

TRENDS in Mounted Warfare

*A sampling of the employment
of mounted combat units in
land campaigns*

by Lieutenant Colonel Kris P. Thompson



Introduction

Think back to 1977. Many of us were in our formative years. Some of us were already in the Army or were cadets. Think for a moment about the then-existing concepts of conducting land warfare. Think about the weapons we had for mounted combat. Think about the combat unit organizations we had at that time. Now reflect on the concepts, weapons, and organizations of today. It is simply amazing how much the nature of land warfare has changed in the last 20 years.

We are at the threshold of the “new millennium.” We are also in the midst of a transition in mounted warfare. Literally thousands of years passed with only incidental changes in mounted warfare — how many ways are there to use a horse? But in the last century there has been a fundamental change in mounted warfare with the advent of the tank, infantry fighting vehicle, and helicopter. Because these weapons are still being improved, changed, and developed, we are still in this transitional period. How will it play out? In 1815, at the close of the Napoleonic Wars, no one wondered whether the horse was going to change in the next 20 years. Yet, we have all

come to expect dynamic changes in mounted warfare in every decade.

This article will describe some key trends in the use of mounted units during this transitional period. Since the article will focus on land armies, I will concentrate on the operational setting. This is where campaigns are won and lost. This article will illustrate examples of how mounted forces have been used to win campaigns. I do not pretend to make this a detailed presentation of all mobile combat in the last century — obviously, such a project would be a multi-volume work. I have selected events and combat leaders as subjects of discussion which seem particularly appropriate as examples of key aspects of this transition. Analyzing these examples, I will identify trends, develop several theses or principles which are key indicators of successful uses of mounted combat units, and provide recommendations.

Mounted Forces in a “Down-sized” Army — the U.S. Cavalry before the Civil War

On March 3, 1855, the federal government of the United States authorized the fielding of two “cavalry” regiments, thus

establishing the first active component mounted units in our history.¹ Spread around the nation in small detachments, these units were little more than a mounted territorial police for the frontier and western regions of the country. The officers in these detachments, kept busy with frequent deployments and widely divergent “peace-keeping” operations, could not have had training or even a thought process which considered anything above small unit combat. Even the manual on cavalry tactics then in use devoted a scant three pages to maneuver of a cavalry division.

With appreciation but detachment, these officers probably listened to stories from Europe about the huge legions of cavalry employed in the Napoleonic Wars, not being able to conceive of how such formations would be relevant or practical in the future. (Perhaps in the same way we today look back on World War II.)

At the outbreak of the Civil War, the Union Army’s mounted arm remained muted because of a belief that rifled cannon would trump cavalry off any battlefield,² and that American terrain was uniquely unsuited for cavalry. The first two mobilization efforts in the North

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called for only one cavalry regiment. How much this was to change! By the end of the war, only four years later, the Union raised 272 regiments of cavalry, and the Confederacy raised over 137 regiments.³

The overall use of cavalry by the belligerents in the early years of the War is well known. The South used cavalry in mass, and with more sophistication and aggressiveness. The North fragmented its cavalry, employing it for guarding logistics sites, picketing encampments, and providing reconnaissance patrols.

Overcoming Prejudice — New Concepts under “Fighting Joe” Hooker

After two years of disaster, disappointment, and finger-pointing concerning the deplorable state of the Union cavalry, senior leaders in the Army of the Potomac reluctantly realized the current system was not working. On February 5, 1863, the new commander of the Army of the Potomac — Major General Joseph “Fighting Joe” Hooker — put all cavalry in his army into a Cavalry Corps.⁴ The new commander of this unit, Brigadier General George Stoneman, organized it into three cavalry divisions.

