



The Horse Cavalry Heritage

by Dr. Robert C. Cameron

In the colonial era, America's mounted force consisted of militia mounted on horses to cope with Indian raids or serve with the British in their conflicts with the French in North America. In this early period, the heavily wooded terrain of the continent and a small population restricted the size of cavalry units and the extent of their operations. During the Revolutionary War, a need emerged for permanent cavalry units to support the Continental Army. On 12 December 1776, the Continental Congress authorized the creation of the 1st Regiment of Light Dragoons and authorization for an additional three regiments soon followed. Basic issue to each trooper included a coat, cap, leather breeches, and a pair of boots and spurs. Weapons consisted of a saber and flintlock pistol that each man provided for himself, while officers were further expected to supply their own mounts.

These dragoons units faced continuous problems in recruiting, finding suitable mounts, and securing supplies. Dragoons were intended to fight mounted or on foot, but their lack of a long-range firearm made them exceptionally vulnerable when dismounted.

These problems led to reorganizing the dragoons into legions, consisting of mounted dragoons and dismounted light infantry. Born of necessity, legions provided a more versatile battlefield force; they performed raiding, reconnaissance, screening, and foraging operations. Mounted militia units supported these ac-

tivities through continuous attacks on British supplies and outposts. In January 1781, dragoons played a central role in the destruction of British forces at the battle of Cowpens. This battle symbolized the growing effectiveness and potential value of a mounted force.

After the Revolutionary War, the dragoons disbanded. For the next 50 years, mounted units were created only temporarily to cope with specific threats. Efforts to minimize military expenses and avoid unpopular taxation often left the fledgling U.S. Army with no cavalry during this period. Instead, volunteer mounted infantry operated on the frontier, although the War of 1812 witnessed the creation of a small cavalry force.

By the 1830s, continued expansion beyond the Mississippi River brought the United States into direct contact with the Plains Indian nations. Unlike the sedentary Indians encountered east of the river, the nomadic Plains Indians relied on the horse for mobility. To secure this ever-expanding frontier, the Army initially possessed few posts with only small garrisons of foot-mobile infantry and artillery. Therefore, in 1833, the Army organized the 1st Regiment of Dragoons. This unit's speed, mobility, and ability to fight mounted or dismounted made it ideal for frontier operations. However, the absence of cavalry doctrine forced the regiment to develop and train its own tactics. Expansion of the Army's mounted force soon followed, but corresponding doc-

"By the 1830s, continued expansion beyond the Mississippi River brought the United States into direct contact with the Plains Indian nations. Unlike the sedentary Indians encountered east of the river, the nomadic Plains Indians relied on the horse for mobility. To secure this ever-expanding frontier, the Army initially possessed few posts with only small garrisons of foot-mobile infantry and artillery."

trinal and organizational developments reflected confusion regarding the role and purpose of cavalry. During the 1846-1848 Mexican War, mounted forces were broken into small detachments to perform reconnaissance, pursuit, and administrative roles. They performed well against the Mexican army and earned a reputation for dash and vigor. Their activities attracted the attention of General Winfield Scott. In response to the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen's successful storming of Chapultepec, he proclaimed "Brave Rifles! Veterans! You have been baptized in fire and blood and have come out steel." This unit later became the 3d Cavalry Regiment.

The war experience did not resolve the uncertainty over the function and composition of mounted units. In 1855, the Army added the 1st and 2d Cavalry Regiments to its mounted force, which now included an array of mounted riflemen, dragoons, and cavalry. Uniform doctrine and organization did not exist. Similarly, weapons varied among unit types. The new cavalry regiments, in particular, carried a variety of experimental muzzle- and breech-loading firearms.

Nevertheless, the continuing westward expansion of the United States provided ample opportunities for the employment of mounted troops of all types. Scattered across the western plains, small detachments of dragoons, cavalymen, or riflemen escorted wagon trains, surveyed new territories, and served as a buffer between the Indian nations and the growing numbers of settlers. In the 1850s, two regiments also participated in the Army's unsuccessful effort to end violence in Kansas, which occurred when the issue of slavery split the state's population into two armed camps.

