning of 13 July, Heth's soldiers struggled through the mud, moving slowly down Falling Waters Road toward the river crossing. Approximately two miles from the pontoon bridge, members of Heth's command positioned themselves perpendicular to the road, with the center of their line on a rise where they could defend against pursuing Union troops. *Army of Northern Virginia* engineers constructed six earthen gun emplacements to further strengthen the position. Heth's

rear guard stretched from the C&O Canal, by the Potomac River, to the left of the rise and off to the right of Falling Waters Road. His line extended across fields for nearly a mile. The emplacements on the ridge were slightly to the front and left of a two story brick farm house. The farm house itself was surrounded by a plank fence. The remnants of an old barn stood to the left-rear of a two story brick farm house—the Daniel Donnelly house (sometimes mistakenly identified as the Downey house). Brig. Gen. James Henry Lane's division (*Pender's*) found themselves between *Heth's* men and the pontoon crossing. On the morning of 14 July they waited to cross into Virginia.

After struggling through the mud-choked country roads to their positions on both sides of Falling Waters Road, Heth's wet, tired and hungry men collapsed. The officers believed the horsemen of Maj. Gen. J. E. B. Stuart's cavalry division was screening them from pursuing Union forces. Heth and his staff officers waited on the rise at the rear of the Donnelly house for orders to withdraw and cross the Potomac over the pontoon bridge and return to Virginia. In his report, Heth noted:

*On reaching an elevated and commanding ridge of hills one mile and a half (possibly a little less) from Falling Waters, I was ordered by Lt. Gen. A. P. Hill to put my division in line of battle on either side of the road, and, extending along the crest of this hill, facing toward Hagerstown. On the left of the road and on the crest of this hill our engineers had thrown up some half dozen epaulements for artillery, the spaces between the epaulements being open. In our front was an open space, with the view unobstructed for half to three-quarters of a mile: then came a heavy piece of*



*timber some three-fourths of a mile in width. I was directed, at the same time that I received the order to place my division in line of battle as described, to put Pender's division in the rear of my own, in column of brigades. At this point we halted, to allow the wagons and artillery to get over the river. We remained in this position awaiting their crossing for several hours.*

### Morning of 14 July:

#### Disposition of Army of the Potomac

Army of the Potomac commander Maj. Gen. George G. Meade ordered a reconnaissance in force of Lee's positions to begin at 7:00 A.M. on 14 July. Word reached the Federals Lee's army had vacated their positions overnight and were crossing the Potomac. Before daylight on 14 July, much of the *Army of Northern Virginia* was already across the river. Lt. Gen. Richard Stoddert Ewell's 2<sup>nd</sup> *Army Corps* forded at Williamsport. Lt. Gen. James Longstreet 1<sup>st</sup> *Army Corps* and Lt. Gen. Ambrose Powell Hill's 3<sup>rd</sup> *Corps* plus the artillery, crossed the pontoon bridge at Falling Waters. Lee ordered Stuart's cavalry to occupy the entrenchments that surrounded Williamsport, as well as the crossings from north of Hagerstown to near Sharpsburg, while the infantry and artillery withdrew to the two Potomac River crossings.

Meade, meanwhile, was ordering the Army of the Potomac to pursue. When Brig. Gen. Hugh Judson "Kill-Cavalry" Kilpatrick, commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division of the Army of the Potomac's Cavalry Corps, learned of Lee's withdrawal, he ordered his horsemen to leave their encampment and dash toward the Confederate positions. His troopers found the area vacated. The Union troopers next galloped

towards the town of Williamsport. There they discovered some stragglers. They also found the rearguard of Early's command fording the Potomac River just above the C&O Canal aqueduct over Conococheague Creek. Having missed the opportunity to cut off the Confederate crossing at Williamsport, the cavalymen spurred their mounts again, this time towards the Falling Waters crossing. Brig. Gen. John Buford, in command of the 1<sup>st</sup> Division of the Army of the Potomac's Cavalry Corps, approached from the east. Kilpatrick's command pushed on through the mud toward Falling Waters from the town of Williamsport to the north.

