

Reconnaissance Pull in the Offense: A Mexican-American War Case Study

by MAJ Nathan A. Jennings

Reconnaissance by cavalry formations is a critical enabling function for brigades and divisions executing decisive action in unified land operations. Doctrinally defined as a proactive action to collect information about threats, infrastructure, terrain, weather and society, the forward action is typically divided into two techniques: pull and push. While the former, according to Field Manual (FM) 3-98, *Reconnaissance and Security Operations*, gains “an understanding of enemy weaknesses” to “pull the main body to positions of tactical advantage,” the latter is employed when commanders have a “thorough understanding of the operational environment” and “push reconnaissance assets” into “areas of operation to confirm, deny and validate planning assumptions.”¹

Though it remains important for cavalry formations to master both techniques, cursory assessment of American conflicts since the onset of mechanization reveals that scouts are pushed during offensive campaigns far more often than they meaningfully pull their higher echelon. World War II, the Persian Gulf War and Operation Iraqi Freedom, for example, all featured regiments and squadrons that were compelled to adopt rapid and forceful information collection based on operational and political demands placed on their higher headquarters’ tempo. In this context, the aim by most cavalry units to conduct deliberate and stealthy movement is historically unrealistic; ground reconnaissance actions in future conflicts will likely remain accelerated and aggressive to inform advanced-stage planning and execution.

Monterrey campaign

One instructive example of reconnaissance pull, however, can be found in the 19th Century, when the U.S. Army invaded northern Mexico during the Mexican-American War. In that conflict, a small expeditionary force of 3,550 Soldiers under future U.S. President GEN Zachary Taylor crossed the Rio Grande, defeated larger Mexican armies and captured the provincial capital of Monterrey to secure American control of Texas. Throughout his advance – which required maneuvering deep into unfamiliar and hostile territory – the general relied on volunteer cavalry in the form of federalized Texas Rangers to constantly inform his movement. These scouts effectively fulfilled the modern Army’s imperative for reconnaissance units to “enable all units to seize, retain and exploit the initiative across the range of military operations.”

The requirement for Lone Star scouts in the Monterrey Campaign, which lasted from April to September 1846, began with Taylor’s initial offensive along the Rio Grande. As veterans of the Wars of the Texas Republic, the Lone Star scouts’ expertise in mounted warfare proved critical as the American expedition marched into unfamiliar terrain and grappled with the much larger Mexican army. The volunteers’ contributions during the forcible entry reflected traditional functions of light cavalry in the post-Napoleonic era as they explored far ahead of the infantry and artillery columns to identify trafficable routes, deflect opposing scouts and report enemy presence. Their familiarity with desert navigation and Mexican culture, in addition to their native horses’ acclimatized endurance, allowed them to patrol farther than the unprepared U.S. dragoons.

This type of wartime augmentation by locally recruited partisans held a commonplace role in 19th Century warfare. Known alternately as irregular or auxiliary cavalry, the Texas Rangers’ amateur status reflected their informal tradition and temporary activation in contrast with the professionalism and permanency of the branches of most nation-state armies. Similar to allied Indians serving the U.S. Army, Russian Cossacks in Europe or the Silladar Native Horsemen of British India at that time, Texas volunteers supplanted the American regulars’ mobility deficiency with region-specific skills.²

A former Texas Ranger named Samuel Walker, originally from Maryland, organized and led the first scout company to ride south. After beginning active service with an inauspicious start when a Mexican patrol overran their forward camp April 28, Walker and his volunteers gained national fame when they re-established communications between the American main army at Port Isabel and a forward infantry outpost on the Rio Grande. The act required the Texans to break through a substantial Mexican screen, which had stymied Taylor’s remaining dragoons, to make contact with the isolated battalion. Abner Doubleday, a U.S. artillery officer with

the army, praised the “gallant” Walker in his journal, noting that “in spite of the dangers and obstacles he succeeded in executing his daring project.”³

On May 7, 1846, the war moved beyond skirmishing and into main-force combat when Taylor decisively defeated the Mexican Army of the North at the Battle of Palo Alto and followed with another bloody victory at Resaca de la Palma the next day. The general accomplished these feats through innovative positioning of “flying artillery,” or mobile light cannon, along the frontlines that enabled it to fire directly into the opposing infantry ranks. LT Napoleon Dana, 7th U.S. Infantry Regiment, called the victory “a horrid spectacle” and “remarkable and brilliant,” while noting that “grape and canister shot had literally mowed them down.”⁴ Texas scouts resumed reconnaissance duty as the shattered Mexican army retreated south.