The start of the Civil War in 1861 broke the integrity of the cavalry regiments. Many soldiers left their units to join the Confederate Army. Initially, Union cavalry accompanied infantry divisions, operating in small numbers to provide details and escorts. Such dispersal nullified combat potential. Confederate cavalry, however, was organized in large formations and assigned at the corps and army level, performing a variety of operations loosely categorized into raiding, reconnaissance, screening, pursuit, and delay. In addition, Confederate cavalry also fought on the principal battlefields alongside infantry and artillery. Their larger size, versatility of mission, and aggressive, energetic leadership made Confederate cavalry far more effective than its Union counterpart in the first years of the war, despite nonstandard equipment that included an array of sabers, carbines, pistols, and shotguns. In 1862, for example, J.E.B. Stuart led a cavalry force behind and around the Union lines, losing one man while gaining useful information for the subsequent Seven Days Battles and taking 165 prisoners. Following the Battle of Shiloh, Confederate cavalry under the separate commands of Nathan Bedford Forrest and John Hunt Morgan helped stop a Union advance on Chattanooga by continuously attacking the Union supply line and conducting sweeping raids through Kentucky. These actions also set the stage for the Confederate invasion of that state and the subsequent Battle of Perryville. Similar cavalry raids against Union supply lines also temporarily halted Union operations against Vicksburg.

Union cavalry noticeably improved in 1863, when cavalry units were removed from infantry formations and grouped into divi-



sions under a separate command. The creation of the Cavalry Bureau provided a central organization responsible for organizing and equipping cavalry units. These changes permitted Union cavalry to conduct raids on its own, symbolized by the Grierson Raid in which 1,000 troopers rode 600 miles through Confederate-held territory in Tennessee and Mississippi. In 1864, Major General Philip H. Sheridan became the principal influence on Union cavalry. He emphasized the creation of cavalry corps and independent operations. The larger organization possessed a formidable mix of firepower and mobility, enhanced further with the introduction of the Spencer Repeater, a seven-shot, breech-loading weapon. Sheridan himself demonstrated the power of the larger cavalry organization by leading a raid on Richmond. In support of army operations, however, larger cavalry formations proved capable of independent action that could decisively influence the outcome of a battle. Following the battle of Five Forks in April 1865, it was Sheridan's Cavalry Corps that blocked the Confederate Army's retreat, captured its supply trains, and encouraged General Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse.

The Civil War firmly established the basic cavalry missions of reconnaissance, security, economy of force, exploitation, pursuit, delay, and raid. The war also demonstrated the supremacy of firepower over the mounted charge. Cavalry units tended to use their horses for transport and fight dismounted, conducting mounted assaults only against surprised or broken forces. These same principles found widespread employment in the decades following



"In the colonial era, America's mounted force consisted of militia mounted on horses to cope with Indian raids or serve with the British in their conflicts with the French in North America. In this early period, the heavily wooded terrain of the continent and a small population restricted the size of cavalry units and the extent of their operations."

the Civil War, especially during the numerous campaigns against Indian nations on the frontier.

The end of the Civil War resulted in a sharp decrease in the Army's size. Volunteers returned home at the same time the Army assumed responsibility for occupation of the ex-Confederate states and was called on to intervene in labor disputes. In the West, expansion and settlement continued, which in turn triggered Indian resistance. Cavalry regiments again became the preferred means of providing security and stability throughout the western territories. Their combination of mobility and firepower made them more effective in dealing with the elusive and nomadic Plains Indians. However, the small numbers of mounted troops available to control a land mass that stretched from the Canadian to the Mexican border and from the Mississippi River to California resulted in regiments operating from multiple posts in squadron- and troop-size increments.

Cavalry soldiers, sometimes supported by infantry, sought to prevent violence between settlers determined to develop the West and Indian nations equally determined to resist encroachment on their tribal lands. The Army became the principal tool for implementing the American government's reservation policy, which

relocated Indian nations to designated areas protected from settlement. However, the harsh conditions of these reservations frequently triggered Indian resistance or efforts to avoid resettlement. The Nez Perce Indians, for example, attempted to flee to Canada rather than accept life on a reservation.

Cavalry units proved the spearhead for eliminating Indian resistance and protecting settlements from Indian raids. Initially, they proved less than adequate. Cavalry columns remained tied to supply wagons, which sharply reduced their speed. Indian warriors exploited their superior mobility to fight on their own terms. They proved elusive and difficult to fix in place long enough for superior Army firepower to prevail. Consequently, cavalry organizations began to rely on Indian scouts to track and locate hostile forces. They also resorted to winter operations against Indian villages, which tended to remain in one location throughout the season. Unused to winter campaigning, many Indian nations surrendered after suffering devastating attacks by mounted forces in bitterly cold conditions.

