



## "A Bold, Desperate Undertaking" The Kilpatrick-Dahlgren Raid

by Dr. Bruce M. Venter

One of the most controversial events of the Civil War which culminated in and around Richmond was the Kilpatrick-Dahlgren raid in the late winter of 1864.

Its start was "auspicious" as one Union officer put it, but it soon bogged down principally due to Virginia's mercurial weather patterns. When 3,500 Federal cavalrymen and a battery of horse artillery rode out of the Army of the Potomac's winter

encampment in Culpeper County on February 28, the temperatures were warm and balmy. But after the successful capture of Ely's Ford on the Rapidan River and a swift ride which one trooper characterized as a "regular charge for 75 miles," things went downhill rapidly as torrential rains hampered the troopers' progress.

This was an unusual cavalry raid from the start. Brig. Gen. Judson Kilpatrick, commander of

the Cavalry Corps' Third Division, originated the idea in his fertile brain. Known to many in the Union army as "Kill-Cavalry" for his spendthrift style with both horses and men, Kilpatrick was always at the scene of action, since

Abraham Lincoln was transfixed with the plight of some 15,000 Union prisoners of war who were suffering horrendous deprivations in Libby Prison and on Belle Isle. When Maj. Gen. Benjamin Butler's troops botched an

attempt to free the captives and capture Confederate President Jefferson Davis in early February 1864, Kilpatrick saw an opportunity he could exploit.

Using his political clout, "Little Kil" (his nickname at West Point) gained direct access to Lincoln. His unbridled hubris

allowed him to promote his plan for a cavalry raid on Richmond directly to Lincoln, over the heads of Maj. Gen. Alfred Pleasonton, his immediate commander, and Maj. Gen. George G. Meade, the army's commander. Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton bought into Kilpatrick's plan to free the Union prisoners and perhaps some extracurricular



The death of Colonel Dahlgren, as depicted in *Harper's Weekly*.

his graduation from West Point in 1861. (He would be wounded three times before the war ended.) His unique leadership style, however, made him loved and admired by most of his troopers, a fact often overlooked by historians.

As the war progressed, he successfully combined his military career with a knack for politics which garnered him influence at the highest levels of government.

In early 1864, President

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## The Kilpatrick-Dahlgren Raid cont...

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activities they may or may not have considered.

Kilpatrick's operation called for a two-pronged approach to the Confederate capital. As the diminutive, 26-year-old general led his main body directly south from Spotsylvania Court House after crossing the Rapidan, a smaller column was to hit Richmond from the south side of the James River. This 460-man force was led by a fearless, but careless 21-year-old colonel named Ulric Dahlgren.

Dahlgren, the son of a famous admiral who was Lincoln's confidant, had lost his right leg in action near Hagerstown in July 1863. Dahlgren was an interloper into Kilpatrick's plan, but the savvy cavalry general probably weighed the political capital he would gain by having the young colonel along. Clearly Lincoln and Stanton favored the plucky colonel.

Unfortunately, Dahlgren's weakened physical condition and his poor judgment at critical times during the raid proved severely damaging to the overall operation. Dahlgren failed to cross the

James in Goochland County at the appointed time and spuriously hanged his black guide for the error.

Meanwhile, Kilpatrick had

Richmond from the southeast "as was the plan." Kill-Cavalry ironically acted out of character. When daring, élan and even a bit of rashness might have carried the day, "Old Kill" opted for caution and withdrew from the field.

This decision did not end his problems, however. That evening he was attacked by 300 howling North Carolina cavalrymen under Maj. Gen. Wade Hampton near Atlee's Station. Hampton's gutsy action precipitated another Yankee withdrawal in rain, sleet, and snow, as Kilpatrick retreated toward Old Church and eventually down the Peninsula to Yorktown.

Col. Dahlgren, however, was not so lucky. After meeting stiff resistance from Local Defense Troops near the intersection of the Three Chopt Road and the Westham Plank Road (present-day Cary Avenue), Dahlgren also retreated.

But he never found Kilpatrick's main column.

Losing a majority of his own force during the night in Richmond's west end, the one-legged colonel ended up in King



The controversial General Kilpatrick

arrived "on time to the minute" at the Confederate intermediate works (near Laburnum Ave. and Brook Rd.) north of the capital on March 1, but his attack stalled.

Once Dahlgren failed in his objective to free the Belle Isle prisoners and Butler never hit

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## Miscellaneous News

--A reminder that the RBA, like many small organizations, relies on its members to stay aware of their dues and membership details. The mailing label on your newsletter has the expiration date of your membership. There are better ways to spend hard-raised preservation money than sending out reminder letters to folks who are delinquent with their dues.

--All of the battlefields east of Richmond and south of the Chickahominy River are in Henrico County. That includes the Fussell's Mill/Second Deep Bottom battlefield so prominent in recent RBA operations. Henrico authorities are in the midst of building a new structure on that battlefield, directly across the road from the RBA property there and on the southern edge of the so-called "Oblique Ravine." Its purpose is to serve as an "odor suppression station," presumably in connection with the new sewer lines lately installed along Yahley Mill Road in preparation for the large development going in just west of the battlefield. No word yet on whether they will recognize the ground's significance by naming the new facility after one of the prominent Civil War figures who fought there.

