

Saddles and Sabers

Unleashing Tactical Audacity: 8th Texas Cavalry Regiment in the Civil War

by MAJ Nathan A. Jennings

“The principal value of cavalry is derived from its rapidity and ease of motion. To these characteristics may be added impetuosity; but we must be careful lest a false application be made of this last.” -Antoine-Henri Jomini

Cavalry has long served as the combat arm of both reconnaissance and decision in Western warfare. Harkening back to antiquity when Alexander of Macedon employed armored *Hetairoi* cavalry to fracture Persian armies, a steady march of ever-modernizing mounted formations have fulfilled their mandate, as now described by U.S. Army doctrine, to “develop situational understanding through action while possessing the mobility to concentrate rapidly.”¹ The American Civil War, in particular, which saw an explosion of diverse functions by horse cavalry in combined-arms campaigns from New Mexico to Georgia, provides a rich military landscape for assessing the potential impact of unleashing mobile firepower across complex operational environments.

Among the multiplicity of formations that rode in support of both Union and Confederate armies, the 8th Texas Cavalry Regiment, Confederate States Army, offers a compelling case study. Popularly known as Terry’s Texas Rangers, this unit achieved an exceptional record of reconnaissance, screening, raiding and decisive shock charges as they supported linear confrontations of massed infantry armies across the Trans-Mississippi Region and Eastern Theater between 1862 and 1865. This tactical effectiveness stemmed from, in large measure, the Texans’ internalization of the offensive fundamental of *audacity*, an intangible that Field Manual (FM) 3-20.971, ***Reconnaissance and Cavalry Troop***, defines as “boldness” that is “essential to success in offensive operations.”²

While many mounted units in the Civil War boasted similar competencies, 8th Texas Cavalry’s fighting methods were informed by its home society’s unique experience with warfare on the Great Plains. Decades of combating Comanche and Mexican cavalries had catalyzed an aggressive martial culture that the governor of Texas defined as a “passion for mounted service” during Confederate mobilization.³ Beginning with the Texas Rangers’ unprecedented adoption of Colt revolvers in the early 1840s on the Indian Frontier, and then proven on the world stage by Texan irregulars in the Mexican-American War, Lone Star horsemen came to specialize in audacious maneuver. This tactical prowess, combining fighting élan with exceptional horsemanship and firepower, would yield similar benefits during the War of Rebellion.⁴

Mobilizing the regiment

Terry’s Texas Rangers first organized in Houston in September 1861 in response to the great Confederate call to arms during initial mobilization. A month prior, the founders of the unit, Benjamin Terry and Thomas Lubbock, had advertised that they were “authorized by the Secretary of War of the Confederate States of America to raise a regiment of mounted rangers for service in Virginia.”⁵ Another recruitment announcement proclaimed that each company would consist of “not less than 64 nor more than 100 privates,” and that “each man must furnish the equipment for his horse, and arm himself either with a short rifle or double-barrel shotgun, and a six-shooter.”

The wording of these advertisements emphasized the distinctive frontier character of the regiment. The intentional designation of mounted rangers for assignment in Virginia indicated that Richmond fully understood the perceived tactical capabilities of Texan horsemen. The concurrent requirement for the cavalymen to equip themselves with both medium and short-ranged weaponry also revealed the intended versatility of the regiment. In short, both the Confederate War Department and local officials hoped to capitalize on Texas’ experience with enduring border conflict by placing a body of aggressive Lone Star cavalry at the center of the Civil War’s decisive theater.

The ***New Orleans Picayune*** agreed with this intent as the regiment mobilized. It wrote of the Texan reputation for tactical effectiveness: “If this regiment does not make its mark on the Lincolnites, there is no virtue in strength, courage, patriotism and [thorough] knowledge of the use of horses and arms.”⁶ Under these high expectations, the

unit mustered 10 companies at Houston Sept. 7, 1861, drawing primarily from the counties of McLennan, Brazoria, Matagorda, Gonzales, Bastrop, Fayette, Bexar, Goliad, Fort Bend, Harris and Montgomery. Volunteer James Blackburn, who later served as a company commander and left a valuable account of his wartime service, wrote that “[1,000] men were expected to constitute the regiment, but more and more were enlisted until the number reached 1,170, an average of 117 to each company.”⁷