Kilpatrick's troopers galloped down Falling Waters Road toward the river crossing. There they encountered numerous Confederate stragglers along with discarded rebel arms, equipment and wagons. Much of the gear had been abandoned when it became stuck in the thick mud. Kilpatrick's command formed up near a tree line with a field to their front. On a rise to his front right Kilpatrick could see the Donnelly house with trees to the side and rear of it. The Federal horsemen also noted that to the right and behind the house were six artillery lunettes. Confederate officers and men were visible along the length of the rise. No artillery pieces or caissons were visible. The opportunity to strike the rebels before they escaped across the Potomac appeared to be Kilpatrick's good fortune, even though Buford's troopers had yet to arrive. Buford had taken the route along the C&O Canal along the river and to the right in hopes of cutting off the remaining Confederates in a pincer-like movement. Kilpatrick decided there was no time to waste. His horsemen must attack immediately. Kilpatrick stated in his official report:



CHARGE OF THE SIXTH MICHIGAN CAVALRY OVER THE CONFEDERATE BREASTWORKS, NEAR FALLING WATERS, JULY 14, 1863.

*Harper's Weekly illustration of the 14 July, 1863 battle of Falling Waters based on sketch by Edwin Forbes. Note the artillery lunettes (left) at the top of the ridge. Pettigrew was mortally wounded between the brick Daniel Donnelly house (center) and the stripped remnants of the barn (right). (Author's collection)*

*Having been previously ordered to attack at 7 a.m., I was ready to move at once. At daylight I had reached the crest of the hills occupied by the enemy an hour before, and at a few moments before 6 o'clock Gen. Custer [Yes, that Gen. Custer. ed.] drove the rear guard of the enemy into the river at Williamsport. Learning from citizens that a portion of the enemy had retreated in the direction of Falling Waters, I at once moved rapidly for that point, and came up with the rear guard of the enemy at 7:30 a.m., at a point 2 miles distant from Falling Waters. We pressed on, driving them before us, capturing many prisoners and one gun. When within a mile and a half of Falling Waters the enemy was found in large force, drawn up in line of battle, on the crest of a hill commanding the road on which I was advancing. His left was protected by earthworks, and his right extended to the woods far on my left. The enemy was, when first seen, in two lines of battle, with arms stacked.*

### Attack by the Michigan Cavalry

Kilpatrick ordered newly promoted Brig. Gen. George A. Custer, in command of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Division (the 1<sup>st</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Michigan Cavalry Regiments), to prepare for an immediate attack the Confederates to their front. Custer ordered Maj. Peter A. Weber of the 6<sup>th</sup> Michigan Cavalry to lead the attack. Custer directed Weber's men to dismount and advance toward the Confederate position, exploiting the firepower of their Spencer rifles. Custer's tactics enraged "Kill-Cavalry" Kilpatrick, and he immediately countermanded his subordinate's orders. He instead ordered Maj. Weber to lead approximately 100 men from Companies B and F of the 6<sup>th</sup> Michigan Cavalry in a mounted attack against the Confederate position on the rise.

The field and road ahead of Weber and his troopers were quagmires from heavy rain. The rise ahead was sure to challenge the already exhausted mounts. Heth's Division held a strong defensive position and possessed a panoramic view of the woodline, the field and Falling Waters Road. Maj. Weber saluted, mounted and then passed commands to the officers and troopers of Companies B and F. Buford recorded in his report what happened next:

*A portion of the Sixth Michigan Cavalry, seeing only that portion of the enemy behind the earthworks, charged. This charge, led by Major Weber, was the most gallant ever made. At a trot he passed up the hill, received the fire from the whole line, and the next moment rode through and over the earthworks; passed to the right, sabering rebels along the entire line...*

### Heth's Division Upon Seeing Federal Cavalry

On the rise and to the rear of the Donnelly house, Heth and Pettigrew spotted the approaching horsemen as they moved from the wood line, across the field and then down Falling Waters Road. Peering through their field glasses toward the approaching horsemen, what they saw both baffled and angered them. A squadron of Union cavalry was drawn up in formation and advancing rapidly, the horsemen and their mounts coated with Maryland mud, making uniform recognition difficult. At the head of the formation, a Union cavalry pennant could be seen flying. Heth and Pettigrew believed the horsemen to be Stuart's displaying a battle trophy. (What they did not know was, contrary to orders, Stuart's men crossed into Virginia earlier that morning at Williamsport.) Pettigrew ordered his men to assemble with arms and prepare to fire. But Heth, confident the advancing cavalry was Stuart's, promptly countermanded Pettigrew's order.

