

Captain Miller's Medal of Honor

By MERRILL F. HUMMEL, ESQ.

The dedication of the War College Medal of Honor Memorial and the centennial anniversary of the awarding of the first Medal of Honor bring to mind that Carlisle, for many years after the Civil War, had as citizen and merchant a holder of the Congressional Medal of Honor. I refer to Capt. William E. Miller, who lived and operated a store on North Hanover Street.

Captain Miller was in command of a squadron of the 3rd Pennsylvania Cavalry shortly before the movement North from Virginia in pursuit of Lee's Army which had as its objective the invasion of the North.

Arriving early on the morning of July 2, 1863, after a forced march of over 24 hours, at the junction of the Gettysburg-Hanover Road and the Low Dutch or Salem Church Road about 2½ miles southeast of Gettysburg, and on the right flank of the Union position, Captain Miller's squadron was assigned to and took up position in a woods north of the road intersection just referred to, and along the said Salem Church Road with orders to stay concealed in the woods.

"The troopers in my command," said Capt. Miller, "were resting—either lying on the ground or using trees for a back rest—but each trooper had the reins of his horse in his hands, ready to mount without delay." He continued: "I was standing on the edge of the woods surveying the field with my field glasses and keeping watch in the direction to the northwest where I had been informed the Confederate Cavalry under Jeb Stuart was stationed.

"The sound of heavy firing in the direction of our infantry position (Pickett's Charge was then in progress)," related the captain,

"caused me to study more carefully the ground in front of the Confederate Cavalry's position when I observed Jeb Stuart's command coming from behind the woods where they were screened from observation, in close column of squadrons and on a brisk trot." "It occurred to me," he said, "that the object of Stuart's movement was to turn our (the Union) flank and attack our infantry's position in the rear while Pickett continued his attack in front.

"I decided to attack Stuart's columns although my orders were to stay in the woods," said Miller, "and I called to my second in command to back me up in case the charge that I was about to order should fail and I was court-martialed. I ordered my bugler to sound 'to horse', 'prepare to mount' and 'mount' in rapid succession, followed immediately by the command 'trot'.

"Moving onto the field at right angles to the Confederate columns at a distance of about 400 yards from Stuart's command I signaled the bugler to sound 'charge' and we hit the columns slightly to the rear of the center. Just before striking the columns, I noticed Gen. Custer with his Michigan Cavalry Brigade coming on the field and charging toward the head of Stuart's columns. We rode through them and on the other side we rallied and then rode through the rear third of the columns and then it was every man for himself as it was impossible to keep formation."

The attack by Capt. Miller's command was a success and Stuart withdrew from the field. The attack in the rear of the Union Army did not materialize and it is a matter of history that Pickett's attempt to dislodge the Union center on Cemetery Ridge was also repulsed.

For his "Disobedience of Orders" as Capt. Miller characterized his exploit he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Capt. Miller made further reference to the Gettysburg engagement in a letter written to his brother, presumably Andrew G. Miller, for many years a prominent attorney in Carlisle. The letter, dated July 7, 1863, was written in Waynesboro as the Union cavalry was pursuing Lee's retreating army.

The captain told of the arrival at Gettysburg "worn out and our ranks very much depleted." The following is from an excerpt from that letter quoted in the History of the Third Pennsylvania Cavalry:

"Tired as we were however, we were forced into an engagement with some of Ewell's men, and had quite a spirited engagement that lasted until long after dark—both parties getting the best of it. During the night we were withdrawn, and encamped near a creek on the Baltimore Pike. On the afternoon of the 3rd we moved to within three miles of the town on the Hanover Road, to a point where we had a good view of the town and the firing along the infantry line.

"We remained undisturbed until about 3 o'clock, when suddenly, Stuart, with his whole command, appeared on our front, and attacked the First New Jersey, who were at the time deployed as skirmishers some distance to our front. The Third at this moment were dismounted and the men were grazing their horses. I was suffering with an attack of cramp, and Captain Gilmore, with his usual kindness, was rubbing me with whiskey. Orders to mount soon jerked the cramp out of me, and we were immediately pushed forward. My command (consisting of Captain Newhall's squadron and my own) was directed along the edge of a woods to the extreme right. Captain Walsh was placed in my rear, and for some reason that I cannot account for, the balance of the regiment was sent off to the left of the First New Jersey, who were now being driven in. I deployed as skirmishers, expecting to move to the extreme right of the First New

Jersey, but before I had time to station my men I was obliged to open fire. For a few moments things became so lively that I commenced to wish for more fellows. Soon, however, the Rebs gave way and the First New Jersey drove them for some distance.



CAPT. MILLER

"Whilst we were conducting this little game Captain Treichel over to the left occupied himself cleaning up some mounted infantry that seemed to be in his way. A calm now ensued that indicated a storm, and soon the storm came off to my front and right. Stuart's whole command rounded a corner of woods and made a direct march for our batteries that were stationed between my squadron and Treichel's command. They moved in column of squadrons and at a walk. Our batteries opened on them and did splendid work, tearing large gaps in their column and slaughtering many of their men and horses. They moved right along, as if nothing was occurring, and with a determination that bespoke business. When they reached within about five hundred yards of our bat-

teries General Custer, who had just come to our assistance, sent a regiment to meet a dismounted regiment that they had thrown out in advance. This regiment acted badly and came near breaking our whole line. Custer, however, led in two more regiments of his command and soon clinched with Stuart's main column.

"Lieutenant Brooke of my squadron and myself stood on a knoll in front of my command, where we had an elegant view of all that was going on. We soon discovered that Stuart was too heavy for Custer, and unless some diversion was made all would be lost, i.e., we would be whipped like the d - - - - -.

"I was without orders, but at Brooke's suggestion, and in accordance with what I thought my duty, I ordered him, with Sergeant Gregg and Corporal Weakley, to close up the squadron, whilst I looked out for a point to strike. The men were restive to get their fists in, and before I gave the order they started to charge. We struck Stuart's left flank in the rear of his colors and cut him in half, turned the rear portion and drove them like sheep.

"Captain Newhall, of McIntosh's staff, and Captain Treichel charged in on the opposite flank, but more to the front. They did effective work and met with heavy losses. Sergeant Heagy, John Nicholson, and myself rode up to a rebel battery, and but for the scattered condition of my men would have hauled it home. As things were, however, we had to leave it and make good our escape through the crowd that Custer had by this time succeed-

ed in turning and was driving like the d - - - - -. This almost settled the business for the day, and we considered ourselves the victors. Some sharp skirmishing kept up until after dark. I lost quite a number of men, principally out of Companies A and C. A number of Company H were wounded and taken prisoners, but none were killed. I will send you a list in a few days. I have a small hole through my arm but it will be healed up in a few days. I will send mother the coat I had on when wounded. General McIntosh complimented me on the field, and I feel that I did what was required of me."

In 1881 Capt. Miller was a prime mover in organizing Captain Colwell Post No. 201 of the Grand Army of the Republic in Carlisle and served as its first commander and was active in the affairs of the G.A.R. until his death. He served one term in the Pennsylvania State Legislature and in 1912 and 1913 was a member of the Pennsylvania Commission that arranged for the 50th anniversary observance of the Battle of Gettysburg. It is of interest to note that Capt. Miller for many years, was an active member of the Hamilton Library and Historical Association of Cumberland County, and for over ten years was secretary of the society. He wrote and published two papers for the Association, to wit:

1. "The Troops Occupying Carlisle in the Civil War," the same being printed in 1902, and

2. "Union Cavalry on the Peninsula and Cumberland County Soldiers" printed in 1908.