From the very outset of mobilization, 8th Texas Cavalry rode with a spirited élan that would characterize their approach to warfare. Committed to the Southern cause, the volunteers elected to contract for duration of the war, rather than a three- or 12-month enlistment, reflecting their nationalistic motivations. This inspiration, rooted in Texas’ culture of frontier militancy, perfectly illustrated the early enthusiasm for the war effort during 1861 and 1862 as privation and conscription had not yet seriously afflicted morale across the Confederacy. The generating counties for the regiment, which conspicuously represented frontier regions with intense histories of friction with Amerindian and Mexican opponents, likewise indicated the depth of the martial tradition the recruits internalized.

The newly formed unit, which had yet to be numerically designated by Richmond, deployed without horses in September 1861. They traveled by individual company first to New Orleans, where they received orders redirecting them to service in Kentucky, and then moved on to Bowling Green. While en route, the Texans predictably acquired the popular title “Texas Rangers,” as Southerners in Louisiana and Tennessee lionized them because of their savage appearance, bristling weaponry and volatile behavior. Back home, of course, the press had been referring to the regiment as “Terry’s Rangers” and “Terry’s Ranging Regiment” since initial mobilization.⁸

Upon arriving at the Confederate Army of the West’s headquarters in Bowling Green, the Rangers, now officially designated by Richmond as 8th Texas Cavalry, elected Terry as their commanding officer. More importantly, they received a full complement of Kentucky-bred horses and organized themselves along the doctrinal structure of a Confederate cavalry regiment. Blackburn remembered that the unit’s companies drew letters “A to K, inclusive, except J.” The department command then issued orders for the Texans to conduct the historical cavalry tasks of “patrol and picket” from “Bowling Green north as far up as Woodsville on the Green River.”⁹

Regiment in combat

On Dec. 17, 8th Texas Cavalry engaged in its first action near Woodsville, KY, where they began to establish an enduring reputation for aggressive lethality. Henry Graber, another Texan who recounted his combat experience, described how while on a reconnaissance in support of their assigned infantry brigade near the town, they “discovered a line of infantry lying down behind a rail fence” while the Confederate infantry were “at least a mile behind.” The rebel brigade commander, Thomas Hindman, ordered Terry to “withdraw the regiment and let him bring up the artillery and infantry.” Disinclined to wait, the cavalryman arrogantly said, “General Hindman, this is no place for you; go back to your infantry.”¹⁰

Terry proceeded to order his men to charge on horseback in two squadrons against the Federal line. Blackburn, as he described the regiment’s assault, wrote that the colonel “immediately ordered a charge, emphasizing the order with an oath not easily forgotten, so we made a rush for those bushes concealing a considerable force of bayonets fixed ready to receive us.” As the compacted ranks of horsemen careened into the North’s formation, he concluded by boasting that “with our shotguns loaded with buckshot we killed, wounded and scattered that command in short order.”¹¹

This charge, and the intensity of their first moment of combat with Union soldiers, found the Texans well prepared for the savagery of close combat. Graber remembered closing violently with the waiting infantry, writing that “in less time than it takes to tell it, we charged them, delivering our fire of double-barreled shotguns, [breaking] down the fence and getting among them with our six-shooters.” He then recalled the success of the maneuver, noting that “in a few minutes we had run over them.”¹² Though not strategically consequential, this tactical action established the template for the audacious, and infamous, shock charge that Terry’s Texas Rangers would employ on many occasions throughout the war.

This kind of attack, by formations of screaming horsemen, proved a terrifying spectacle for defending troops. COL August Willich, commander of the opposing 32nd Indiana Infantry Regiment, described the action from the perspective of the foot soldiers who received the thundering assault: “With lightning speed, under infernal yelling, great numbers of Texas Rangers rushed upon our whole force. They advanced to [15] or [20] yards of our lines,

some of them even between them, and opened fire with rifles and revolvers.”¹³ The Texans suffered just four dead and eight wounded, while the Federals lost 11 killed, 22 wounded and five missing.

