



# À Cheval

## *Equitation as Sport and Training at the French School of Armor and Cavalry*

by Lieutenant Colonel John Moncure

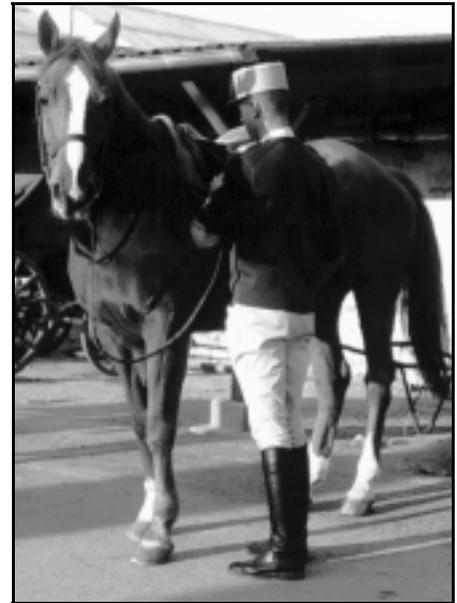
*The author began riding when he assumed his duties as the American Liaison Officer at The French Cavalry School. As of this writing, he has not broken any bones.*

Nestled in the magnificent valley of the Loire River in northwest France, the School of Application of Armor and Cavalry seems at first glance to be a curious blend of old and new.<sup>1</sup> The Cavalry School conducts basic and advanced officers courses, reserve OCS, senior NCO courses, and all manner of specialized, armor-related technical courses. It contains a think-tank for armor doctrine and advanced computer simulations suites. Just across the street from a spanking-new, angular building of diamond-shaped steel girders and glass — the new home for instruction on the high-tech, digitalized, third-generation Leclerc main battle tank — is the riding complex. There one finds

stables for 120 horses, two *maneges* (indoor riding halls), the *carrière* (a large outdoor riding arena), and the *Chardonnet* (an even larger arena). Behind the 18th century headquarters building is a special arena for dressage. It has not changed much since the end of the 19th century. The school also owns a 100-acre wood and field with trails for riding. The cadre of the school — even those who spend their days teaching the new Leclerc — often touch their roots at 7 a.m., exercising on horseback. The instructors of the *Section Equestre Militaire* (SEM) offer daily classes to student officer cadets, basic and advanced course students, officers, NCOs, and draftees of the cadre, and even cadre spouses and children. In 1993, the SEM taught 4,600 hours to officer and NCO students, 2,200 hours to dependents, and 2,000 hours to cadre (individual and in groups). Clearly, equitation is the glue that binds the diverse organisms of the school, as

much with each other as with the past. More important, the French see the horse as a training device to teach the spirit of the cavalry, character, and leadership.

To introduce new officers to the spirit of the branch they have selected, the French cavalry school requires all basic course students to ride.<sup>2</sup> Usually, no more than half of the lieutenants have ever ridden before their arrival in Saumur in September. But by the end of their 10-month basic course, in July, they perform on horseback during an annual gala called the *Carroussel*.<sup>3</sup> Before 30,000 to 40,000 spectators, the young lieutenants jump meter-high barriers in unison, and charge full-tilt with lances to snare 12-inch diameter rings dangling from a platform. Others, carrying sabres at a gallop, skewer paper maché heads (looking curiously like their instructors) planted one foot off the ground.



At left, the opening ceremony in the Carrousel.

Above, a lieutenant prepares his horse in preparation for his riding lesson.

On the following page, a platoon of lieutenants performing during the Carrousel.

