

Gentle Warrior: Charles Russell Lowell, Jr.

by Thomas E. Parson

No one who was there would ever forget the sight. Two brigades of Union cavalry, nine regiments, stretched out in columns of fours, riding from right to left across the length of the Federal line. There was a lull in the fighting at Cedar Creek allowing the troopers to ride the entire front, unchallenged by the attacking Confederates.

Between the two armies, with the entire panorama of the battlefield in view, the horsemen walked their mounts slowly and calmly as if on parade. At their head was the young Charles Russell Lowell, Jr. Colonel of the 2nd Cavalry and commander of the vaunted Cavalry Reserve Brigade. A volunteer with no prior experience, Lowell had impressed the West Pointers in the Army of the Shenandoah with his natural talent for directing men in battle. Major General Phil Sheridan in particular was impressed; a commission to General was signed and on the way from Washington for the deserving young officer. On this 19th day October, 1864, with his star on the rise and far out shining his peers, Charles Lowell had less than 20 hours to live.

The eldest son of cousins Charles Lowell and Anna Jackson, Charles Jr., or Charlie, was born in Boston on the 2nd of January, 1835. For nine generations his family had been principal players in the business and social circles of the city, as well as leaders in politics and finance until Charles Sr., lost a sizeable amount of the family fortune in the Panic of 1837. Though far from destitute the family had seen better days and any reversal of fortune would be left up to the son, the father now spending his days preparing a card catalog at the Boston Athenaeum. If anyone was up to such a challenge it was young Charlie.

Two years of prep school and Charlie entered Harvard at the tender age of 15, the youngest man in his class. As a freshman he was not too popular with his classmates, being a bit too boisterous and blunt, but as the years went by and the boy matured he became quite prominent and well-liked by all. A gifted student, he took his place at the head of the class and stayed there, impressing his friends by appearing to retain everything, though never studying. It was in college that his love for philosophy bloomed as well as a passion for science and literature.

Plato was his constant companion and provided the inspiration of his trademark phrase "By Plato!" Attracted to mysticism, he was also, like his family and close friends, a follower of the Transcendentalist movement. Graduating as Valedictorian in 1854, a frail looking young man with wavy brown hair and a light mustache, Charles was ready to embark into the world of business. He could take his pick of jobs, his family's standing in society assured that, but he chose a lowly administrative position in the counting house of Boston businessman John M. Forbes. A deep friendship began between the two men and thereafter nothing was too good for Forbes' young protégée.

With no intention of staying with the firm, Charles soon took another menial job as a laborer in an iron mill, the Ames Manufacturing Co. in Chicoppee, Mass. It was simple, back breaking labor, far below the abilities of a Harvard man, but Charles was there for a

purpose. He wanted to see and understand operations from the workingman's point of view. He was appalled by the terrible working conditions and the squalor in which they lived, already making plans for change when he took a position of authority. Moving on in the Autumn of 1855, Charles took a management position with Trenton Iron Co. of New Jersey, a position he excelled in and seemed to enjoy, when soon after he was found coughing up blood; stricken with tuberculosis at the age of 20. Doctors recommended a move to a warm climate and no work until past the age of 30.

Acting on the doctor's first recommendation, John M. Forbes whisked Charles away on a trip to New Orleans and the West Indies where his health soon returned, though it was apparent he would not be ready for work for some time. Forbes and Charles' grandmother footed the bill for an extended tour of Europe, a trip they hoped would restore his vitality and strength. For two years he criss-crossed the continent, learning the language wherever he stopped and developing into an accomplished equestrian. He was able to observe military maneuvers in Austria and France and found time to become a proficient swordsman, all knowledge that would serve him well in the years to come.