For the next 14 months, the Cavalry Corps launched a series of attacks and raids which were of a magnitude unheard of on the Union side up to that time. This period was a blooding of the North’s mounted arm, attempting to play catch-up after nearly three years of misuse. With each hard lesson learned, Union leaders became bolder and bolder in using larger cavalry formations. Finally, the much awaited clash between opposing mounted main bodies (on the flanks of their respective armies) took place at Brandy Station in June 1863. The battle was a hard fought, face-to-face brawl. The Union cavalry had arrived. While the Southern cavalry leader, J.E.B. Stuart, claimed victory based on the Northern cavalry’s retreat from the battlefield,

all present realized the Northerners had achieved parity.

Hooker’s reorganization was a landmark event, no doubt, but Stoneman and his successor — Brigadier Alfred Pleasonton — were not the personalities to complete the evolutionary process of the Union cavalry.

Coming of Age — The Union Cavalry under Sheridan

In the spring of 1864, Lieutenant General U.S. Grant took charge of the entire land force of the Union. Grant put Major General Philip Sheridan in charge of the Cavalry Corps. At the time he took over, he was five feet, five inches in height and weighed one hundred fifteen pounds.⁵ Despite his size, however, Sheridan had tons of fight in him and has been described as:

“...a short, bandy-legged, quick tempered, foul mouthed Irish bantam, with a massive torso, dangling arms and an infinite capacity for making men want to fight.”⁶

Sheridan had an immediate run-in with his new commander, Lieutenant General George Meade, who was still nominally in charge of the Army of the Potomac. Sheridan was insistent on two fundamental changes in the employment of the cavalry. First, he wanted to emulate the Southern enemy who “had organized his mounted force into compact masses... husbanding the strength of his horses by keeping them to the rear...”⁷ This philosophy was in stark contrast to the Union philosophy of using cavalry to continually “cordon” the infantry corps with cavalry pickets. This constant deployment caused the horseflesh to go thin and wear down.

Secondly, Sheridan refused to be a martinet stationed at Meade’s Headquarters, as had his predecessors. They had

been “an adjunct at army headquarters — a sort of chief of cavalry...”⁸ Because of this, and the outpost duty, he felt the Cavalry Corps was a corps “in name only.”

Sheridan wanted to free his Cavalry Corps from being tied to the maneuver and pace of the infantry corps. Meade protested, and argued the cavalry was the only available force for security of the infantry, trains, and artillery. Sheridan explained to Meade his philosophy:

“I told him that if he would let me use the cavalry as I contemplated, he need have little solicitude in these respects, for, with a mass of ten thousand men, it was my belief that I could make it so lively for the enemy’s cavalry that, so far as attacks from it were concerned, the flanks and rear of the Army of the Potomac would require little or no defense, and claimed, further, that moving columns of infantry should take care of their own fronts. I also told him that it was my object to defeat the enemy’s cavalry in a general combat... that would enable us after a while to march where we pleased, for the purpose of breaking General Lee’s communications and destroying the resources from which his army was supplied.”⁹ (emphasis added)

Initially, Sheridan did not get his way. In early May 1864, Grant tried to outflank Lee’s position on the Rapidan River by moving around the position on the weakly-held East side. The Rapidan is an east-west waterway about halfway between the Potomac River and Richmond. Sheridan’s cavalry led the way, but was still tied to the main body of infantry. While the infantry corps slogged it out in the Wilderness, the cavalry sparred with the Confederate cavalry and outposts. The tight linkage between the Cavalry Corps and the infantry caused a number of problems in movement — intermingling during night road marches,

lost opportunities for snatching key terrain, and general confusion.

Sheridan was irritated, and his quick Irish temper soon got the better of him. After Meade chastised him for impeding the progress of an infantry corps, Sheridan lashed out:

“...I told him that I could whip Stuart if he (Meade) would only let me...”¹⁰

At the end of his rope, Sheridan finally told Meade to command the cavalry himself. Meade then went to Grant’s Headquarters and complained about his insubordinate cavalryman. The story goes that Grant (a friend of Sheridan’s) then asked if Sheridan really said he could whip Stuart. After being assured that he did, Grant replied “then let him go out and do it.”