Figure 1. CPT Charles A. May’s squadron of 2nd Dragoons (now 2nd Cavalry Regiment) slashes through enemy lines in an attack at Resaca de la Palma, TX, May 9, 1846, a battle that climaxed the opening campaigns of the Mexican-American War. The cavalry squadron’s bravery proved that the 2,500 American soldiers under GEN Zachary Taylor had enough self-confidence and pluck to shatter the Mexican force of 6,000 and eject it forever from Texas. Thereafter throughout the war, the U.S. Army never lacked daring. CPT May’s attack order was simple and effective: “Remember your regiment and follow your officers.” (U.S. Army in Action Series; painting commissioned by the U.S. Army and in the public domain)

Reconnaissance pull into Mexico

Taylor elected to build on his battlefield success with a deeper invasion of Mexico to solidify American control of Texas and compel territorial concessions. However, he and his commanders had little intelligence concerning routes and enemy disposition to their front. To inform his planning, the general dispatched a combined force of dragoons and Texans May 19 to locate the Mexican retrograde. This force included a newly arrived volunteer company led by another former Ranger, CPT John Price. CPT William Henry of 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment recalled how the riders followed the retreating enemy for almost 60 miles and then “fell in with the rearguard of the army and attacked them.” The task force suffered two wounded in the skirmish and subsequently reported the enemy position to Taylor.⁵

Events continued to develop south of the Rio Grande, while the newly annexed state of Texas mobilized two full mounted rifles regiments of 10 companies each, numbered 1st and 2nd respectively, to address Taylor's mobility requirement. The general had begun his advance west from Matamoros throughout the first and second weeks of June, and a third company of Texas scouts, under famed frontier fighter CPT Ben McCulloch, joined the army May 23. He joined the others in a field camp that Samuel Reid, a scout from Louisiana in McCulloch's company, compared to "a Hottentot hamlet" and an "Indian village." On June 5, Taylor dispatched Price's men to provide route security for 1st U.S. Infantry Regiment's march to the town of Reynosa 60 miles up the Rio Grande.⁶

On June 12, the Texans began concerted forward patrols to inform and "pull" the Army's columns into unfamiliar territory. McCulloch's company, in particular, rode southeast toward Linares to, as reported by Reid, "gain information touching the number and disposition of the enemy." They also hoped to ascertain if a passable southern approach to Monterrey existed to support "the line of march for a large division, with its artillery and wagons." Aware of possible observation by "Mexican spies," the scouts feinted toward Reynosa and then cut cross-country to the Linares Road after nightfall. After finding that direction impassable for the expedition's logistical and artillery trains, they returned to report findings and established a temporary camp with 1st U.S. Infantry at Reynosa.⁷

The Texans' region-specific capabilities made them uniquely suited to shape Taylor's scheme of maneuver throughout the invasion. In one instance, which revealed the advantage of previous border experience during the Texas Republic's many wars against Mexico, McCulloch's reconnaissance party leveraged cultural familiarity against an enemy patrol. The Ranger captain first deceived the enemy by hailing them in Spanish before opening fire and capturing a mail carrier. He then translated a captured map and questioned local civilians, which yielded intelligence on the dearth of water and forage ahead. This conversancy in the Spanish language represented another of the Texans' unique skills.⁸

Forward and proactive information collection by mobile scouts, so critically needed to maneuver cumbersome 19th Century infantry and artillery regiments through foreign landscapes, made the Lone Star auxiliaries an indispensable asset during the American advance into Mexico. Taylor himself later reported of McCulloch that "his valuable services as a partisan and spy were greatly needed." He went on – in language uncharacteristically generous for a Regular Army officer speaking of disdained volunteers – to note that "the services rendered by MAJ McCulloch and his men, particularly in reconnoitering ... were of the highest importance."⁹