His strength restored, Charles returned to the States in 1858, and with the assistance of John M. Forbes, took a position as treasurer with the Burlington and Missouri Railroad. Though he excelled in the position, Charles had developed a passion for the iron making industry and soon left for a post, again thanks to Forbes, as ironmaster of the Mt. Savage Iron Works in Cumberland, Md. While engrossed in his work, Charles was not blind to the political unrest in the border state he now called home, or the larger turmoil in the country as a whole. A Lincoln man and a passive abolitionist, he waited patiently for the inevitable. In the days after Fort Sumter, when the 6th Mass. Infantry was attacked by a mob in Baltimore, Charles knew his duty and left for Washington to seek a commission.

Applying directly to the Senator Charles Sumner, Lowell claimed, "... (I) am tolerant proficient with the small sword and single-stick; and can ride a horse as far and bring him in as fresh as any other man." Sumner passed the request on to Secretary of War Simon Cameron who gave the young man a commission as captain in the 3rd (later 6th) U.S. Cavalry, a regiment that had seen nearly all of it's experienced officers transfer to the volunteer service. It is an interesting question why Lowell chose to accept a commission with the regulars rather than with the troops being raised in his home state. Quite possibly it was a belief that he would find a more professional air about the regulars, and he was not disappointed with his appointment to a renowned unit.

Captain Lowell's first months in uniform were spent recruiting in Ohio and Pennsylvania, and by September he had joined the regiment in camp at Bladensburg, Md. where the new men were learning to ride and fight like a team. The commanding officer of the 6th, Lt. Col. William Emory, was impressed with Charles referring to him as "...the best officer appointed from civilian life he had ever known... ", and soon rewarded him with command of a squadron (two companies). It was April of 1862 before the 6th U. S. was called to action, boarding transports for the trip to Fort Monroe, Va. and the massive military buildup that preceded Gen. George McClellan's peninsular campaign. The pursuit of the Confederate forces after the siege of Yorktown gave Capt. Lowell his first taste of action, and during the fighting around Williamsburg he distinguished himself leading sabre charges against the enemy. "Our Capt.", recalled orderly Frank Robbins,

"was the first man through the rebel lines every time we charged that day." Cited for bravery at Williamsburg and Slatersville he was recommended for brevet to Major. Not involved with the fighting during the Seven Days Battle, the 6th U.S. camped at Harrison's Landing, within earshot of the battle raging to the northeast. Charles took a deep personal loss during this battle with the death of his younger brother James, killed in the fighting near Glendale. An officer in the 20th Mass. Infantry, James was mortally wounded during the battle, dying several days later in enemy hands.

Charles' recommendation for promotion, though not granted, was noticed by the commanding general who had the young captain transferred to his staff. Life on McClellan's staff was exciting and hectic as the army was then engaged in transferring men and equipment back to Washington via the James River. It was not glorious work, and kept him away from the action during the fighting at Second Bull Run, but not the terrific battle along Antietam Creek on the 17th of September. While the Union troops were heavily engaged against the Confederate left, Lowell was dispatched with orders for Gen. Sedgwick's division of Sumner's corps. Arriving on the field he found a part of the line routed and in retreat. In a moment he was everywhere, calling the men to rally and stemming the flow of men to the rear. He called the men to return to the fight and something about the scrappy little captain caused them to follow. A nearby officer recalled "I shall never forget the effect of his appearance.

He seemed a part of his horse ...After I was wounded, one of my first anxieties was to know what became of him; for it seemed to me that no mounted man could have lived through the storm of bullets that swept the (East) wood just after I saw him enter it." Twice his horse was struck, a third bullet ripped through his overcoat, and a final ball struck and shattered his scabbard. Charles himself was miraculously untouched. McClellan rewarded his young aide by giving him the honor of presenting the thirty-nine captured battleflags to President Lincoln in Washington.

His letters to friends and family after the battle are typical. He names officer friends who were wounded and downplays the ferocity of the fighting, but never a word about himself, his close calls, or the high honor he was given. In a rare moment he mentions to John M. Forbes that he would need a new scabbard and would have to ride a different horse for a time. The letters of Charles Lowell, like his official correspondence, never were platforms for bragging or garnering attention to his accomplishments. It was simply beyond him to blow his own horn.