The Federal horsemen, with sabers glittering, closed on the Confederate line at a gallop. Now the situation became clear to Heth. He elaborated in his report:

*About 11 o'clock, I received orders from Gen. Hill to move Pender's division across the river, following Gen. Anderson's division, and, after leaving one brigade of my division in line, to follow up the movement of the corps as speedily as possible. About 15 or 20 minutes after receiving these orders, and while they were in progress of execution, a small body of cavalry, numbering not more than 40 or 45 men, made their appearance in our front, where the road debouched from the woods previously described. I will here remark, that when on the road, and some 2 or 3 miles from the position I now occupied, a large body of our cavalry passed by my command, going to our rear. When*

the cavalry alluded to make its appearance, it was at once observed by myself, Gen. Pettigrew, and several members of my staff, as well as many others. On emerging from the woods, the party faced about, apparently acting on the defensive. Suddenly facing my position, the galloped up the road, and halted some 175 yards from my line of battle. From their maneuvering and the smallness of numbers, I concluded it was a party of our own cavalry pursued by the enemy. In this opinion I was sustained by all present. It was not until I examined them critically with my glasses at a distance of not more than 175 yards that I discovered they were Federal troops. The men had been restrained from firing up to this time by Gen. Pettigrew and myself. The command was now given to fire.

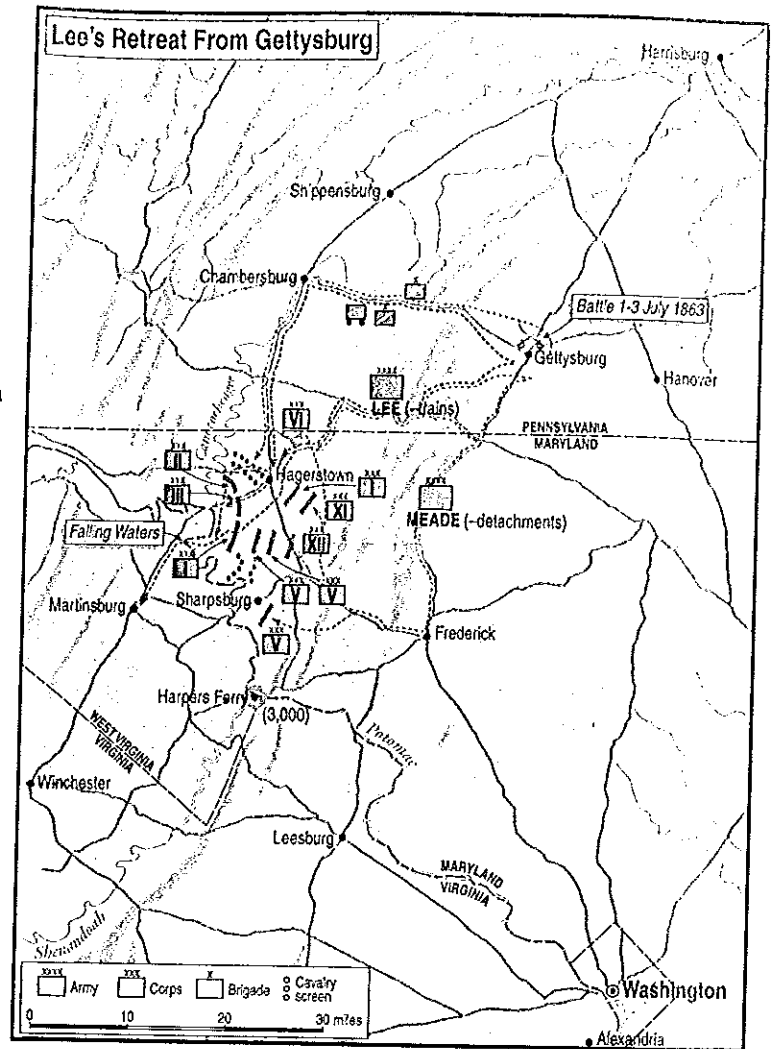
According to Maj. J. Jones of the 26<sup>th</sup> North Carolina Infantry:

