

# Organizing the First Armored Divisions

The Meeting at a Schoolhouse in Louisiana in 1940  
 Dragged the Infantry and Cavalry Branches  
 Into the Age of Combined Arms

by John B. Wilson

**Editor's Note:** Because the Cavalry branch of the Army took the lead in adopting mechanization in the 1930s, it is a common misconception that the Armor branch grew directly from Cavalry. This was not the case, as historian John B. Wilson describes it in a new volume of the Army Lineage Series, *Maneuver and Firepower: The Evolution of Divisions and Separate Brigades*. The following excerpt is used with permission of the Center for Military History.

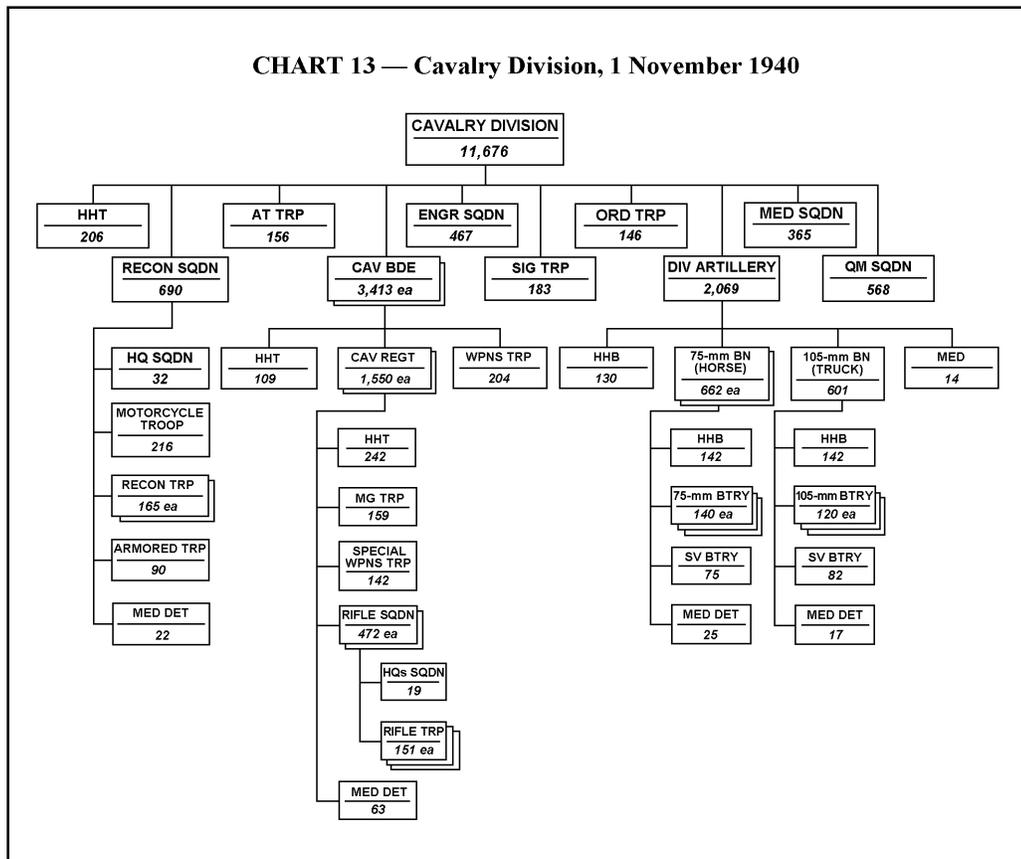
During the 1940 maneuvers the Army also had tested a provisional mechanized division. After the German invasion of Poland in 1939, Brig. Gen. Adna R. Chaffee had called for "armored" divisions separate from both infantry and cavalry. Chaffee's 7th Cavalry Brigade (Mechanized), Brig. Gen. Bruce Magruder's Provisional Tank Brigade (organized in 1940 with infantry tank units), and the 6th Infantry made up the new unit. At the conclusion of the exercises, Chaffee; Magruder; Col. Alvan C. Gillem, Magruder's executive officer; Col.

George S. Patton, commander of the 3d Cavalry at Fort Myer, Virginia; and other advocates of tank warfare met with the G-3, General Andrews, in a schoolhouse at Alexandria, Louisiana, to discuss the future of mechanization. All agreed that the Army needed to unify its efforts. The question was how. Both the chief of cavalry and the chief of infantry had attended the maneuvers, but they were excluded from the meeting because of their expected opposition to any change that might deprive their arms of personnel, equipment, or missions.<sup>1</sup>

Returning to Washington, Andrews proposed that Marshall call a conference on mechanization. The crisis in Europe had by then increased congressional willingness to support a major rearmament effort, and at the same time the success of the German panzers highlighted the need for mechanization, however costly.