Soon after the battle McClellan was replaced and the members of his staff returned to their regiments or sought new assignments. Charles had begun hinting to friends months before that he would like to command his own regiment and one replied that he should spend the winter recruiting a regiment of gentlemen. "Gentlemen?", he scoffed, "What do you mean Gentlemen, drivers of gigs?" Another friend, John M. Forbes, was then involved in an enterprise that would soon give Lowell that very opportunity.

In October of 1862 Governor John Andrew was presented with an offer by J. Sewall Reed of San Francisco of a company of cavalry from California if he would agree to pay the travel expenses. Recruiting was difficult in New England at this stage in the war and contemplating his own plan of raising a second regiment of state cavalry, he accepted. This company, soon to be known as the 'California Hundred', was to be the hand picked elite of the west, and when another offer was presented for an additional four

companies, the 'California Battalion', he didn't hesitate in embracing the plan that would bring another 400 men into the service of Massachusetts. By early December Captain Reed and the 'Hundred' were aboard a ship steaming on the Isthmus of Panama.

A cavalry regiment is made up of twelve companies and another seven would have to be soon forthcoming to make the regiment a reality. John M. Forbes and Amos A. Lawrence, like Forbes a wealthy Boston businessman, proposed to raise a battalion of troops for the state if the bounty money for the new recruits would be turned over directly to the new partners. It was their plan to waive the commission that most bounty brokers charged, thus giving the recruits more cash, and therefore filling the ranks that much quicker. The plan was agreed to and recruiting was ready to kick off as soon as a commanding officer was selected. Forbes suggested his young friend Lowell, a recommendation that the Governor, who probably knew the young man socially, agreed to without reservations. On the 4th of November, 1862, Captain Lowell secured McClellan's permission to leave his staff and was soon on his way to Boston and his new command.

Recruiting in Boston was tough even with the added incentive of a big wad of cash. More officers were selected from other regiments to assist in the recruiting with the understanding that they would receive commissions in the 2nd Mass. Cav. Officers scoured the counties around Boston and soon the men came pouring in; butchers, bakers, farmers and sailors, men from every walk of life and most with only one thought on their mind: the said wad of cash. Mr. Forbes and Mr. Lawrence made one, albeit very large, mistake in the recruiting process. They gave the money to the men as soon as they enlisted, rather than as was the custom to give it to them after they were in the field. The result was that bounty jumpers came from near and far to get a free piece of the pie. So many that Charles Lowell, now Col. Lowell, had the distinction of commanding the regiment with the highest number of desertions in the state of Massachusetts. A total of 614 deserters, a number which becomes even more astonishing when considering all but a handful came from the seven eastern companies. Filling the companies took a lot of time, a lot of money, and occasionally a fair dose of courage.

Entering the recruiting office one morning Col. Lowell found a handful of new men in a 'mutiny' having only taken the oath of enlistment moments before. A sergeant had ordered the ringleader handcuffed and the malcontents were preparing to charge when Lowell happened on the scene. The men tried to explain their side of the story but he quickly hushed them saying he'd hear what they had to say after the order was obeyed. "God knows, my men, I don't want to kill any of you; but I shall shoot the first man who resists. Sergeant, iron your man." Of course they resisted, and the gentle, philosophical Lowell, pulled his pistol and dropped the leader where he stood. Holstering the smoking sidearm, Lowell walked over to the Governor's office, entered and said, "I have to report to you, sir, that in the discharge of my duty I have shot a man." Without another word he turned and left, the Governor mentioning to an onlooker, "I need nothing more. Colonel Lowell is as humane as he is brave." Nothing further was ever done about the matter, though the other 'mutineers' did wind up in various prisons for their part in the drama.

Recruits were sent to the regimental barracks at Camp Meigs in Readville, some nine miles by rail from Boston, where Lowell began the process of converting citizens into soldiers. It was not an easy task and the Colonel kept his men in the saddle for hours.