In the Southwest, the Army faced a different Indian threat. There, warriors repeatedly left reservations to conduct raids before retreating to mountain hideouts. To apprehend these Indians, cav-



"Following the Battle of Shiloh, Confederate cavalry under the separate commands of Nathan Bedford Forrest and John Hunt Morgan helped stop a Union advance on Chattanooga by continuously attacking the Union supply line and conducting sweeping raids through Kentucky. These actions also set the stage for the Confederate invasion of that state and the subsequent Battle of Perryville."



"In 1916, the conflict spilled over the border when Pancho Villa, the leader of an anti-American faction, attacked Columbus, New Mexico. The United States responded by sending a 5,000-man column into northern Mexico after the raiders. The column included cavalry, trucks, and aircraft to support ground troops. This action became known as the 'Punitive Expedition.'"

ally units used scouts to track the raiders and apply pressure on them. Although contacts proved infrequent, the relentless pursuit tactics often forced the raiders to surrender, starve, or fight in unfavorable circumstances. In these campaigns, conducted under difficult conditions in an unforgiving climate, the 9th and 10th Cavalry Regiments played a prominent role. These regiments were composed of African-American soldiers and non-commissioned officers led by white officers. Their habit of wearing buffalo robes earned them the nickname "buffalo soldiers."

For many soldiers service on the frontier was characterized by long periods of boredom and inactivity punctuated by short bursts of intense action and combat. On campaign, complacency and overconfidence, however, proved almost as dangerous as the enemy. In 1876, the 7th Cavalry Regiment sought a rapid conclusion to operations against the Sioux and Cheyenne in Montana. Noted for its dash and aggressiveness, the regiment finally located its quarry and immediately prepared to attack. Without waiting for infantry or artillery support from supporting columns, and without effectively determining the strength of the opposition, the regiment attacked. It soon found itself fighting for survival against an unprecedented concentration of more than 2,000 warriors. The ensuing battle of Little Big Horn resulted in the destruction of more than half of the regiment, including its commander.

Despite this victory, the Indian nations could not stop the expansion of the United States. By the 1890s, the frontier had closed and the Indian wars had come to an end.

Cavalry units, however, continued to find employment as the nation began to transform into a global power. They fought in the Boxer Rebellion in China, the Spanish-American War, and the Filipino Insurrection. During these conflicts, mounted units faced the conventional forces of Spain, Filipino guerrillas, and the fanatical Boxer mobs intent on killing foreigners. However, cavalry units also provided humanitarian assistance to San Francisco in the wake of the great earthquake and fire of 1906, and they assumed occupational duties in Cuba.

These experiences shaped cavalry development, encouraging greater reliance on modern firepower, maneuver, and rapid mobility. The principal weapon became a .30-caliber, magazine-fed rifle that used smokeless powder. Drill and service regulations

underwent improvements and new organizations were tested. Machine gun platoons also joined cavalry regiments. Symbolic of the growing importance of cavalry to the Army, permanent mounted divisions and brigades were also established.

In 1910, border unrest resulted from the outbreak of civil war in Mexico. There, multiple factions vied for power and sought international support, including American aid. In 1916, the conflict spilled over the border when Pancho Villa, the leader of an anti-American faction, attacked Columbus, New Mexico. The United States responded by sending a 5,000-man column into northern Mexico after the raiders. The column included cavalry, trucks, and aircraft to support ground troops. This action became known as the "Punitive Expedition." After a pursuit over rugged terrain reminiscent of similar operations conducted during the Indian wars, the column successfully launched a surprise attack on Villa and his supporters.

The Punitive Expedition marked the last major action of American horse cavalry, which played only a minor role during World War I. However, the horse cavalry continued to modernize and experiment with new ideas and tactics. Cavalry leaders sought to retain the battlefield relevance of their branch amid an array of new technologies. In the 1920s and 1930s, horse cavalry units incorporated a growing pool of motor vehicles for reconnaissance and logistics purposes and increased the number of organic automatic weapons. The horse was retained because no vehicle could yet match its cross-country mobility. Cavalry doctrine stressed the importance of operating in small, dispersed groupings. Coordinating the actions of these groups posed a challenge that encouraged increased use of the radio. In response to the growing threat of armored vehicles, the horse cavalry developed antitank tactics based on firepower, depth, and mobility to channel and destroy enemy tanks. With the development of reliable armored fighting vehicles and the need for heavier weapons to defeat them, however, horse cavalry ceased to be a competitive force on the battlefield. World War II marked the final replacement of the horse with vehicles, and mechanized cavalry replaced the horse cavalry.



Robert S. Cameron is the armor branch historian.