

The Cavalry without any Horses

Did you know the army still has cavalry? The soldiers of the U.S. Army (God bless 'em) have a different type of cavalry than in the old days. They have “mechanized” cavalry made up of tanks, armored personnel carriers and Humvees. Ranger Jim Minor who has the desk next to me was in the 1st Cavalry Division during his stay in Vietnam. Jim rode a helicopter rather than a horse, so he was never issued any spurs.

Call me old fashioned if you like but I think cavalry should have horses, or at the very least a mule or two. There was plenty of cavalry in and around Corinth during the war and all of the troopers had horses. Well, almost all of them.

The state of Texas provided quite a number of troops for the young Confederacy and quite a number of them were horse soldiers. Governor Francis Lubbock tried to explain the situation to the Secretary of War; “The people of Texas live on horseback and it is with great aversion they enlist in the infantry. Cavalry, efficient cavalry, can be obtained from the state almost to the extent of the male population, but infantry is difficult to furnish.” Who wants to walk when they can ride?

There were thirteen regiments of Texas cavalry that were here in Corinth for the siege and the battle and they loved their ponies. Most of them were present for the Battle of Pea Ridge in Arkansas in March of '62 but they didn't see too much action. Shortly after that battle a call came from the east for all of the troops under General Van Dorn to cross the Mississippi and report for duty in Corinth.

And then came the bad news; no horses would be making the journey. The mounts were all worn out from hard service and were ordered south into Texas to fatten up on good Lone Star grass.

The news came as a shock to the troopers. Pvt. Victor Rose of the 3rd Texas protested, “This order was a breach of faith, totally at variance with [our] contract.” Pvt. B. L. Thomas of the same regiment claimed he “would rather

suffer crucifixion head down,” than submit to leaving the state without his steed.

Captain James Bates of the 9th Texas wrote home and explained, “A good deal of dissatisfaction was manifested by some but when they found it would be of no avail they acquiesced with as good a grace as possible.” Not everyone was so graceful. One author said “If cursing could kill, Van Dorn would have been in his grave.”

The Texans were loaded on riverboats at Des Arc, Arkansas and taken down the Arkansas River to the Mississippi and thence to Memphis. They were packed into a train of cattle cars for the final leg of the journey which proved to be most exciting. “We were speeding along at the rate of thirty miles an hour. Occasionally on an incline grade of several miles we would make a mile in one and one half minutes, which most of the boys thought pretty tall travelling compared with riding on horseback.”

Of the thirteen Texas cavalry regiments which ended up here in Corinth, all but one were serving as “dismounted cavalry,” a glorified term for infantry. A serious problem with making a ground pounder out of a horseman was the difference in weapons they carried. Your average infantryman carried a rifled .58 caliber musket that could pierce a 1 inch board at 600 yards. A powerful weapon indeed. But a cavalry trooper, in 1862, was more often than not armed with a shotgun and pistols, neither of which had a long range or were particularly accurate.

With or without good weapons or tall horses, the Texans were fighters and they toed the mark at the fighting around Farmington and later at Iuka. Two regiments in particular, the 6th and 9th Cavalry paid a very high price at the Battle of Corinth.

These units were assigned to the brigade of Brigadier General Charles Phifer along with some dismounted Arkansas cavalry who also had a grudge against General Van Dorn. The brigade was lightly engaged on the first day of the fight but made up for it on October 4th. Three times they attacked the Ohio troops east of Battery Robinett and three times they were

driven back. Bates described how “buck shot rattled around us like a terrific hail storm & besides these it seemed the air was literally filled with musket & rifle balls.”

At the height of the struggle the men of the 9th Texas were reduced to fighting hand-to-hand with the infantry of the 27th Ohio. In a desperate brawl the flag of the 9th Texas was captured by Pvt. Orrin Gould who was mortally wounded in the encounter.

In all there were seven dismounted cavalry regiments in the battle; men from Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri. Together they lost 110 men killed, 347 wounded and 247 captured for a total of 704 casualties. That’s a lot.

Eventually the cavalry got their horses back. It was a bleak day in early December when a long column of horses met up with the soldiers in Grenada. They were fatter and needed new shoes but they were a sight for their two legged partners. Pvt. Newton Keen of the 9th Texas was positively beaming; “My, how bully I felt when I got on my horse.”

Van Dorn was no longer the goat he had been for taking away the horses. His reputation even took a rebound when he took the cavalry on a spectacular raid to Holly Springs. The troopers not only destroyed Grant’s massive supply depot, but they also stopped the first Union campaign against Vicksburg. Without the supplies Grant was forced to withdraw his army from Mississippi and find another route to capture the strategic Confederate stronghold on the river.

It just goes to show how that a Confederate cavalryman could be a worthy foe when he was on his feet, but was matchless when he was on horseback.