Nearly all of the Californians were accomplished riders, but not so their eastern counterparts who were routinely bucked off, bitten, or out smarted by their unruly mounts. By February of 1863 five companies were formed into a battalion and sent off to Virginia under the command of the senior Major, Crowninshield. Assigned to the troops around Yorktown and Gloucester Point, the regiment would do picket duty far to the south while the remainder of the regiment was recruited and trained.

Slowly, and with a great deal of effort, the other companies were recruited and in April were joined by the 'California Battalion', just arrived from the west. The Californians were the heart and soul of the regiment, everyone in the command knew it, most of all Col. Lowell. So it came as no little shock when he broke up the battalion and divided its companies up and with the eastern recruits formed the second and third battalions. (The first was with Crowninshield in Virginia). It was a logical move, the westerners providing an element of professionalism and esprit de corps, that was sadly lacking in the other companies. Lowell needed a fighting regiment, not an elite battalion with eight companies of dead weight, though his decision was a bitter pill for the west coasters. Never able to forgive Lowell for this slight was Major DeWitt C. Thompson who had recruited the 'Californian Battalion' and had fully expected to command them in the east. Thompson smoldered with resentment and would leave no stone unturned in his futile attempts to remove his men from the regiment and form their own command.¹

By May the men were nearly ready for the field and a move was made to Camp Brightwood, Md. a fine camp just outside the Capitol and close to the seat of war. Knowing that real fighting was now just a matter of time, Lowell pushed his men relentlessly to prepare them. Many growled and complained at the fever pace he set, but later, when it counted, they blessed him for it. Others noted that as hard as they worked their little Colonel was always there, going thru the same exercises and drills, never tiring, never sparing himself, and always saving the administrative details until the men were resting. So near to Washington, it's political intrigues and showy military reviews, Lowell didn't give a hoot for the martial dog and pony shows and was irritated when Maj. Gen. Silas Casey called for a review of the regiment. Casey was pleased with the review, and, grudgingly, so was Lowell who could see the long days paying off, writing to his fiancé, "I wish you could see how my Battalion will turn out tomorrow morning; not an extra gewgaw, nothing for ornament. If they want ornamental troops around Washington, they'll let me go, -indeed, I have dropped some things which have generally been counted necessities; two of my companies go without any blankets but those under their saddles. That is pretty well for recruits. " .

The call to action finally came on the 10th of June, 1863, when Lowell ordered three days rations for every man and soon had them in the saddle hunting the partisan leader John. S. Mosby. Earlier that day Mosby and his newly organized 43rd Battalion of Virginia Cavalry had attacked two companies of the 6th Michigan Cavalry, routing them before disappearing into the Maryland countryside with their prisoners. This inaugural raid of the Rangers initiated a year of contact between Lowell and Mosby, a year that would see victories, and defeats, but never the outright destruction of the rebel band. Mosby was a master of hit and run operations, striking quickly at a smaller target, then disbanding his men into the countryside to await another call to action, tactics that were nearly impossible to counter with conventional means. The concept of total war had yet

to come to Northern Virginia, the only way to effectively deal with such a guerilla force, and Colonel Lowell had no choice but to act in a predictable way. A pattern developed where Mosby would strike, Lowell would be notified and give chase, a good day taking one or two of the Rangers as prisoners.

A change in routine occurred during the Gettysburg campaign when Lowell, tasked with picketing a stretch of the Potomac, was ordered by Major Gen. Joseph Hooker, commanding the Army of the Potomac, to join Gen. Slocum's troops then at Harper's Ferry, Va. Sending a telegram to inform his own commanding officer (Maj. Gen. Peter Heintzelman) of his orders, Lowell put his men in the saddle and hustled off in compliance. Arriving in Knoxville (across the river from Harper's Ferry) the next morning, he was presented with a telegram from Heintzelman ordering him back to his position on the river, a location which had just been used by the Confederate cavalry to cross into Maryland. Informing Hooker and Slocum of his new orders Lowell immediately puts his boys back in the saddle for the return trip. This initiated a flurry of orders and telegrams back and forth between the three generals, all claiming they had the authority over Lowell's two battalions. Hooker was furious that the young Colonel refused to heed his orders. The issue was finally settled when Union General in Chief Henry Halleck entered the fray and specifically ordered the 2nd Mass. Cav. back to the defenses of Washington. A livid Hooker used this small incident, as well as several larger ones, to claim lack of support from the administration and to submit his resignation as army commander. Unaware of the small part he had played in army politics, Lowell returned to camp after an ineffectual pursuit of the rebel cavalry column.

