Lessons From History

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Cavalry units that can function as an independent arm, ranging the battlefield to conduct reconnaissance and provide security, could prove as indispensable on tomorrow's battlefields as they were at Gettysburg.

The Panama and Grenada operations were successful without employing cavalry units to conduct reconnaissance and security missions. Satellites, aircraft, special operations units, and pre-positioned forces provided the necessary battlefield information to decisionmakers. This concept works well when one can rely on facing a limited force and attacking a fixed enemy in known locations. A problem arises, however, when one faces an unknown enemy and has become accustomed to not employing cavalry. We are beginning to rely less and less on cavalry outfits for accomplishing their doctrinal missions. This is acceptable as long as the missions are completed by units that are familiar with the task. The inherent danger with this approach, where an absence of cavalry is commonplace, is that we will risk not using this vital arm of information gathering and security and may relearn an old lesson at a needless cost.

Gettysburg

> There is typically a battle which precedes the battle—a confrontation of opposing reconnaissance units—and the winner of that preliminary battle is often the victor in the main event.
>
> —BGen E.S. Leland, Jr., USA

In May 1863, Lee invaded the North in order to capture Harrisburg, PA, and force the North to end the war. The success of Lee's invasion depended largely on defeating the Union Army on ground that the Confederates chose. This concept rendered victory to the South in many previous engagements—Second Bull Run, Shenandoah Valley Campaign, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville.

An implied task for Lee during his march north was to find and fix the Union Army. The majority of Lee's cavalry should have been given this mission. Unfortunately for the Confederate Army, cavalry commander J.E.B. Stuart was on the far eastern flank of the Union Army conducting raids on supply depots and trains. Edward J. Stackpole, author of "The Story of the Three Days at Gettysburg" (*Civil War Times Illustrated*, 1989) writes:

> The impression is widespread that the absence of the cavalry under Stuart deprived Lee of the "eyes of the Army." It was Stuart himself who was missed; more than half of the cavalry was available for reconnaissance had Lee not felt so dependent on his capable Lieutenant."*

Many of Lee's forces were moving through enemy territory without properly directed cavalry to provide reconnaissance or security. Further, because of the great distance between Stuart and Lee, communication was virtually nonexistent. The infantry had no idea about the size, location, or disposition of the Army of the Potomac. In order to gain this information, they had to use units that were unfamiliar with, and ill equipped to accomplish, cavalry missions.

"The principle of using cavalry en masse was a sound and highly 'European' one, but in the hands of J. E. B. Stuart and his friends it became little more than a license to roam off into the enemy's rear areas searching for plunder and glory. . . . This led to disaster at Gettysburg, where the cavalry was absent when most needed. . . ."

—Paddy Griffith in *MHQ*, Spring 1989

*Gettysburg is only one of many battles where the proper or improper employment of cavalry affected the outcome of battle. Examples of proper employment of cavalry include Hannibal at Cannae, 216 BC; Cromwell at Marston Moore, 1644; and French uses of calvary in the 1804-1805 Napoleonic Empire Wars. Improper employment of cavalry occurred at Ia Drang, 1965; and the raid on Calivigny, Grenada in 1983.

The Confederate forces that initially moved into Gettysburg were from Henry Heth's division. A.P. Hill, the corps commander, ordered Heth forward to report on the situation in and around the town. These were main body forces, which are equivalent to today's infantry and armored divisions. Committing main body forces is an action that few corps commanders, yesterday or today, would ever want to make. It is not usually in one's best interest to allow main body troops to become engaged in the covering force battle, especially when the situation is unclear.

A division of George Meade's cavalry forces, commanded by John Buford, executed a screen north of the Union main body and found the Confederates in the vicinity of Gettysburg. Buford dismounted his cavalry northwest of town and fought a guard action against superior forces. Armed with Sharps carbines and defending on good ground, he held the Confederates for several hours.

An initial key element for both sides in the campaign was the proper employment of cavalry. For the Confederates, according to Stackpole:

> There was an unusual lack of thorough terrain reconnaissance at all stages of battle. Such precautions are vital to the attacking force. In this battle, the Union Army held a strong ridge position based on interior lines and Lee knew neither the size of Meade's Army nor his troop dispositions . . .

Stuart's poor positioning and Lee's inability to properly use his remaining cavalry effectively placed the Army of Northern Virginia at a disadvantage. Since Lee normally relied on the tactical defense to provide him with an opportunity for victory, it was extremely important to know as much as possible about his opponent. The Union forced the Confederates to battle with little information for the key decisionmakers.

Accurate and timely information will not guarantee success but often increases its chances. Buford's action

with respect to the conduct of his mission and the manner in which he developed the situation provided the Union Army with several advantages.