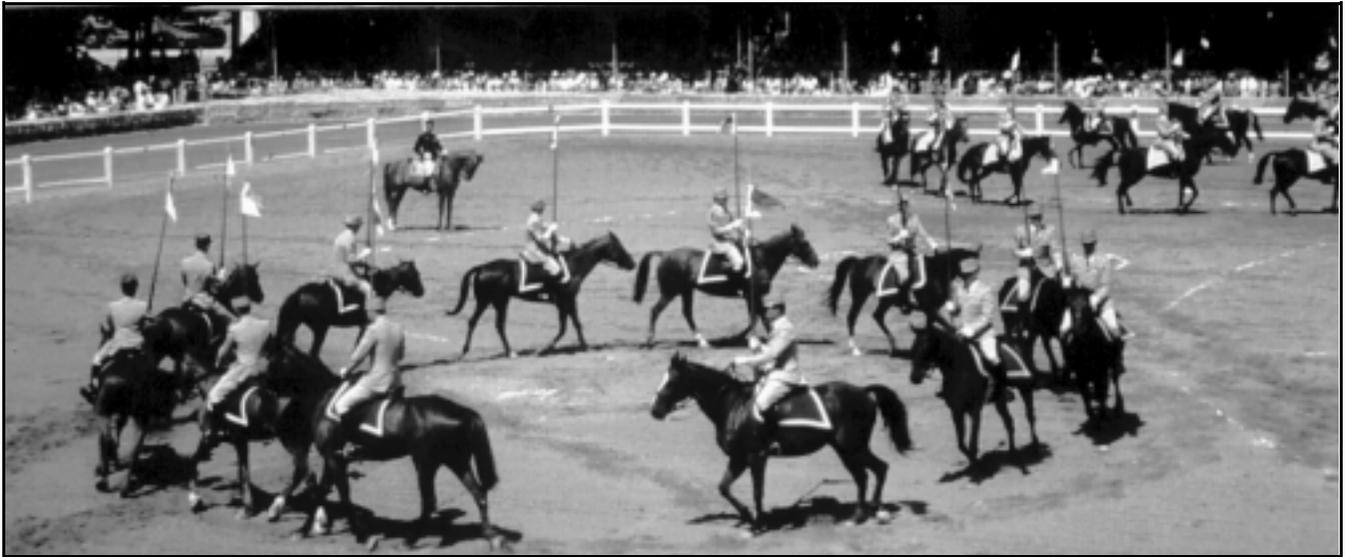
The course of instruction for lieutenants is organized by the *Écuyer en Chef* Lieutenant Colonel Patrick Mozat (the riding master on the faculty of the school), and conducted by his cadre of one captain, three NCOs, and eighteen military grooms, all of whom are specially trained at the Military Equestrian Sports Center at Fontainebleau (CSEM). The curriculum includes 27 periods of instruction of one hour, and 19 more of two hours each. At the end of the first 25 hours the lieutenants conduct a *raid d'équitation*, an overnight exercise including a mounted land navigation event in which they are required to fill in a whited-out section of a photocopy of a 1:50,000 map. They also practice 40 hours for the Ca-

roussel. More advanced riders may join the Club Wattel, named after a former riding master,<sup>4</sup> and enjoy additional hours of riding instruction to prepare them for competitive events elsewhere in France or internationally. By the end of the year, 85 percent of students reach the skill-level goal.<sup>5</sup> The robustness of the program suggests strongly that the emphasis placed on riding is an important instrument in the development of cavalry officers.

The equestrian program serves other purposes as well. Of course, riding is a sport. A beginning rider (*debutant* in French) who also runs regularly will experience significant soreness in the first few weeks of instruction, even at the pace of one lesson per week. The

style is "classic" (English) — adapted to the French mentality, of course. Horsemen use the Danloux saddle<sup>6</sup> and all riders are required to wear the riding uniform: britches, riding boots, kepi. They do not actually "ride" as much as they become a component of a centaur: man and horse in a single being. The *trot enlevé* — rising trot in Britain or posting in the U.S. — requires the rider to balance on the stirrups, perform modified knee bends, and squeeze his calves into the horses' flanks to indicate acceleration, deceleration, change of pace, change of direction, or change of attitude of the horse (such as an oblique movement). While it is not as demanding in endurance as distance running, it requires considerable effort and coordinated skill.

