When most people think of the American Doughboy in World War I, they imagine Soldiers in a muddy trenches facing devastating artillery barrages or charging through “no man’s land” into murderous machinegun fire. Typically the last thing that comes to mind when thinking about American involvement in WWI is traditional horse-mounted cavalry assaults against enemy positions. But that is exactly what First Army employed during both the St. Mihiel and Meuse Argonne Offensives to supplement other technology such as airplanes, tanks or motor vehicles which were unreliable at best in the unforgiving terrain of the frontlines. Indeed, the American cavalry performed so well that General John J. Pershing commented about it.

“During this period (WWI) all arms had a chance for development and employment except the Cavalry, so that to some unthinking person the day of the Cavalry seems to have passed. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The splendid work of the Cavalry in the last few weeks of the war more than justified its existence and the expense of its upkeep in the years of peace preceding the war….In any future war, the use of cavalry will be as important as it has been in the past.”

John J. Pershing, General, U.S. Army, and Commander, American Expeditionary Force (AEF).1

Prior to the American involvement in the war, the cavalry had been seen as an elite branch of service and a force intended to provide a wide variety of services. The cavalry did everything from reconnaissance to serving as advance forces to pursuing and harassing enemy forces in retreat. The cavalry was so highly regarded within the British Army that nearly all senior Army officers were former cavalry officers. Author and historian Alexis Wrangel assesses this as one possible explanation for the early fight on the Western Front devolving into stalemate.2 When the war started, most European cavalry soldiers still carried sabers and lances as well as rifles but were expected to fight soldiers who were also mounted.

In contrast the U.S. Army’s approach to cavalry during this period was more similar to an 18th and 19th century troop known as Dragoons – essentially mounted infantry using the horses for increased mobility but generally participating in the fight dismounted.3 U.S. cavalry troopers employed this tactic a great deal in their service along the Mexican border in the years preceding WWI, which was one of the reasons General Pershing, who had led the excursions there, was so fond of them. In fact, when General Pershing landed in France he brought an advanced party of 67 American soldiers with him. Of the 67 soldiers, 35 were cavalrymen and 31 were members of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment. Until the end of the war, General Pershing would always maintain one officer and 20 troopers from the 2nd Cavalry with him as his personal security detachment. This was largely due to their reputation and Pershing’s knowledge of their abilities during the Punitive Campaign.4 The remainder of the U.S. cavalry troops in France serving with the AEF and First Army were primarily utilized not as fighting soldiers, but as military police (MP), horse and mule caretakers, farriers, and stable hands. The Army’s logistics system was still primarily based around the horse, with most transport being by horse drawn wagons. While advances were being made in incorporating motor vehicles within the Army, they were in short supply and complicated to maintain, so the horse was put to great use and the cavalry trooper understood how to care for and manage them.

By 30 August 1918, weeks after First Army was established, the AEF directed the 2nd Cavalry to form a mounted provisional squadron at Camp Jeanne d’Arc using what horses the French could spare. Captain Ernest Harmon, the Squadron Commander, described the horses as being everything from Percheron draft horses to a Spanish pony. They received the horses in very poor condition from various remount depots and veterinary hospitals with many of the horses having been previously treated for bullet wounds or gas exposure. CPT Harmon goes on to describe that “forty-two were white or gray.” This was a reference to the long-held opinion that white or gray horses were undesirable as cavalry mounts or as war horses in any capacity, because they were too visible to the enemy. Regardless, within 15 days, 14 officers and 404 troopers were assembled and as ready for combat as they were going to be.5 As for arms, the U.S. cavalry did away with the sabre and instead were armed with the new M1903 Springfield rifle as well as the M1911 pistol.
Additionally, General Dickman, commander the IV Corps of First Army, directed that each troop (approximately 100-110 men) be armed with four Browning Automatic Rifles (BAR). The BAR was an experimental weapon and most would not be introduced until the Meuse Argonne Offensive, so these cavalry troopers were among the first to use them in combat.

The new 2nd Cavalry Squadron would be made up of Troops D, F and H and were to advance after the American infantry had cleared the German trenches during the start of the St. Mihiel Offensive. Around 2:15 pm on 12 September, 1918, they crossed the now-abandoned American and German trench lines with orders to “reconnoiter toward Vigneulles… and intercept the railroad line between Heudicourt and Vigneulles.” CPT Harmon lamented that even if they managed to make that objective they had no demolitions or attached engineer unit to blow up the rails once they got there. They passed through the American infantry lines and were about five miles past Nonsgard when they encountered considerable resistance from a column of retreating German infantry.