Despite the regiment’s success in the skirmish at Woodsville, Terry died during the assault. The unit retained the name of its organizer and first leader, though they would serve under several other colonels of note in the Confederate officer corps. After several months of reconnaissance and skirmishing activities, the Texans moved south to Tennessee, following the retrograde of the western Confederate line in the spring of 1862.

The clash of American armies soon catapulted 8th Texas Cavalry into the heart of the struggle for the Trans-Mississippi region. On April 6 and throughout the next day, they participated in the strategic Battle of Shiloh, where the Confederate Army of Mississippi, with 44,000 men, attempted to defeat the Union Army of Tennessee’s 66,000 soldiers. Learning the limitations of mounted élan on a combined-arms battlefield, the Rangers conducted two costly charges against the Federal left, one mounted and another on foot, but both attempts ended in failure. Blackburn recalled that they experienced their “first repulse” in this battle, with the Union lines “resisting with great stubbornness.”¹⁴

Despite the setback, the regiment proved its value the next day as the stymied rebel army retrograded south to Corinth. Blackburn recorded that the Texans were “employed in patrolling the space now behind the army and as rear guard,” performing another timeless cavalry support function. When Ulysses Grant sent a division to pressure the Confederate retreat, famed rebel cavalier Nathan Bedford Forrest included the Rangers in a spontaneously formed cavalry brigade to interdict the attack. Blackburn remembered how the bold commander’s orders stressed close-combat tactics as the Federal vanguard closed in: “Boys, go in [20] steps of the Yankees before you turn your shotguns loose on them.”

The young volunteer recalled how the attack unfolded, writing that “Forrest ordered us forward. Without waiting to be formal in the matter, the Texans went like a cyclone, not waiting for him to give his other orders to trot, gallop, charge, as he had drilled his men.” As 8th Texas Cavalry advanced on the enemy position, he then described how the Union infantry stood with “their bayonets ready to lift us fellows off our horses.” The Rangers suddenly “halted in [20] steps of their two lines of savage bayonets,” indicating a pragmatic disinclination, doubtlessly reinforced by the failure at Shiloh, to assault infantry lines without first softening the formation.

As the Texans came to a precarious halt within range of the enemy rifles, Blackburn described the chaotic melee that followed: “In the twinkling of any eye almost, both barrels of every shotgun in our line ... [were] turned into that blue line and lo! What destruction and confusion followed.” He then continued to emphasize how they transitioned smoothly from stand-off to close-ranged engagement: “After the shotguns fired, the guns were slung on the horns of our saddles, and with our six-shooters in hand, we pursued those fleeing, either capturing or killing until they reached their reserve force. Just before we reached this force, we quietly withdrew.”¹⁵

This engagement, named for the site of the skirmish near a place called Fallen Timbers, again demonstrated the Texans’ mastery of tactical audacity. It also illustrated that the success of bold maneuvers were conditionally dependent on the opposing unit’s preparedness and ability to mass effects, and on the trafficability of the terrain that must be traversed. While the fortified infantry position and wooded landscape at Shiloh had stymied 8th Texas Cavalry’s attacks, the maneuver at Fallen Timbers benefited from catching a similar enemy force while on the march in open ground. The additional tactic of pausing to discharge rifles and shotguns also revealed flexible methodology. Recognizing Forrest’s skill as a cavalry leader, Leonidas Giles, another Texan who wrote of the campaign, called the attack a “brilliant charge.”¹⁶

The regiment next won greater fame, again under Forrest’s leadership, at the First Battle of Murfreesboro July 13, 1862. Now permanently part of a specialized strike brigade, the Texans participated in a strategic raid against the critical Union Army rail and logistical hub at Murfreesboro, TN. The Federal garrison consisted of some 1,800 soldiers, including cavalry, infantry and artillery, separated into three camps. Blackburn recalled that after an “all-night ride,” the rebel force of 1,400 struck the unsuspecting defenders from the east with “three divisions, sending one to attack the courthouse, one to attack the enemy at Stone River ... and the balance of the Rangers to attack the encampment in the edge of Tennessee.”¹⁷

The dispersed Federal companies initially resisted, but lacking coordination, surrendered in detail. At one point Forrest threatened a hold-out position that if they did not surrender, he would charge with “the Texas Rangers

under the black flag.”¹⁸ This statement, and the immediate capitulation that followed, indicated the brutal reputation Texans had acquired among both the Northern and Southern armies. The rebel brigade captured about 1,200 men, wounded or killed most of the others, and most importantly, destroyed the supply depot and rail hub, thereby delaying the Union drive on Chattanooga.