After traveling all night in mud and rain, about 8 o'clock on the morning of the 14<sup>th</sup> we took position in a wheat-field as a portion of the rear guard, while the rest of the troops crossed the river at the pontoon bridge (about 1 1/2 miles) at Falling Waters. The men stacked arms, and most of them were asleep, feeling perfectly secure, as our cavalry were out in front. We had been here probably two hours when the enemy's cavalry dashed in upon us, causing some confusion, as the men were just aroused from sleep...

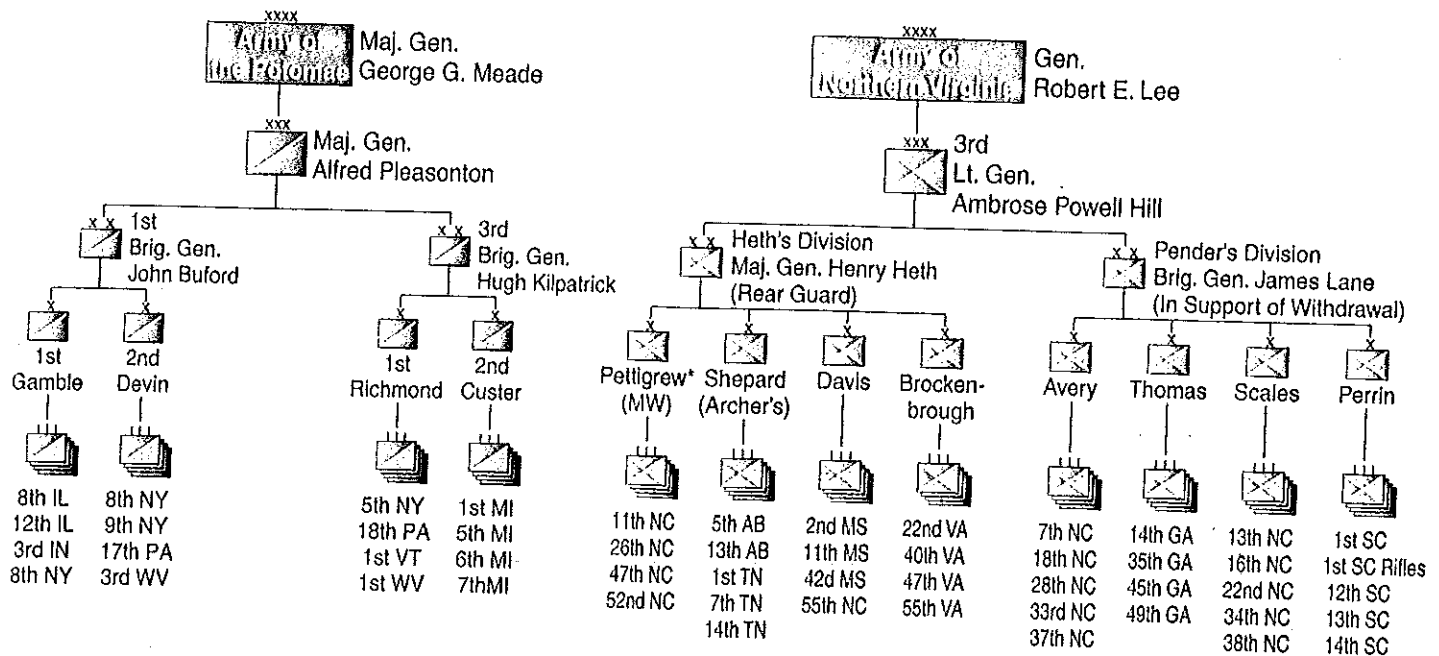
The two companies of Michigan Wolverines led by Maj. Weber rode in, sabers unsheathed, across the muddy field, down the road and up the rise into the teeth of the Rebel defenses. As Weber's men cleared the emplacements, they were engaged in a brutal hand to hand fight. Heth's hardened veterans clubbed muskets, swung fence rails, threw stones and wielded axes against men and horses. Weber's two companies rode through the Confederate position and to the right along Heth's line. Those Wolverines who were not killed, wounded or captured returned to the tree line, some minus their horses. Weber's command was decimated with a loss of 30 killed, wounded, and missing, including the gallant Weber who ended up dead.