Charles Lowell's first taste of combat as a commanding officer came during the Confederate retreat from Gettysburg when it was unsure among the Union high command just where Gen. Lee's army was located. Dispatched to Ashby's Gap in the Blue Ridge Mountains to watch for troop movements in the Shenandoah valley, Lowell fought with dismounted Confederate cavalry defending the gap, easily flanking them out of their position. No forces of the enemy were spotted in the valley and Lowell reluctantly returned to his new camp in Vienna and operations against the guerrillas.

Clashing with Mosby on the 31st of July Lowell succeeded in recapturing a wagon train of 30 wagons and their terrified sutler owners. The Rangers themselves were once again too elusive a target and managed to disappear into the countryside, taking on their guise of innocent farmers, or hiding in hidden locations. It was obvious that a concerted effort was needed to shut down the irregular operations, and Washington responded by giving Lowell command of an Independent Cavalry Brigade, consisting of the 13th and 16th NY, as well as his own 2nd Mass. (including his first battalion just returned from the York River). Lowell welcomed the New Yorkers though his own regiment considered the newcomers, predominantly German, as "...so much excess baggage to be taken care of." Tasked with picketing a 20 mile line and sending out daily patrols, the brigade had nearly daily contact with Mosby's men.

Rooting out the guerrillas from their farms and hideouts brought Col. Lowell into close contact with the civilian population, a business he had little enthusiasm for. "I don't at all fancy the duty here", he wrote, "serving against bushwhackers; it brings me in contact with too many citizens, -and sometimes with mothers and children." On one occasion a young Ranger was captured and his mother came pleading for the boys release. Though Vienna was a pro-Union town other nearby communities expressed

contempt and hatred toward Lowell and his men, always making a show of slamming doors and letting down window shades as they passed. Lowell detested the work but he was very good at it, prompting Mosby to later write, "I have often said, that of all the Federal commanders opposed to me, I had the highest respect for Colonel Lowell, both as an officer and a gentleman."

Lowell got the upper hand on Mosby in August when a detachment of his men was surprised by the Rangers but managed to put a pair of bullets into the rebel leader's side. Out of action for nearly two months, Mosby's absence allowed his adversary to concentrate on other guerilla forces that prowled the area. "The Comanches", as the 35th Battalion of Virginia cavalry were known, were a frequent nuisance under their commander Lt. Col. Elijah White. Never a threat on the level of Mosby, White and his men were a bit of a discipline problem and were frequently attached to the Army of Northern Virginia. By Fall Mosby was healed and all was as it was before.

Things were well enough in hand during the Fall to allow Charles to take leave and marry his fiancé Josephine Shaw. The sister of the martyred Col. Robert Gould Shaw of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, Josephine, or Effie, was the perfect match for Charlie Lowell. An attractive, slender young woman of 19, Josephine had been educated in Paris and Rome, where, like Charlie, she gained a deep love for literature and history. Casual friends since childhood, they fell deeply in love after his return from Antietam and wrote each other nearly every day. Returning to camp in November, Lowell changed tactics and caught Mosby's men off guard. Sending out a mounted detachment of 25 men that followed the roads and lanes by day, it was shadowed by 75 dismounted troopers who kept to the shelter of the woods, making most of their movements by night. Led by a local Union sympathizer, the force swept up two dozen of Mosby's men. Within days the Rangers adapted and Lowell returned to the standard procedure of patrolling and picketing.

