



PATRIOTIC RECOLLECTIONS

Joseph Charlton: A Union Cavalryman in the Civil War

By Michael F. Nugent [\(a\)](#)

Joseph Charlton was born in about 1840 in New Castle on Tyme, England. As a boy he immigrated to the United States and settled with his family on a farm in Allegheny County, near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Joseph decided to fight for his adopted country. As a farm boy, Joseph was already accustomed to working with horses. With some additional encouragement from recruitment advertisements promising *The Best Paid Arm of the Service!* and *No Work in the Trenches!* he chose to join the Cavalry. Skeptical, however, about serving in one of the new, inexperienced volunteer units and doubtful as to the qualifications of their newly appointed officers, Joseph instead enlisted in the regular Army, mustering into Company F of the 6th United States Cavalry on July 11, 1861.

Charlton encamped at Camp Scott in the Oakland section of Pittsburgh (near the present day campus of the University of Pittsburgh). In August he joined the Regiment at Bladensburg, Maryland, about six miles from Washington, DC. There he learned to be a soldier and served in the defense of the city through March of 1862.

In March, the 6th Cavalry left Washington to participate in General McClellan's Peninsula Campaign. Joseph and the Regiment received their baptism by fire on May 5th during the Siege of Yorktown. Promises of an *easy* life in the Cavalry were soon forgotten as the 6th Cavalry began an exhausting routine of constant campaigning and reconnaissance operations. Charlton and the Troopers of the 6th Cavalry would see action in the Antietam and Fredricksburg campaigns and in countless skirmishes against their Confederate counterparts.

Despite the hardships of the service and horrors of the battlefield, Joseph kept his sense of humor and was known as a joker among his comrades. During the Fredricksburg campaign, Charlton and Troopers James Evans and James Stewart came upon a Confederate deserter hiding out at a farmhouse belonging to his girlfriend's family. The deserter and the girl bemoaned their plight to the Federal trio. They wanted to be married, but could not return to Fredricksburg, as he would surely be arrested for desertion. Evans and Charlton convinced the couple that Stewart was an ordained Methodist minister. Stewart cobbled together an outlandish wedding ceremony consisting of what he could remember from *now I lay me down to sleep* and the *Lord's Prayer*, and pronounced the couple

man and wife. The three Troopers managed to keep a straight face, the bride's father produced a hidden supply of apple brandy to celebrate, and the couple apparently lived happily ever after.

In February of 1863, the 6th US Cavalry was assigned to the 3rd *Reserve* Brigade of Brigadier General John Buford's 1st Cavalry Division, Army of the Potomac. During the Spring of 1863, as the armies moved through Maryland towards Pennsylvania, Charlton saw action with the Regiment at Chancellorsville, at Brandy Station (the war's largest Cavalry battle and the end of the Confederate Cavalry's dominance on the battlefield), and in engagements at Middleburg, Upperville and Hanover prior to the Battle of Gettysburg. Unlike the Cavalry clashes of the previous two years, it was now the Confederate Cavalry often finding itself bloodied and beaten by the hardened and finely tuned Federal Cavalry.

General Buford's 1st and 2nd Brigades set the stage for the epic battle at Gettysburg and opened the fight on July 1st. Their classic use of delaying tactics, trading terrain for time, allowed the Army of the Potomac to converge on the critical crossroads town. The Reserve Brigade was not on the field during the battle's opening days. Under newly promoted Brigadier General Wesley Merritt, they had been assigned to screen the Union left flank and rear, between Hagerstown and Frederick, Maryland.

On the morning of July 3rd, a civilian claiming to be a local farmer rode into General Merritt's headquarters in Emmitsburg and reported that a Confederate wagon train was foraging near Fairfield, Pennsylvania. Shortly afterwards, a dispatch from Major General Alfred Pleasonton ordered Merritt's Brigade to move to Gettysburg and attack the Confederate right flank and rear. As the Brigade moved towards the sounds of the fighting, General Merritt ordered the 6th Cavalry, under Major Samuel H. Starr, to Fairfield to seize or destroy the Confederate wagon train and to cut off the Confederate line of retreat. The mission was a considerable risk for a single regiment. The 6th would be riding nearly ten miles behind enemy lines, well beyond any support from the rest of the Brigade should trouble develop. Compounding the danger, the Regiment was under strength having detached a Squadron for duty with General Pleasonton's headquarters.

Major Starr led his 400 Troopers towards Fairfield without encountering any enemy resistance. South of the village he detached his 1st Squadron to reconnoiter the wooded hillsides to the west of town, and cover his left flank as the remaining four Squadrons moved into town and up the valley along the Fairfield-Orrtanna Road. The Confederate wagon train was nowhere to be found, but a few wagons were spotted about a half mile north of town, hastily withdrawing up the valley. A Squadron, under Lieutenant Christian Balder, was sent in pursuit.

Charlton and the men of Company F, personally led by Lieutenant Balder, charged after the retreating wagons with Company L, under Lieutenant Joseph Wood, on their left. Rather than a lightly guarded wagon train however, Charlton's Company ran headlong into the veteran 7th Virginia Cavalry, the lead element of the *Laurel* Brigade under CSA Brigadier General William E. *Grumble* Jones. Lieutenant Balder quickly turned his Squadron around and raced back towards Fairfield to alert the rest of the Regiment. Major Starr deployed the 6th Cavalry in a defensive position along the road at a narrow point of the valley. Stout post and rail fences lined the road, a large orchard to the left and wheat fields to the right. Two Squadrons dismounted and deployed along both sides of the road. Two Squadrons, under Lieutenant Balder and Lieutenant Joseph Bould, remained on the road, mounted in column.