Weber's two companies were not the only ones to suffer during the charge. Pettigrew directed the defense from astride his horse near the garden behind the Donnelly house. There he was thrown by his horse. Accounts of what happened next vary, but there are some facts that are consistent. Pettigrew had been wounded at Gettysburg in one hand and his other arm was still weak from an earlier wound. After being thrown, he struggled to his feet and reached for his pistol. The Confederate general saw a Union trooper on foot near the barn firing into the mass of Confederates. Pettigrew ordered his men to cut down the man. But the noise and confusion of battle drowned out Pettigrew's orders, so he moved toward the Yankee cavalryman who fired in return. Pettigrew was struck and went down. By that time, Union horsemen were galloping back to the tree line. The Confederates, buoyed at their success in repelling the horsemen, discovered Pettigrew lay on the ground with a grievous wound. Heth recounted in his report:

At the same time, the Federal officer in command gave the command to charge. The squadron passed through the intervals separating the epaulements, and fired several shots. In less than three minutes all were killed or captured save two or three, who are said to have escaped. Gen. Pettigrew received a wound in one of his hands at Gettysburg, in consequence of which he was unable to manage his horse, which reared and fell with him. It is probable when in the act of rising from the ground that he was struck by a pistol-ball in the left side, which, unfortunately for himself and his country, proved mortal.







### Subsequent Attacks

Kilpatrick directed arriving elements of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Division against Heth's line. Custer himself mounted and led another attack, saber drawn while another element of Kilpatrick's command advanced on foot as skirmishers. Buford finally arrived, wheeling the troopers of his division into position. His division followed along the C&O Canal by the Potomac River in preparation for an attack on Heth's flank, but Kilpatrick's and Buford's attacks were again repulsed.

Increasingly concerned about his ability to hold his position, Heth requested the artillery across the Potomac River in Virginia be recalled. Lane, his command still not across the pontoon bridge, was ordered to support *Heth's Division*. Col. John Mercer *Brockenbrough's Brigade*, which included the 22<sup>nd</sup>, 40<sup>th</sup>, 47<sup>th</sup> and 55<sup>th</sup> Virginia Infantry, advanced with their colors in the lead from their position to the right of Falling Waters Road only to find their effort unsupported. Many of Brockenbrough's officers and men, including Col. William Steptoe Christian of the 55<sup>th</sup> Virginia were captured along with their colors and arms.

Rather than risk the loss of additional men and materiel, Hill ordered Heth to withdraw across the Potomac into Virginia. Heth's regiments fixed bayonets and formed successive lines of battle behind those of *Lane's Division*. Lane's men then reformed behind *Heth's Division* until they reached the ramp over the C&O Canal and finally the pontoon bridge. During the movement to the crossing, Kilpatrick and Buford's horsemen continued to attack the front and flanks of the withdrawing Confederates. Some Confederate stragglers and wounded were captured, but the majority of the troops withdrew without much loss. Pettigrew's men carried their wounded commander on a litter down the road and across the bridge.

Falling Waters, Maryland, was the last battle for the well-regarded general. He died from his wound the morning of 17 July in Bunker Hill, Virginia. The last men to cross the pontoon bridge were from the 26<sup>th</sup> North Carolina of Pettigrew's Brigade around noon of 14 July. The bridge was cut free from the Maryland shore. Federal horsemen stood by the river, under sniper and artillery fire from the Virginia shore, overcome by exhaustion and frustration mixed with relief. For the officers and men in wet, muddy uniforms on both sides of the Potomac, the pontoon bridge swinging in the rushing brown current symbolized the end of the Gettysburg Campaign.

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