Sheridan then did exactly what he said he would do. Grant’s official order was simple — “proceed against the enemy cavalry...”¹¹ Sheridan then explained his plan:

“...Moving in one column around the right flank of Lee’s army to get in its rear...it was my intention to fight Stuart wherever he presented himself... Our move would be a challenge to Stuart for a cavalry duel behind Lee’s lines...”¹² (emphasis added)

There is no doubt the defeat of the enemy mounted arm was the “principal object” of the raid.¹³ The formation was three cavalry divisions in a column of “fours,” thirteen miles long.

Stuart rose to the bait. In the resulting battle of Yellow Tavern, Stuart was killed by a Michigan cavalry trooper under George Armstrong Custer, and the Confederate cavalry was “badly broken up.” Thereafter, Sheridan’s cavalry caused disruption and great alarm in the heart of Confederate Virginia. The “most intense excitement” stirred in Richmond with Sheridan running loose. The Cavalry corps tore up miles upon miles of Virginia railroad, burned several railroad bridges, captured and destroyed two million rations and other commissary stores, and overran small rear garrisons.

This success led to further employment of the Cavalry Corps to rip apart Lee’s

communications network. It was now much easier to convince Meade and Grant’s staff of the advantages of having the cavalry “cut loose”¹⁴ from the main body. The raid to Trevillian Station again had the double goal of drawing out the enemy cavalry and tearing up railroad lines. In a replay of Yellow Tavern, Sheridan’s cavalry defeated cavalry under General Wade Hampton and disabled more stretches of railway (Wilson alone accounted for 60 miles of destroyed railroads and rolling stock). Sheridan, of course, was then sent to a larger command in the Shenandoah Valley and the remainder of the war, as they say, is history.

What lessons did the Union cavalrymen learn at the birth of the mounted arm in the United States? The major points on the employment of mounted units from Sheridan’s standpoint were:

- The cavalry of an army **must be employed as a distinct, separate, completely mounted entity.**
- It must be “cut loose” from other branches which would slow its maneuver.
- Its first object should be to gain **superiority over the enemy’s mounted arm**, and the secondary object is to **disrupt his communications and destroy resources** upon which the enemy army depends.
- It should be **moved around the enemy army’s flank and meet the enemy cavalry in the enemy’s rear area.**

These were important lessons, as they surely made their way into the minds of the future American mounted leaders of World War II. George Patton, Jr. for instance, was born in 1885. As he grew up and listened attentively to stories about the Civil War, it seemed as close to him as the Korean War and World War II did to all of us growing up. He read text upon text about the Civil War. By 1910, at the age of 25, he owned at least seven volumes of *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*.¹⁵ In 1926, at the age of 41, he read and inscribed Charles D. Rhodes’ *History of the Cavalry of the Army of the Potomac*.¹⁶ In 1938, at the age of 53, he read a new publication by a little known

German officer over and over until he knew it by heart — Heinz Guderian’s *Achtung Panzer!*¹⁷ This takes us to the heart of the transitional period of mounted warfare.

Notes

¹Urwin, *The United States Cavalry, An Illustrated History* (Blandford Books Ltd., 1983) p. 96.

²Stackpole, *Sheridan in the Shenandoah Valley* (2d ed. Stackpole Books, 1992) p. 117.

³Urwin, p. 108.

⁴Ibid., p. 118.

⁵Sheridan, *Civil War Memoirs* (Bantam Books, 1991) p. 140.

⁶Urwin, p. 124. Lincoln claimed jokingly that Sheridan could “scratch his shins without having to stoop over...” (Stackpole, p. 121).

⁷Sheridan, p. 145.

⁸Ibid., p. 146.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 155.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., p. 156.

¹³Rodenbough, “Sheridan’s Richmond Raid,” *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, Vol. IV* (Castle) p. 189.

¹⁴Rodenbough, “Sheridan’s Trevillian Raid,” *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, Vol. IV* (Castle), p. 233.

¹⁵Nye, *The Patton Mind* (Avery Pub. Group, 1993) p. 28.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 71.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 119.

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