General Jones ordered the 7th Virginia to draw sabers and charge. As the Confederates thundered forward, the dismounted Federal Troopers delivered a hail of carbine fire from both flanks. Caught in the accurate crossfire, blocked from moving forward and hemmed in by the fences, the badly mauled Confederates beat a hasty retreat back down the road.

Emboldened by this initial success, Major Starr ordered a charge to pursue the Virginians, attempting to press the retreating Confederates and continue to drive them back. General Jones

brought an artillery battery into action and countered with a charge by the 6th Virginia Cavalry, joined by elements of the 11th Virginia and the routed 7th Virginia. When the opposing forces collided, the fight quickly turned into a hand-to-hand brawl with sabers and pistols used at close range. The badly outnumbered Federals were decimated with 242 Troopers killed, wounded or captured.

Joseph was wounded during this intense fighting when a pistol ball pierced his left breast, passed through his body and lodged in his right side. He also suffered a saber wound to his hand in the melee. Losing strength and fearing he might fall from his horse and be dragged, he tried to dismount but fell against a rail fence breaking three ribs. F Company Trooper Jacob Schilling rode to his rescue and helped him from the fence to a nearby farm where he managed to avoid capture.

For more than two months, Charlton recuperated at the home of a local farmer and at the Camden Street Hospital in Baltimore. The ball, however, was never removed and remained in his side for the rest of his life. He rejoined the Regiment but was hospitalized again in April 1864 in West Philadelphia when inflammation to his wound caused bleeding from his lungs. On July 29, 1864, Charlton was discharged at the completion of his term of service. He also received a Surgeon's Certificate of Disability due to the injuries he suffered at Fairfield [\(b\)](#).

Six weeks as a civilian was long enough for Joseph. The tranquil life on the farm did not compare with his experience of the previous three years. He missed the adventure and comradeship of being a soldier and longed to return to the Army despite his injuries. By 1864, the volunteer regiments were hardened veterans and had weeded out their incompetent officers. Having served side by side with state units, Charlton's opinion of them had changed and on September 12th, he re-enlisted in the 14th Pennsylvania Volunteer Cavalry. Joseph apparently underwent only the most cursory examination. Eager perhaps to meet his quota of new soldiers, Charlton's Recruiting Officer overlooked his wound and certified that he had ... *minutely inspected the Volunteer ... accepting him as duly qualified to perform the duties of an able-bodied soldier.*

On December 17th, Charlton and 100 Troopers, under the command of Captain William W. Miles, were sent on a reconnaissance near Millwood, Virginia. Confederate Colonel John Singleton Mosby's Cavalry was reported to have crossed the Shenandoah River and formed a picket line on the near shore. Captain Miles ignored a civilian's report of 300 to 400 Confederates near Berry's Ford and failed to deploy skirmishers. The Federals were ambushed by a Confederate force more than three times their number. Captain Miles and 35 of the Pennsylvania Troopers were killed or wounded. Only ten escaped unscathed. The remainder including Charlton were captured.

The prisoners from the 14th Pennsylvania were sent to the infamous Libby Prison in Richmond. After two months, Joseph was paroled on February 15, 1865. Fellow prisoner, Private William H. Barrett, recalled that Charlton ...*was a strong, healthy man - only he was nearly starved to death ... and was a mere skeleton when he came out of prison.* Following a month's furlough, Charlton returned to the Regiment in April and was discharged in Washington, DC on May 30th.

Joseph returned home to the family farm near Pittsburgh. In October the following year, he married Margaret McGovern, a 16 year-old Irish immigrant. Soon afterwards, Joseph went to work on the Pittsburgh waterfront building barges. On August 1, 1869 Margaret gave birth to a son, Thomas, the first of the couple's seven children. In about 1871, Joseph joined the Pittsburgh Fire Department and served in Engine Company Number 12 on the city's south side. Continually troubled by his wound, he applied for a disability pension from the Army in 1875 and received \$6.00 per month. By 1883, Joseph's declining health forced him to leave the Fire Department.

Joseph had always told his wife that his wound would eventually kill him. Sadly, he suffered not only physically, but psychologically as well. Friends noticed that *something appeared to trouble him all of the time* and that he began to act *strangely* and did not seem *right in his mind*. Margaret noted that his

troubles were worse at night when ... *He thought he was in battle and again in his tent...* Joseph's physical and mental condition continued to deteriorate. On August 22, 1884, he was admitted to a Pittsburgh asylum suffering from dementia. On October 31st, he died from what his doctor termed *nervous exhaustion*.

N.N. Hill, a Special Examiner from the Pension Commissioner's Office, was assigned to investigate Charlton's case when Margaret applied for a Widow's Pension. Mr. Hill concluded that Joseph's ...*sufferings in Libby Prison and his sufferings from his severe wound, combined to break him down and were the primary cause leading to his death.* Although Joseph Charlton had survived the skirmishes and battles, he was a casualty of a war that ended 19 years earlier.

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(b) Note: Two days after the battle at Fairfield, a civilian named Richardson rode into General Buford's camp near Frederick City and asked about troop movements in the area. Suspicious of the civilian, Buford had him arrested. Found to be possession of passes from Confederate Generals Lee and Longstreet, Buford ordered Richardson hung as a spy. There is considerable speculation that Richardson may have been the *farmer* who provided General Merritt with the false report of the Confederate wagon train, luring the 6th US Cavalry to disaster.