The American general continued to advance his infantry regiments west along the Rio Grande toward Camargo, Mier and the provincial capital of Monterrey through early July with McCulloch's men riding ahead. The newly arrived 2nd Regiment, Texas Mounted Rifles, now followed the invading column's trail, passing through Reynosa on July 24, while 1st Regiment, Texas Mounted Rifles, continued its march from south Texas toward Matamoros. McCulloch again proved useful during this movement with another reconnaissance, this time focusing on the northern "China Road." When the scouts disqualified the use of that way due to restrictive terrain, Taylor noted that the Texans had "given valuable information touching on one of the routes to Monterrey."¹⁰



Figure 2. Overview map showing U.S. forces' movements into Mexico. Movements of units mentioned in this article are on the central-eastern side of Mexico. (Map courtesy of Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/0/0b/mexican-american_war_%28without_scott%27s_campaign%29-en.svg/2000px-mexican-american_war_%28without_scott%27s_campaign%29-en.svg.png)

By late August, the main infantry brigades, artillery companies, engineer detachments, McCulloch's and Price's scouts and, more importantly, the 10 mounted companies of 2nd Texas had consolidated at Camargo. This placed most of the expeditionary force about halfway to the strategic objective at Monterrey. Taylor then employed McCulloch to assess the next route, this time to Mier and Cerravlo, while reporting that 2nd Texas was "rendering useful service as escorts." The veteran Ranger company also officially reorganized into 1st Texas Regiment under another famous Texan, COL John Coffey Hays, during this time.¹¹

While 2nd Texas provided close support to the army's infantry brigades, the eight companies of 1st Texas secured the army's southern flank. Taylor noted that the mounted regiment was "on its march from Matamoros, having taken San Fernando along its route, which passed through a part of the country not before examined." A journalist from *The Picayune* (New Orleans) newspaper reported the Texans would "take up the line of march again tomorrow and move for a town called China, about 150 miles from this place." He also noted that "at China, the regiment will probably join the main body of the army." Reid simply called the maneuver a "long scout." This circuitous movement cleared a large tract of enemy Mexican guerrillas while preventing an organized surprise attack against Taylor's extended lines of communication.¹²

On Aug. 19, the American column veered away from the Rio Grande and toward the prize of Monterrey. While most of 1st and 2nd Texas moved as intact regiments, the general retained McCulloch's company and another led by former Ranger G.A. Gillespie to explore the remaining route to Monterrey. The scouts patrolled southwest and arrived at the town of Cerralvo Sept. 5 with the lead infantry regiments close behind. The long train of American foot and cannon units soon closed in and established a temporary camp. The 1st Texas, still guarding the army's southern flank, skirmished against Mexican cavalry to the south during this period, losing three men but fulfilling its mission.¹³

On Sept. 15, the twin Texan regiments consolidated as a volunteer brigade of mounted rifles under nominal command of Texas Gov. James Henderson and moved to converge with the main column at Marin. PVT James Holland, a volunteer enlisted scout from Harrison County, TX, recalled that a detachment of "about 100 men were ordered in advance as spies."¹⁴ McCulloch's and Gillespie's companies remained detached from the *ad hoc* brigade to work directly for the commanding general. As Taylor's trusted scouts, they patrolled ahead to meet their parent regiment in Marin. Once there, Taylor issued the order of battle and the plan for the expected assault on Monterrey.

On Sept. 14, while leading the American advance, McCulloch's riders conducted effective counter-reconnaissance by defeating a larger Mexican cavalry force near Marin. Reid described how the enemy horsemen "opened fire with their *escopetas*, or carbines, which was returned by our boys in a most spirited manner." He then wrote that "the Mexicans staggered under our fire and retreated into the town in the greatest confusion." With the Mexican scouts in retreat, the Texans advanced to occupy the town Sept. 15, only 25 miles from the provincial capital. Though just a skirmish, this engagement underscored the lethality of the Texans' Colt revolvers and degraded the Mexican commander's ability to observe the invader's approach.¹⁵