A new assignment came in February of 1864 when Col. Lowell was detached for temporary duty at the Cavalry Bureau in Washington and tasked with organizing the supply system at the Giesboro Point depot. The depot, located just across the Eastern Branch of the Potomac from Washington, supplied the remounts for all of the eastern armies and was an administrative nightmare. To bring order to chaos, newly appointed Bureau chief Brig. Gen. James H. Wilson, brought in Lowell to straighten out the depot which was floundering without a head.

Charles threw himself whole heartedly into the new duty, efficiently overhauling the system that processed over 20,000 horses during his brief stay. By the end of March the depot was running productively and Lowell was allowed to return to his brigade in Vienna. During his absence disaster had struck when a 125 man detachment was ambushed and routed by Mosby. 55 men were captured and 10 killed including Capt. J. Sewall Reed, the popular commander of the 'California Hundred', whose idea to bring the men east had led to the formation of the regiment. A similar misfortune occurred in July when a 150 man patrol under Major William F. Forbes (the son of John M. Forbes) was attacked and routed resulting in a dozen killed and 38 captured. This fight brought an end to Lowell's activities against the guerrillas as he was soon called north into Maryland to help in the defense of the Capitol against the approaching Confederate army of Gen. Jubal Early.

Taking only his 2nd Massachusetts, Lowell gathered up fragments of other regiments scattered around Washington and was the only unit ready to pursue when Early's force was pushed back from the city gates. Harassing the Southern rear guard while the Federal infantry slowly began a pursuit, Lowell nearly met disaster in the streets of Rockville. Tired of the cavalry dogging his heels, Early sent two brigades to punish Lowell's force, striking at them during a halt in the Maryland town. Massively outnumbered and with his own troops clogging the street, unable to retreat or counterattack, Lowell had to act quickly or face annihilation. Waving his hat, he shouted, "Dismount! and let your horses go!" Unable to spare one man out of four to hold the mounts, Lowell's order was immediately obeyed. "He waited till the enemy came near, fired one volley at short range, - it checked the rush; another, -it stopped it. then Lowell, on foot, ran out before them, waving his hat, and they ran forward firing, and the rout was averted."

Word of the scrappy little Colonel had gotten out and in early August when Maj. General Phil Sheridan was appointed to command the Army of the Shenandoah he asked for and received Lowell and his 2nd Mass. Cav. Assigned to Brig. Gen. Wesley Merritt's First division, Lowell was given command of the Third Brigade consisting of the 2nd Mass, 14th and 22nd Penn, and the 1st Md. The days of chasing bushwhackers were over, Lowell was once again part of an army, confiding to Josephine, "It is exhilarating to see so many cavalry about and to see things going right again.

For two weeks Lowell's brigade maneuvered with the army, fighting with the enemy every day. On the 25th of August Lowell led his brigade in an attack on Confederate infantry, "...he himself actually whacking their leveled muskets with his saber.." while his men tore down the barricades and charged thru. Capturing 74 prisoners and suffering only a handful of casualties, the Colonel's actions had been observed by Sheridan who remarked to an aide while watching Charles jump his horse over the barricade, "Lowell is a brave man." Barely two weeks later the third brigade was disbanded and Lowell was given command of the Reserve Brigade, made up of the tough regular cavalry and considered by many to be the best in the service. Consisting of the 1st, 2nd, and 5th U. S. along with his own 2nd Mass., Lowell's appointment was a high honor, one due to his own exceptional abilities.

Sheridan's trust in putting the young volunteer in charge of the regulars paid off with big dividends on the 19th of September during the Third Battle of Winchester. Forcing a crossing of the Opequon River under a withering fire early in the battle, the cavalry waited through the day while the infantry wore down Early's ranks. Sensing victory, the cavalry was massed to the north of Winchester awaiting the pivotal moment. The Reserve brigade was on the left of the line when the massive charge of five Union brigades, a line half a mile wide in double ranks, charged and crushed the Confederate line. Lowell, with the regulars, charged a battery, capturing two guns and caissons during which his horse was shot out from under him, one of thirteen lost during the campaign.