First, this action made Lee commit his forces as a reaction rather than a planned engagement. Throughout the battle, Lee's actions were far less synchronized than the Union's. Second, it allowed the Union time to reinforce and mass. (John Reynolds' corps marched all night and arrived just as the Confederates gained superiority.) Further, it provided the Union with the opportunity to defend on decisive terrain, giving it the same advantage the Confederates had at Fredericksburg, defending with rifles and artillery from higher ground. Although Lee eventually pushed Meade back to the high ground south of town, Buford's initiative allowed these positions to be free for occupation by main body forces under Oliver Howard. The Union Army also demonstrated agility in being able to react, reinforce, and develop a sound plan based on the initial observations of commanders on the ground. Without Buford's quick action, the Confederates may have exploited the initiative and gained the advantage at the outset of battle.

Continuity

Mechanization changed the cavalry's composition but not its mission. In fact, the same principles of reconnaissance and security that Buford employed at Gettysburg were found to be just as valid in mechanized warfare. America's first real combat experiences in North Africa during World War II confirmed this. Many lessons were learned and some old axioms confirmed. The U.S. Cavalry School reiterated that "the reconnaissance soldier must never forget that he is out there mainly to get back accurate, complete, and timely information." Even though the cavalry received armored cars, light tanks, and jeeps, "it was found that most of the collecting of information was done dismounted." Even with the advent of new technology, many of the old basics remained—as they do today. The same adaption of the basics to improved technology yields better results. Edward M. Flanagan, in *Before the Battle*, writes:

> Just for openers, consider the relevant value of the so-called McNamara line across the border between the Vietnams. We scattered, planted, and sprayed millions of dollars worth of sensors along VC [Viet Cong] and NVA [North Vietnamese Army] trails, near assembly areas, and in supply dumps. We built an elaborate center with computers and electronic gadgets to read out the results. Yet I dare say that well trained men, using their eyes, ears, brains, and occasionally noses, gathered more reliable intelligence than any of the sophisticated, expensive sensors.

Today, when U.S. forces fight they task organize. This involves the cross-attachment of different branches in order to achieve an effective combination of arms. As far back as 210 B.C. Petronius Arbiter had this to say about task organizing:

> We trained hard, but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up into teams we would be reorganized. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganizing, and what a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency, and demoralization.

Combined Arms

Fortunately, U.S. Army armored cavalry regiments (ACRs) are already combined arms organizations. In addition, the recently approved table of organization for a divisional cavalry squadron will also return it to an organic combined arms organization. This means that the cross-attaching "nightmare" does not exist. Furthermore, cavalry units are required to perform essentially the same missions as mechanized units in addition to cavalry specific missions. Because all cavalry units will be combined arms organized, the personnel will be accustomed to working together and familiar with other branches. These benefits are immeasurable and make a significant difference in attitudes and capabilities.

Light cavalry forces can do the same for light units as an ACR or future divisional cavalry squadron can do for heavy forces. Equipped with high mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles modified to fire different weapons systems, the light cavalry could greatly increase the light fighter's reconnaissance and security capabilities.

Present Trends

Over 50 years ago, military strategists confronted problems that were similar to the difficulties we encounter today. Their challenge was to determine how to fight in a rapid and decisive manner in order to obtain military and political objectives. The result was blitzkrieg. Currently, American forces desire to attain different goals, but in a similar manner, with our objectives being based on worldwide contingencies. Naturally, our forces must be much more deployable than the Wehrmacht of years ago, but the shock effect and decisiveness of these forces must also produce the same tactical results.

In the summer of 1863, Gen Lee had cavalry forces at his disposal. Unlike cavalry units under Stuart, Lee's remaining cavalry were dispersed throughout his army. Lacking mass and unity of command, these forces were incapable of fulfilling their mission. Presently, much attention has been given to the Sheridan tanks and light armored vehicles (LAVs) used during Operation JUST CAUSE in Panama. The Sheridan's ability to knock down walls and the use of small numbers of LAVs and tanks throughout the operation is noteworthy. Particular to the circumstances of Panama, this infantry support model task organization of armored forces apparently was correct—the results justify the methods. But different and more difficult low- to mid-intensity conflict operations await us. With the present armor leadership espousing an infantry support role for tanks in light infantry divisions, a dangerous mindset is developing. This mirrors the great infantry-tank debate of the 1920s and 1930s. It is not a question of branch justification. Our recent combat successes should not cloud our attitude toward an effective combination of arms, based on sound historical precedence. Cavalry, either heavy or light, should not be limited to infantry support. Rather, it should function as an independent arm that assists in the overall mission accomplishment.

It is hard to argue with success. The intent is to avoid "setting ourselves up for a fall" in a larger scale conflict when we have become accustomed to not employing all forces at our disposal to ensure that we have the maximum possible advantage over our adversaries. Otherwise, our military influence and success will be largely limited to defeating Third World countries without mechanized forces. USMC

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