During that year, the lieutenants not only get good exercise to supplement their other sports, they learn a skill viewed at the school as a measure of machismo, and they become confident in their abilities as well. Frequently, troops of horsemen ride into Saumur or its outlying villages, clattering purposefully along the narrow streets, or cantering through the nearby fields or woods. Sitting astride a 1200-pound



animal with its own mind is a daunting prospect to anyone who has not done it. The apprentice rider learns a new way to sit, to stand, to balance himself. He learns a suppleness in the saddle without which riding is not only uncomfortable and even painful, but a precursor to lingering back injuries. Enjoying the view five feet above the heads of pedestrians surely contributes to the value of the horse as an instrument of psychological conditioning for young cavalry officers. Just as the parachute badge gives a soldier a sense of accomplishment at having faced danger, so does an experienced horseman gain a general sense of presence and mastery from his horseborne feats.

But more than these more obvious purposes, the physically and psychologically demanding exercise of learning to ride a horse gives the young officer a sense of the relationship of the leader and the led. For the duration of a ride the horseman gives the horse direction, rate of advance, and pace. The horse is an enormous creature (much larger than it appears in Westerns) with a mind of its own. If it refuses to perform as requested (usually a consequence of inexpert directions by the rider) it can be forced. But it can also turn on its master when it has had enough abuse. A more experienced rider learns to operate in concert with the horse to defeat the obstacles that confront them both. He takes into account the horse's personality and character, his previous history, his physical aptitude, and his level of training. He teaches it with patience and clarity, but also with firmness. On horseback, in motion, he must rapidly read, understand, and react correctly to both the horse and the external situation.<sup>7</sup> This

description should sound much like a platoon in the hands of its new lieutenant. The cavalry basic course officers — who are not made aware of these similarities — join their first unit with at least a subliminal understanding of some of the basic truths of leadership.

Thus, equitation at Saumur is not just a pleasant diversion for the idle rich. The mode of transportation for the predecessors of today's armor officers has been pressed into service in a new way. Coming to grips with the horse gives young leaders a hint of the intangible qualities that make cavalrymen effective in modern, high-tech combat. In 1913, the French riding master and author Gustave Lebon wrote:

It is interesting to note that the reasoned dressage of the horse serves the cavalryman as an exercise in intellectual gymnastics and character-building that no theoretical instruction could ever replace.<sup>8</sup>

Most modern armies have relegated the discipline of equitation to the confines of quaint, anachronistic tradition. By devoting impressive resources of time, energy, and funds to the sport, the leadership of the French Cavalry School — and the Army headquarters that funds it — have demonstrated convincingly their recognition of its continuing value in building the armor leaders of the future.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>I wish to thank Captain Dominique Siegwart for his helpful suggestions during the preparation of this article.

<sup>2</sup>Several hours of equitation are also required at St. Cyr, and offered at several other branch

schools as well. Advanced course and NCO course students receive only 8 hours of instruction; thus, the principal thrust of the Riding Section is for the lieutenants.

<sup>3</sup>This, and other public events, offset the cost of horseback riding at the school. The army spends about \$4.00 per lesson for its students.

<sup>4</sup>After commanding the 2nd Tank Battalion in 1918, General Wattel returned to Saumur to be riding master of the famous Cadre Noir. He took the business of armored warfare seriously, announcing, "I take the same care of my tanks that I do of my horses!" Général Decarpentry et Jacques Perrier, *Les Maîtres Écuyers du manège de Saumur* (Paris, Charles-Lavauzelle, 1993), p. 95.

<sup>5</sup>"Activités de la Section Equestre," unpublished document, prepared in 1994 and furnished to the author by LTC Mozart.

<sup>6</sup>The Danloux saddle looks generally like an English saddle, and is named after General Wattel's successor as riding master at Saumur.

<sup>7</sup>Capitaine Pascal Bayle, "L'Equitation au Programme de la deuxième division d'instruction de l'Ecole d'Application de l'Arme Blindée et de la Cavalerie: Tradition onereuse ou nécessité contemporaine?" Unpublished manuscript [n.d., 1985?], paras. 221, 222.

<sup>8</sup>Gustave Lebon, *L'Equitation actuelle et ses principes* (1913), 136.

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