Lowell excelled again five days later during fighting in the Luray Valley, a follow-up to Sheridan's Winchester victory, prompting Sheridan to request a commission for Charles to Brigadier General. Unaware of Sheridan's request for his advancement, Lowell thought just as highly of his commander. "I like Sheridan immensely," he wrote Josephine, "Whether he succeeds or fails, he is the first general I have seen who puts as much heart and time and thought into his work as if he were doing it for his own

exclusive profit." Two days later during the ill planned advance on Waynesboro, Early's forces, which had been retreating steadily, turned and lashed at the Federals pursuing him. The Reserve brigade, leading the advance, was nearly surrounded and was fighting for it's life, while Colonel Lowell, calm and unshaken, coolly directed a fighting withdrawal which safely brought his men out of the trap.

A little over a week later, as the Federal troops were engaged in burning the Valley's resources, the Confederate cavalry under newly appointed commander Gen. Thomas Rosser struck out at Sheridan's cavalry. Sheridan was amazed that the rebels would strike at his rear and ordered his chief of cavalry to, "...either give Rosser a drubbing or get whipped himself." On the 9th of October the Federal cavalry struck back at the Battle of Tom's Brook, smashing the enemy and driving them headlong in a 26 mile running retreat. By evening Lowell's men had captured 1 battle flag, 4 pieces of artillery, 4 caissons, 2 forges, 2 ambulances, 7 wagons and 50 prisoners. His total losses; seven wounded.

Throughout the Valley campaign Charles Lowell had led a charmed life, never struck though men fell all around him. As they days of fighting wore on he seemed to have a premonition which he revealed in his letters to Josephine with statements such as "I should like to have Sundays quiet", or, "I do wish this war was over!", and most telling of all, "...I don't want to be shot till I've had a chance to come home. I have no idea that I shall be hit, but I want so much not to now, that it sometimes frightens me." It was not to be.

On the 19th of October, 1864, General Early's supposedly beaten army turned and in a surprise flanking attack caught Sheridan's army unprepared at Cedar Creek. The Union cavalry was encamped on the far right of the line and other than a small foray at the opening of the battle was left unengaged while the infantry fought on the left. Lowell had awakened at three that morning, preparing to take his men out on a reconnaissance, and so had his brigade mounted and ready when the battle broke out. Keeping his brigade in the saddle and awaiting orders, he listened to the sound of the battle with Col. James Kidd, commander of the Michigan brigade, wondering what was happening to the southeast. It was apparent by the sound of the firing that the Federal line was falling back, but still the cavalry stood by listlessly, without orders. Finally Lowell made a decision to take the Reserve brigade to the left, and when questioned by Col. Kidd what he thought he should do replied, "I think you should go too". He thought for a moment and then, "Yes, I will take the responsibility to give you the order." And so the two brigades began their march across the entire length of the front, taking full advantage of a lull in the fighting to make their movement.

Two corps of the Union army had been crushed and were in retreat. Gen. Sheridan, returning from a conference in Washington, had spent the night in Winchester and was now making his way to his embattled army. Union stragglers choked the field while a single corps of infantry held a defensive position against the victorious Confederates. It was over this confusing field that the cavalry rode, their movement noted by Gen. William Dwight of the VI Corps. "They moved past me, that splendid cavalry; if they reached the Pike, I felt secure. Lowell got by me before I could speak, but I looked after him for a long distance. Exquisitely mounted, the picture of a soldier, erect, confident, defiant, he moved at the head of the finest body of cavalry that today scorns the earth it treads." While making their transit, Lowell and Kidd finally received a dispatch,

confirming Lowell's instincts and ordering them, and the remaining cavalry brigades to the left. Taking up a position on the army's left flank the cavalry held off the enemy on their front and stabilized the line as Sheridan arrived on the field, electrifying his men with his presence. One of Sheridan's first orders was to Lowell questioning whether he could hold the vital flank while the army rallied. Lowell's simple answer; he could.