The American army arrived in Marin in separate brigade columns over the next few days, while Taylor again employed his Texans to scout ahead, this time as his personal escort to facilitate a commander's reconnaissance. As chronicled by Dana, "As soon as GEN Taylor arrived at his camp, he and an escort of dragoons and two companies of Texas Rangers went to reconnoiter the enemy's positions." This action facilitated the final refinement of the battle plan as the commander and his staff officers saw the objective for the first time. On Sept. 18, the full Lone Star Brigade arrived at the American camp, bringing the expedition to more than 6,000 men.¹⁶

The expedition began its final march south toward Monterrey Sept. 19. Taylor ordered the "Texas mounted troops" to "form the advance ... except for two companies to compose the rearguard." This directive preserved the infantry and dragoons from fatiguing advance and rearguard security duties while retaining them in close-order formation for the impending assault. The Texans' sequence of march as the army's vanguard consisted of Gillespie's company, McCulloch's company, 1st Texas Regiment and 2nd Texas Regiment. Taylor followed with three infantry divisions comprised of regulars, followed by several volunteer infantry regiments.¹⁷

The consolidated weight of the American army now advanced inexorably toward its objective. As remembered by Walter Lane, a young Texas Revolution veteran riding with 1st Texas, the invasion force marched "as if it were like the ocean's swell" and "formed a noble and imposing pageantry." Most Soldiers were eager to participate in what they expected to be the culminating battle of the war. Another scout recounted how the Mexican cavalry "in proud array, with lances bright," contested the advance. The Texans were soon "charging at full gallop," and the enemy was "seen to wheel and retreat toward the city."¹⁸ When the Texans reached the hill overlooking Monterrey, they halted to allow Taylor's staff engineers, which included future Confederate GEN Robert E. Lee, to conduct a final assessment of the daunting fortifications.¹⁹

This final act of counter-reconnaissance on behalf of the expedition allowed the line regiments to deploy unmolested from line-of-march to attack positions along advantageous approaches. In the following days, the consolidated army – relatively unscathed and unfatigued in large part due to the Texans' reconnaissance-pull actions – would attack and capture one of Mexico's greatest urban centers with a bold plan that fixed the garrison to the east while enveloping from the west. Despite its massive fortifications and more than 10,000 defenders, which one Soldier called a "second West Point in strength," Monterrey would soon fall under a series of bloody assaults that swiftly led to its capitulation.²⁰ The American army then proceeded to occupy the city and the entire Rio Grande corridor in hopes of compelling diplomatic concessions.

Follow-on operations

After the capture of Monterrey, the Lone Star mounted brigade emerged as a liability for Taylor in the next phase of the conflict. In addition to the army no longer requiring their forward reconnaissance services, the volunteers' indiscipline and brutality toward Mexican civilians had become a liability for stability operations. As their excesses threatened to rouse the indigenous populace, the general complained in exasperation that "the mounted men of Texas have scarcely made one expedition without unwarrantedly killing a Mexican."²¹ With the war seemingly won, he dismissed most of the Texas volunteers to return to their homes on the western frontier.

However, the American occupation force soon learned that major combat operations were far from over. In January 1847, suspicious of a Mexican counter-offensive and again lacking proficient scouts, Taylor re-enlisted McCulloch's proven company to screen the vast expanse of Mexican territory to the south. As the invading army spread out to patrol and guard Monterrey, and its surrounding infrastructure and approaches, it remained vulnerable to concentrated attack. The Texans patrolled the southern flank of the army throughout the next month. They soon provided critical intelligence about the approach of a large retaliatory force under Mexico's president, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna.

On Feb. 22 and 23, the American force of 5,000 Soldiers repelled the Mexican army of 16,000 soldiers in a bloody and indecisive engagement. Called the Battle of Buena Vista, McCulloch's Rangers performed light-cavalry functions before, during and after the engagement, earning special commendation from the commanding general. Ohio officer Luther Giddings later credited "that trusty and accomplished scout, CPT McCulloch" for providing the critical notice of Santa Anna's unexpected approach. The timely information collection and reporting allowed Taylor to rapidly reposition his army to defensible terrain just prior to the battle, which allowed him to defeat the larger Mexican force and provide political leverage to leaders in Washington, DC.