The American cavalry troopers charged the Germans head on, overcoming two machineguns by charging and killing their crews on horseback with their pistols after a short, somewhat uncoordinated and confused attack. During the attack, several of the troopers were wounded and a number of horses had bolted from the intense fighting. The confused nature of the attack and heavy German resistance forced the troopers to withdraw back to Nonsgard for the evening. The next day the troopers continued their reconnaissance and patrols, reaching the town of Vigneulles and linking up with American Infantry and elements of French cavalry along their route. By 15 September, the 2nd Cavalry Squadron had captured 60 German prisoners and 56 machineguns.
During these patrols, a high-ranking German staff officer was captured during the fighting. But the bigger prize for the troopers was the capture of his personal black stallion. The stallion was pressed into service by the Squadron’s Commander CPT Harmon. Additionally, and most crucial, the troopers were able to keep an accurate accounting of where the retreating German positions were for the pursuing French and American infantry.

Following their combat debut, the squadron received high praise and letters of commendation from surrounding Division commanders, General Dickman (IV Corps commander of First Army), and other various organizations in the area. The squadron would go on to serve as combat liaisons to the 28th, 35th and 91st Infantry Divisions during the Meuse Argonne Offensive starting on 26 September 1918. While there were several small actions, most of the troopers’ time was spent patrolling. After 48 hours the terrain became too difficult due to the extensive entrenchments, and their combat tour was complete. The 2nd Cavalry Squadron had started operations with 14 officers and 404 troopers on 12 September. Three weeks later, the Squadron had only 150 men reporting for duty. One of the many causes of the trooper’s significant losses came from exposure to gas during the Meuse Argonne operations. Following their combat time, the 2nd Cavalry Squadron would find itself scattered across France, returned to MP duties and providing remount services to other units.

While it may have seemed counterintuitive to introduce mounted cavalry into the WWI fight, given the conditions, it was the AEF and First Army that adapted the American cavalry troopers to make them useful in this new style of combat. The European model, typically, was to use cavalry on a large scale to harass the enemy and potentially exploit a breach in a line. First Army commanders changed the way the American cavalry troopers were to be used — employing them in small, effective formations to act as a vital command and control assets. This was especially crucial when aerial observation was not available. The cavalry’s actions added critical intelligence to the American commanders on the ground.

Following WWI, the cavalry branch would continue in a diminishing role. As tanks became more reliable and the realization set in that armored cavalry was the way of the future, U.S. Army cavalry units were slowly converted and their troopers sent to other units. By 1941, with a few exceptions, horse-mounted cavalry was largely a thing of the past. The last horse-mounted cavalry charge by a U.S. unit took place on the Bataan Peninsula, in the Philippines. The 26th Cavalry Regiment of the allied Philippine Scouts executed the charge against Imperial Japanese Army forces near the village of Morong. The charge was led by First Lieutenant Edwin Ramsey on 16 January, 1942. He and the rest of his 27-man platoon (G Troop of 26th US Cavalry), their heads low over their horses’ necks and firing their Colt 1911 pistols, galloped headlong into a far larger force of Japanese infantrymen on the Bataan Peninsula of the Philippines. The charge did successfully halt the Japanese advance for a short time until additional American reinforcements arrived. Despite the success this would be the last formal horse cavalry action to take place in U.S. Army history.

Military Humor

HELPFUL HINTS

No. 17—Don’t let anyone fool you on April 1st.

Oh yeah? I chose your’s the keenest or sumpin' just like all the rest of the April Fools.

The C.O. doesn’t know the date, and doesn’t give a hoot.

On this date—April 1st—remain constantly on the alert to avoid being called an April Fool. To avoid this terrible tendency you must ignore all orders and commands, regardless of their source. As this is the most popular form of battery a prospect—follow this advice conscientiously and we can assure you you will be called anything but April Fool.

Editor’s Note

As we continue this series of newsletters to report on the activities of the First Army in World War One and World War Two we would like to extend the invitation to all of First Army to read and contribute to this newsletter. These newsletters are intended to be a means to educate our First Army family about our own history and to inspire discussion. We are additionally searching for World War Two First Army veterans. If you know of any please contact us.

If you have a request for additional information or you would like to have a specific topic covered please contact CPT Kevin Braafladt kevin.d.braafladt.mil@mail.mil for story submission requirements. All stories are subject to editing by the First Army Historian.

5. Ibid. Regan
7. Ibid. Harmon
8. Ibid. Harmon
9. Ibid. Regan
10. Ibid. Harmon