The 8th Texas Cavalry spent the autumn of 1862 supporting the Confederate invasion of Kentucky with reconnaissance and screening operations. Performing the traditional role of light cavalry in nation-state warfare, Blackburn wrote that they were “to be the vanguard on this trip to clear up the way and keep the commanding general posted as to what was before him on his line of march.” He also reported that for 38 consecutive days, the “regiment in part or as a whole had been under fire ... fighting and skirmishing occurred every day.”¹⁹

By October, the Southern army was again in retreat into Tennessee as the weight of the massed Union corps proved irresistible. Giles recounted his regiment’s role in the retrograde that focused on rearguard protection for the more cumbersome infantry brigades. In this context the Ranger wrote that the Confederate commanding general, Braxton Bragg, “now started for the Cumberland Gap, leaving his cavalry to protect his rear and retard, as best they could, the onward march of the enemy.”²⁰

By December 1862, the regiment had received enough reinforcements to bring it to a total of 690 men. Despite this upgrade, populated nearly entirely by Texan recruits in accordance with the unit’s demands, the Rangers still suffered from attrition by more than a year of nearly constant combat. On Dec. 31, the revitalized 8th Texas Cavalry participated in the Second Battle of Murfreesboro, which Blackburn called “one of the great battles of the Civil War.” Over the next two days, as part of a larger cavalry brigade, the regiment sought to envelope the Union right flank with ill-advised frontal attacks. Once again, as at Shiloh, they learned costly lessons in gauging the difference between tactical audacity and misplaced boldness. After the broader Confederate offensive failed to displace the Union defense, the Texans conducted the now-familiar duty of covering the bloodied army’s retreat.

The Texans’ involvement at Murfreesboro offered a comparative event between opposing cavalries when the Texans clashed with a formation of Union Horse. While conducting a decisive defense against a “Yankee cavalry” regiment, Blackburn attested that they “charged them, drove them and scattered them.” He also recounted how his commander ordered them to “Let them come up nearly close enough to strike and then feed them on buckshot.” The results were indicative of the conditional superiority of Texan frontier tactics over conventional eastern methods. According to the young Ranger, “One volley from the shotguns into their ranks scattered these saber men into useless fragments of a force.” The emphasis on Union cavalry’s use of sabers, in contrast with the Texans’ traditional reliance on revolvers and Bowie knives for close killing, indicated the disdain with which they held their more conventional foe.²¹

The 8th Texas Cavalry spent the year 1863 raiding throughout Tennessee, Alabama and Georgia, and fought in significant actions in September of that year at Chickamauga. In early October, they participated in a deep raid against Union rear echelons, during which they destroyed a logistical depot at McMinnville. By the summer of 1864, after a difficult year of fighting across Tennessee, the regiment moved to harass GEN William T. Sherman’s devastating march through Georgia and South Carolina. Despite the Texans’ proven effectiveness, the harassment against the Federal expedition proved futile; single cavalry regiments could not hope to decisively dissuade the massive Union offensive. Blackburn called the effects of Sherman’s March to the Sea “fearful to behold,” as “none had more of devastation and cruelty and inhumanity than this one.”²²

As the Civil War approached its bitter conclusion, the Battle of Bentonville in North Carolina witnessed the final charge of Terry’s Texas Rangers. The confrontation developed between March 19 and 21, 1865, as a last attempt by the Confederate Army to halt Sherman’s northward march through the Carolinas. As in battles past, the Union mass again proved too great for the rebel attacks. When the outmatched Southern forces moved to retreat from the battlefield, the commanding general, Joseph Johnston, selected the Texan regiment to seize a Union-occupied bridge through which the Confederate brigades had to pass to escape intact.