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and Queen County with about 90 survivors. Late on the evening of March 2, they were ambushed by a makeshift force of 150 Confederate cavalrymen and home guard units. Dahlgren was killed. The papers found on his body created a firestorm for several weeks after the raid because they ordered the capture or assassination of Davis and his cabinet.

These controversial orders make the Kilpatrick-Dahlgren raid on Richmond stand out as one of the most enigmatic raids on either side during the four year conflict.

Many of the sites associated with the raid have been lost to development. But it's not the shopping malls or housing sprawls of the last two decades that caused the problem. Much of the area covered by the raid near the city was lost years ago, when the metropolitan center of Richmond expanded in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Benjamin Green's home (Roselawn) on the Three Chopt Road, which served as a hospital for Union wounded, continues to stand as a beautifully restored private residence. But the battleground over which Dahlgren's troopers charged near Roselawn has disappeared into a mature, affluent west end neighborhood. It's difficult to tell the story of the fight between the blue-clad cavalrymen and Local Defense Troops under Captain John McAnerney without risking life and limb at the hazardous intersection of Three Chopt Rd. and Cary Avenue.

The outer defenses and the intermediate lines which Kilpatrick attacked are also gone, save for a small section of the outer defenses that looks strangely out of place in the Brook Run shopping center on Route 1.

Even Hampton's heroic night attack at Atlee's Station is obliterated by brick ranchers bordering Atlee Station Road and a develop-

ment of faux colonials surrounding Mrs. Crenshaw's plantation house which served as Lt. Col. Allyn Litchfield's 7th Michigan Cavalry headquarters.

In Goochland County, the plantation homes of Dover, Sabot Hill and Eastwood are all gone; not burned by Dahlgren, but destroyed in the early 20th century. The brick walls of the Dover Steam Mill which was burned by the raiders remain standing as an unmarked monument to the raid.

The private land leading to the James River where the colonel sought to cross his troopers, however, still gives a clear viewshed of what the Yankees saw in 1864.

But the best vestiges of the raid exist in King and Queen County, a farming region hardly changed since the war. Present-day roads still trace those from Maj. Gen. J. F. Gilmer's wartime Confederate map nearly perfectly.

The road leading to the ambush site, with its four feet high banks, as remembered in veterans' memoirs, remains intact. The site itself is memorialized locally as "Dahlgren's Corner," its pristine setting only marred somewhat by a nearby county trash collection center also named (perhaps mockingly) for Dahlgren.

A number of Virginia state historic markers refer to Dahlgren's or Kilpatrick's route throughout the region, some unfortunately with erroneous information about the raid. A "Freeman marker" can be found at the intersection of Three Chopt and Cary. No interpretative signs, like those put up by the Civil War Preservation Trust or the Virginia Civil War Trails, exist along the raiders' route, however.

Most of the raid's major combat areas are long gone, but if you drive through rural King and Queen County, a vision of Col. Ulric Dahlgren, his officers and scouts riding in advance up the River Road to where Southern avengers are waiting, with car-

bines, muskets, pistols and squirrel guns cocked in the shadowy darkness, can still be imagined.

Dr. Venter is a long-time member of the RBA. His expanded article on the raid appeared in *Blue & Gray* magazine (Winter 2003). He is a partner in Star & Stripes Events, LLC, an American history tour company. ([www.starsandstripesevents.com](http://www.starsandstripesevents.com)).

On Richmond's  
FRONT LINE

is published for the RBA membership at P.O. Box 13945, Richmond, VA 23225. The web address is: [www.saverichmond-battlefields.org](http://www.saverichmond-battlefields.org). The RBA is chartered as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. All contributions are tax deductible. A financial statement is available upon request, from the Virginia Office of Consumer Affairs.

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## Centennial vs. Sesquicentennial

The imminent Civil War Sesquicentennial prompts reminiscences of the Centennial, nearly 50 years ago. The local committee established in Richmond did outstanding service on many levels. Its members oversaw the publication of more than two dozen books and pamphlets dealing with a rich variety of topics. They also sponsored new markers, arranged lectures, gave plays, and did everything in their power to draw attention to the Civil War sites in and around Richmond. It remains to be seen whether the 150th anniversary events produce anything as lasting or as meaningful.

The local committee devoted an entire day in May 1962, (on the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Seven Pines), to the subject of Civil War balloons around the capital city. They called it "The Birth of Military Aviation in America." A full day of speeches, eating, drinking, and balloon demonstrations ensued. The ceremony involved the mayor, a local high school band, descendants of Civil War balloonists, and a retired Air Force general. United Airlines hosted an after-dinner reception. As usual, the Richmond Civil War Centennial Committee mixed waggish humor with serious commemoration.

Thanks to RBA board member T. S. Parsons for sharing the balloonish lunch menu for that event, part of which is reproduced here:

- *Baked Deflation Valve on Slice of Bag Covering w/Hydrogen Sauce* [Chicken Leg on Ham, with Mushroom Sauce]
- *Shredded Guide Lines* [String Beans-Almondine]
- *Toasted Diced Sandbags* [Hash Brown Potatoes]
- *Wind Tossed Salad* [Chopped Fresh Vegetables]
- *Wedge of Basket Wicker* [Virginia Apple Pie]
- *Sulphuric Acid* [Coffee]

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