Three successive charges against Lowell's line could not dislodge his men from their strong position behind a stonewall. On the third charge a spent bullet ricocheted off the wall and slammed squarely into the chest of Charles Lowell. Reeling in the saddle but not falling, he was helped to the ground by Col. Smith Hastings of Kidd's brigade who searched for a wound but found only a mushroomed piece of lead. All breathed a premature sigh of relief, not knowing that the wound was probably mortal. The bullet had most likely collapsed one of his tubercular lungs and he was bleeding internally. With blood on his lips Lowell tried to reassure the men around him, "It is only my poor lung", he whispered.

General A.T.A. Torbert, commander of Sheridan's cavalry, urged Lowell to move to the rear but he refused. The rallied army would soon be advancing and he insisted on leading his men when the charge was called. His men built a small earthwork around him for protection as he waited and rested for the advance. When the order for the counterattack was given Lowell was lifted into the saddle where he summoned all his strength, drew his sword, and whispered to an aide to sound the charge. Almost immediately he was tumbled off the back of his horse, a bullet passing through his body and severing his spinal cord. As the fighting raged on, Charles was taken to an old house in nearby Middletown where he was attended to by Dr. Oscar DeWolf, surgeon of the 2nd Mass. Cav. The Dr. recalled his final hours, "There were four or five that night in the room. Lowell lay on the table, shot through from shoulder to shoulder; the ball had cut the spinal cord on the way. Of course, below this he was completely paralyzed. Four others were lying desperately wounded on the floor. One young officer was in great pain. Lowell spent much of his ebbing strength helping him through the straits of death. 'I have always been able to count on you, you were always brave. Now you must meet this as you have the other trials - be steady - I count on you.'" Urged by the doctor to write a few words to his wife, Charles found he could use his writing hand and managed a few lines to her. Dictating a few orders and final requests, he found his strength slipping away and by morning it was all over, Dr. DeWolf pronouncing 8 a.m. as the time of death.

His loss was felt deeply within the brigade but most keenly among the army's high command. "His fall cast a gloom on the entire command," wrote Gen. Merritt. "No one in the field appreciated his worth more than his division commander. Young in years, he died too early for his country, leaving a brilliant record for fixture generations, ending a career which gave bright promise of yet greater usefulness and glory." Gen. George Custer, once a member of McClellan's staff with Lowell, echoed this feeling, "We all shed a tear when we knew we had lost him. It is the greatest loss the Cavalry Corps has ever suffered." And especially touched by the loss was Gen. Sheridan himself. "I do not think there was a quality which I could have added to Lowell. He was the perfection of a man and a soldier." In a letter to Josephine Lowell Sheridan stated, "Had General Lowell lived, it is my firm belief that he would have commanded all my cavalry and would have done better with it than I could have done."

Charles Russell Lowell, Jr. was buried at the Mount Auburn Cemetery on the 28th of October. His biographer, Edward Waldo Emerson recalled the scene, "I remember, one rainy day when the sudden gusts blew the yellow leaves in showers from the College elms, hearing the beautiful notes of Pleyel's Hymn, which was the tune to which soldiers were borne to burial, played by the band as the procession came, bearing Charles Lowell's body from his mother's house to the College Chapel; and seeing the coffin, wrapped in the flag, carried to the altar by soldiers; and how strangely in contrast with the new blue overcoats and fresh white and red bunting were the campaign-soiled cap and gauntlets, the worn hilt and battered scabbard of the sword that lay on the coffin."

Charles Lowell's commission to Brigadier General had been signed the day before his death. He was 29 years old. Historians and friends have speculated where he would have gone, what he would have accomplished had he not perished that day in the Shenandoah Valley. A brilliant student, a natural leader, a gifted soldier, a gentle philosopher. There was no limit to his promise. Barely a month after his funeral, Josephine Shaw Lowell gave birth to the couple's only child. Named for the father she would never know, the daughter was called Carlotta.

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¹ At war's end Thompson was still so furious over having lost his battalion, that when he wrote their history he managed to tell the story without ever mentioning the 2nd Mass. Cav., Col. Lowell, or any other Massachusetts officer.