Andrews' initiative, made three days after the British evacuated Dunkirk, noted that the American Army had inadequate mechanized forces and that it needed to revise its policy of allowing both infantry and cavalry to develop such units separately. He suggested that the basic mechanized combined arms unit be a division of between 8,000 and 11,000 men. With the chief of cavalry planning to organize mechanized cavalry divisions, which mixed horse and tank units, such a conference seemed imperative. Marshall approved Andrews' proposal.<sup>2</sup>

CHART 13 — Cavalry Division, 1 November 1940



From 10 to 12 June 1940 Andrews hosted a meeting in Washington centering on the organization of mechanized divisions. Along with the General Staff and the chiefs of the arms and services, Chaffee, Magruder, and other tank enthusiasts attended. Andrews disclosed that the War Department would organize an independent armored force, belonging to neither the Infantry nor Cavalry branches, in the form of "mechanized divisions." In such divisions the command and control echelon would consist of a headquarters and headquarters company and a signal company. A reconnaissance battalion with an attached aviation observation squadron would constitute the commander's "eyes," which would operate from 100 to 150 miles in advance and reconnoiter a front from 30 to 50 miles. At the heart of the division was an armored brigade made up of a headquarters and headquarters company, one medium and two light armored regiments, a field artillery regiment, and an engineer battalion. Using the two light armored regiments as the basis for two combat teams, the division was to conduct reconnaissance, screening, and pursuit missions and exploit tactical situations. An armored infantry regiment, along with armored field artillery, quartermaster, and medical battalions and an ordnance company, supported the armored brigade. Similar to the German panzer division, it was to number 9,859 officers and enlisted men.<sup>3</sup>

When approving the establishment of the Armored Force to oversee the organi-



A column of light tanks from 68th Armor, part of the 2nd Armored Division, moves down a dusty road during the 1941 Louisiana Maneuvers. The 2nd AD was one of the first two U.S. armored divisions established by order of General Marshall the previous year.

zation and training of two mechanized divisions on 10 July 1940, Marshall also approved designating these units as "armored" divisions. Furthermore, he directed the chief of cavalry and the chief of infantry to make personnel who were experienced with tank and mechanized units available for assignment to the divisions. On 15 July, without approved tables of organization, Magruder organized the 1st Armored Division at Fort Knox from personnel and equipment of the 7th Cavalry Brigade and the 6th Infantry. Concurrently, Brig. Gen. Charles L. Scott, a former regimental commander in the 7th Cavalry Brigade, activated the 2d Armored Division at Fort Benning using men and materiel from the Provisional Tank Brigade. Marshall selected Chaffee to command the new Armored Force.<sup>4</sup>

Four months later the War Department published tables of organization for the armored division. It resembled the unit developed during the summer, except that the engineer battalion was removed from the armored brigade and assigned to the division headquarters, and the ordnance company was expanded to a battalion. To the surprise of Chaffee, who had supervised the preparation of the tables, the authorized strength of the division rose from 9,859 to 12,697, including attached personnel.

The division fielded 381 tanks and 97 scout cars when all units were at war strength.<sup>5</sup> Chaffee envisaged the establishment of corps-size units commanding both armored and motorized divisions, the latter essentially an infantry division with sufficient motor equipment to move all its personnel. On 15 July 1940 the War Department selected the 4th Division, which had recently been reactivated as part of the Regular Army's expansion, for this role. Collocated with the 2d Armored Division at Fort Benning, the 4th's divisional elements had earlier experimented with motorized infantry. Eventually the department published tables of organization for a motorized division that retained the triangular structure but fielded 2,700 motor vehicles including over 600 armored half-track personnel carriers.<sup>6</sup>



The 1st Armored Division's 150 tanks are lined up prior to maneuvers in June, 1941, less than six months before the U.S. entered World War II. At the outset of the war, the U.S. had only 400 tanks, most of them, like these, already obsolete.



**General George C. Marshall, impatient with the Infantry and Cavalry branch chiefs' progress in adopting mechanization, finally decided to form the first two armored divisions over their objections.**

Along with the reorganization and expansion of divisional forces, the Army increased unit manning levels and concentrated units for training. A peacetime draft, adopted on 16 September 1940, provided the men, and eventually the strength of all divisions neared war level. Prior to 1940 units were scattered over 130 posts, camps, and stations in the United States, but with mobilization Congress provided funds for new facilities. The Quartermaster Corps, during the winter of 1940-41, built accommodations for 1.4 million men, including divisional posts of the type constructed in World War I.<sup>7</sup>

But as in World War I, equipment shortages could not be quickly remedied and greatly inhibited preparation for war. Among other things, the Army lacked modern field artillery, rifles, tanks, and antitank and antiaircraft weapons. Although acutely aware of the shortages, Marshall believed that the Army could conduct basic training while the production of weapons caught up.<sup>8</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Adna R. Chaffee, "Mechanized Cavalry," AWC lecture, 29 Sep 1939, AWC course material, MHI; Gillie, *Forging the Thunderbolt*, pp. 109, 162-64; *History of the Armored Force, Command, and Center*, AGF Study 27 (Washington, D.C.: Historical Section, AGF, 1946), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Memo, G-3 for CofS, 5 Jun 40, sub: Mechanization, G-3/41665, AGO 320.2 (6-5-40), RG 407, NARA. General Andrews' background was not with cavalry, infantry, or mechanized forces, but with the U.S. Army Air Corps.