The 8th Texas Cavalry now numbered less than 200 fighting men, closer to a battalion than a regiment. Due to combat attrition or promotion of every field-grade officer who had served in the unit throughout the war, command now fell to a mere captain named J.F. Mathews. Graber described the Rangers’ final offensive engagement of the war, which oriented against two blue-coat infantry companies that defended the bridge.

Recalling their final action with pride, he wrote that “the Rangers went into a thick woods, hardly suited for a cavalry charge, raising their accustomed yell and with their pistols, dashed into the first line of infantry, who on account of the sudden, unexpected onslaught, must have overshot them in their first volley.” Relishing their success, the cavalryman finished by assessing that “the Rangers were right among them, drove them into the second line, which became demoralized and fell back in confusion.”²³

Unleashing tactical audacity

The final attack by Terry’s Texas Rangers at Bentonville represented a fitting end to their tactical performance in the Civil War. Blackburn grandly called it a “charge rarely equaled and never surpassed in impetuosity and daring,” while Giles proclaimed that similar to their “other brilliant charges, it was the very audacity that brought success.”²⁴ These assessments, admittedly professed by interested participants, nevertheless offered insight into the organizational culture that set 8th Texas Cavalry apart from contemporary regiments. For these Texans, who embraced aggressive methodology that prized decisive action, victory stemmed from combining mobility and firepower to fracture their opponent’s structural and psychological integrity.

Yet even as the brazen Texans leveraged aggressive action time and again to enable success in reconnaissance, screening, raiding and shock charges, they likewise learned the costs of misplaced boldness. At the battles of Shiloh and Second Murfreesboro, repeated assaults against prepared infantry lines, bristling with rifles, revealed the limitations of fighting élan. Failure to modify tactical application of forceful maneuver against the realities of modernizing weaponry resulted in costly education in the academy of war.

This tension, which balances FM 3-20.96, *Cavalry Squadron*’s imperative for commanders to attack with a “tempo and intensity the enemy cannot match,” against reciprocal doctrinal mandates for leaders to “understand when and where they are taking risks,” captures the most pertinent lessons of 8th Texas Cavalry’s combat experience.²⁵ Finding relevancy across all military endeavors, the offensive fundamental of audacity must be encouraged, focused and energetically unleashed. Yet as exemplified by the victories and defeats of Texas’ most famous regiment, tactical boldness should likewise be wielded with judicious and precise application. Assessing and internalizing this balance, drawing upon both the arts and sciences of warfare, may ultimately catalyze decisive victory or invite crushing defeat.



Figure 1. A memorial to Terry’s Texas Rangers at the Texas state capitol.

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Notes

¹ Training and Doctrine Command Pamphlet 525-3-1, *The U.S. Army Operating Concept*, 2014.

² FM 3-20.971, *Reconnaissance and Cavalry Troop*, August 2009.

³ "Governor's Message to the Senators and Representatives of the Ninth Legislature of the State of Texas," executive office, Austin, Nov. 1, 1861.

⁴ See Jeffery Murrah, *None but Texians: A History of Terry's Texas Rangers* (Austin: Eakin Press, 2001) and Bryan Bush, *Terry's Texas Rangers: A History of the Eighth Texas Cavalry* (New York: Turner Publishing, 2002) for studies on this unit.

⁵ C.C. Jeffries, *Terry's Rangers*, New York: Vantage Press, 1961.

⁶ *New Orleans Picayune*, Sept. 16, 1861.

⁷ Thomas Cutrer, editor, *Terry Texas Ranger Trilogy*, Austin: State House Press, 1996.

⁸ Jeffries.

⁹ Cutrer.

¹⁰ Henry Graber, *A Terry Texas Ranger: The Life Record of H.W. Graber*, Austin: State House Press, 1987.

¹¹ Cutrer.

¹² Graber.

¹³ Cutrer.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Graber.

²⁴ Cutrer.

²⁵ FM 3-20.96, *Cavalry Squadron*, March 2010; FM 3-20.971, *Reconnaissance and Cavalry Troop*.

Acronym Quick-Scan

BCT – brigade combat team

FM – field manual