Past lessons, future insights

The reconnaissance and security efforts by Texan mounted volunteers in the Monterrey Campaign reveal an obscure, though relevant, historical example where well-armed, highly mobile and proactive cavalry forces pulled an American field army to victory. By executing route reconnaissance, counter-reconnaissance and mobile guard operations, the Lone Star scouts enabled the advancing infantry brigades and artillery companies to, as described by U.S. Army doctrine, "achieve positions of relative advantage" across 200 miles of challenging and unknown terrain.²² The volunteers achieved this through clear understanding of the commander's intent, tactical ability to fight for information and focus on timely and accurate reporting.

The 1846 invasion of northern Mexico offers several lessons for the modern U.S. Army. First, when brigades, divisions, corps or joint task forces advance into unfamiliar terrain and unpredictable situations, they need reconnaissance elements that are trained and equipped to "pull" them into the fight. While most ground reconnaissance efforts will likely be pushed by advancing formations with relatively developed plans, cavalry forces must prepare for the eventuality when degraded information environments require forward scouts to inform immature plans at tactical and operational levels. These instances will require mobile elements, like the Texan volunteers in northern Mexico, to "work over a broad area to develop the enemy situation."²³

The second lesson of the campaign is fundamental to all cavalry operations. The success of the Texas volunteers – in addition to many other examples since – indicates that ground reconnaissance forces must possess adequate firepower, mobility and, in the 21st Century, passive and active protection to allow them to aggressively fight for information. If reconnaissance actions in past wars revealed the cost of failing to develop a versatile range of "scouting" capabilities, the uncertainty of the future will compel squadrons to arm to negotiate it. By equipping for both pull and push missions against the most capable threats, U.S. cavalry formations will, as mandated by GEN Mark Milley, 39th Chief of Staff of the Army, enable "sustained land operations across the spectrum of conflict and win in ground combat."²⁴

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Notes

¹ FM 3-98, ***Reconnaissance and Security Operations***, July 1, 2015.

² Charles Trower, ***Hints on Irregular Cavalry***, Calcutta: W. Thacker and Co., 1845; Philip Haythornthwaite, ***Napoleonic Cavalry***, London: Cassell & Co, 2001.

³ Abner Doubleday, ***My Life in the Old Army: The Reminiscences of Abner Doubleday from the Collections of the New York Historical Society***, edited by Joseph Chance, Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1998.

⁴ Napoleon Dana, ***Monterray is Ours! The Mexican War Letters of Lieutenant Dana, 1845-1847***, Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1990.

⁵ William Henry, ***Campaign Sketches of the War with Mexico***, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1847.

⁶ Samuel Reid, ***The Scouting Expeditions of McCulloch's Texas Rangers, or the Summer and Fall Campaigns of the Army of the United States in Mexico***, Philadelphia: John E. Potter and Company, 1885; House executive documents (HED) No. 60, 30th Congress, 1st Session.

⁷ Reid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ HED No. 60.

¹⁰ James Holland, "Diary of a Texan volunteer in the Mexican War," ***Southwestern Historical Quarterly*** 30, July 1926; Reid; HED No. 60.

¹¹ HED No. 60; Holland.

¹² HED No. 60; Reid.

¹³ Henry; Frederick Wilkins, ***The Highly Irregular Irregulars: The Texas Rangers in the Mexican War***, Austin: Eakin Press, 1990.

¹⁴ Holland.

¹⁵ Reid.

¹⁶ Dana.

¹⁷ HED No. 60; Reid.

¹⁸ Reid.

¹⁹ Walter P. Lane, ***The Adventures and Recollections of Walter P. Lane***, Marshall: News Messenger Pub. Co., 1923.

²⁰ Dana.

²¹ HED No. 60.

²² FM 3-98.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ GEN Mark Milley, ***Advance Policy Question for Nominee for the Chief of Staff of the Army***, July 21, 2015.

Acronym Quick-Scan

BCT – brigade combat team

FM – field manual

HED – House executive document



Figure 3. Mexican territorial claims relinquished in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo are shown in white. (From the National Atlas of the United States; public domain)