<sup>3</sup>Memo, G-3 for CofS, 5 Jun 40, sub: Mechanization; Notes on G-3 Mechanized Conference, G-

4/23518-69, AGO 320.2 (6-5-40), RG 407, NARA.

<sup>4</sup>Memo, G-3 for CofS, 23 Jun 40, sub: mechanization, G-3/41665, AGO 320.2 (6-5-40), RG 407, NARA; Ltr, TAG to CG of all Armies, Corps Areas, and other addresses, 10 Jul 1940, sub: Organization of the Armored Force, AG 320.2 (7-5-40) M (Ret) M-C, AG Reference files, DAMH-HSO; Historical Data Cards, 1st and 2d Armored Divisions (Armd divs), DAMH-HSO.

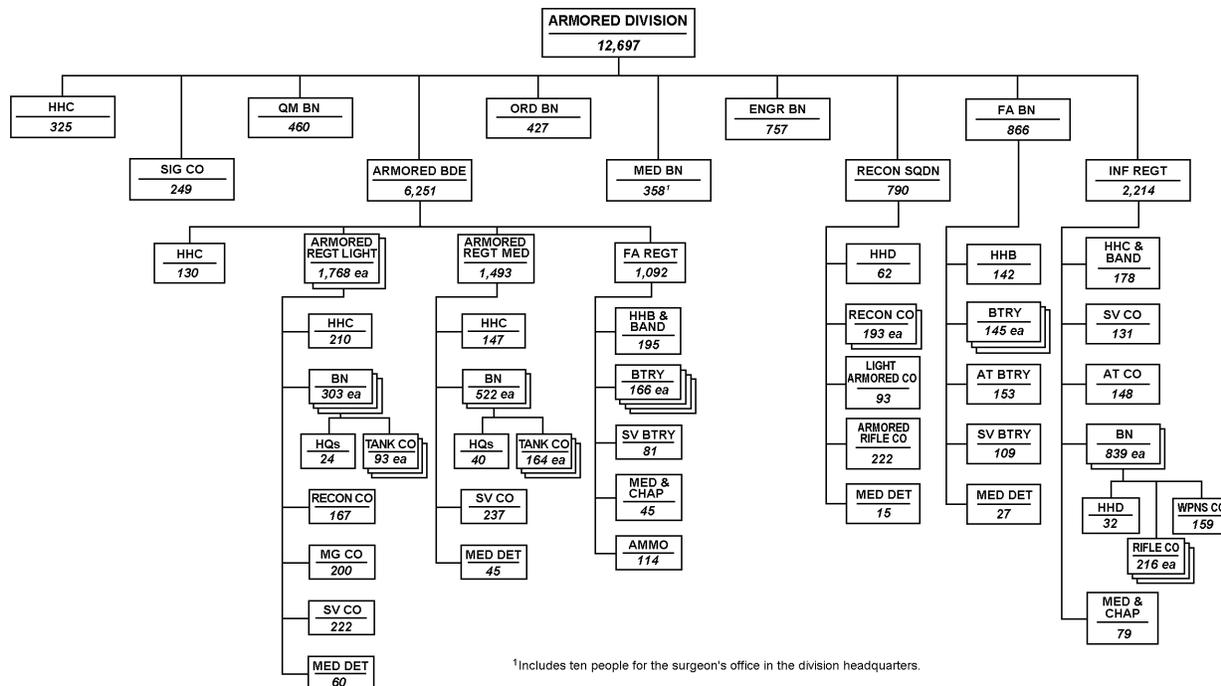
<sup>5</sup>T/O 17, Armored Division, 15 Nov 1940; Ltr, Chaffee to Scott, 9 Sep 40, and Ltr, Scott to Chaffee, 12 Sep 40, Charles L. Scott Papers, LC.

<sup>6</sup>Statement of Adna R. Chaffee, 14 May 1941, Document Collections, U.S. Army Armor School Library, Fort Knox, Ky.; Ltr, Scott to Grow, 3 Sep 40, Scott Papers, LC; Ltr, TAG to CG of all Corps Areas and other addresses, 20 Jul 40, sub: Organization and Movement of Units and Cadres in Connection with Augmentation of the Army to 375,000; T/O 77, Infantry Division (Triangular, Motorized), 1 Nov 1940.

<sup>7</sup>*Biennial Report of the Chief of Staff, July 1, 1939 to June 30, 1941*, pp. 1-3; *Rpt of the Sec of War, 1941*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>8</sup>*Rpt of the Sec of War, 1941*, pp. 62, 68-70; Erna Risch and Chester L. Kieffer, 2 vols., *The Quartermaster Corps: Organization, Supply, and Services* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1955), 2:293.

**CHART 14 — Armored Division, 15 November 1940**



<sup>1</sup>Includes ten people for the surgeon's office in the division headquarters.