When Cavalry Attacks:
Battle of Palmetto Ranch, 1865

by MAJ Nathan A. Jennings

American cavalry has historically been mounted, trained and armed since the Civil War to execute reconnaissance and security operations in support of higher-echelon maneuvers. While the U.S. Army's armored, Stryker and motorized ground-cavalry squadrons vary in their specific abilities to enable brigade combat team (BCT) and division actions, they all focus on collective missions that include zone, route, area and forceful reconnaissance, or screen and guard assignments. While the former centers on proactive methods for fighting for information with both stealthy and rapid advancement, the latter aims to provide freedom of action for higher commands through projection of mobile and static picket lines.[1]

Despite optimization for such critical enabling tasks, the realities of combat often demand broader tactical versatility. According to Field Manual (FM) 3-98, *Reconnaissance and Security*, U.S. Army cavalry forces may, when required, be compelled to "attack enemy positions and attempt to force the enemy to react by using local reserves or major counterattack forces." On the other hand, guarding elements sometimes attack, defend and delay as needed, while a larger covering force "reconnoiters, screens, attacks, defends and delays as necessary."[2] These offensive requirements – often resulting from unexpected exigencies – mean that mounted scouts must maximize their unique combination of mobility, protection, firepower and operational reach.

The military history of the United States, during the Civil War in particular, is replete with instances of American cavalry successfully conducting hasty-attack operations. For example, at the Battle of Palmetto Ranch – fought in 1865 in south Texas – 2nd Texas Cavalry Regiment, Confederate States of America (CSA), won the final engagement of the Civil War when it defeated an invading Union task force that sought to achieve a last, if ill-advised, victory along the Gulf Coast before hostilities ceased. Throughout the mini-campaign, the Texans employed speed and close-combat firepower to mitigate their enemy's initiative and infantry mass. By maximizing these attributes, the Confederates fixed, flanked and ultimately routed the dismayed Union forces.

Defending south Texas

The little-known Battle of Palmetto Ranch, named for a horse ranch near Brownsville, TX, on the north bank of the Rio Grande, occurred as a tactically important, though strategically inconsequential, engagement May 12-13, 1865, the final year of the Civil War. COL John Salmon Ford, veteran of the Mexican War and former Texas Ranger, held responsibility for guarding the Gulf Coast against possible Union incursions with 2nd Texas and several volunteer mounted battalions. Though the Lone Star State won a clear victory at the ranch, GEN Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia in the Eastern Theater had surrendered four weeks prior, and the collapse of the Confederacy was imminent.

Figure 1. Confederate COL John Salmon Ford led the victorious Texas cavalry forces at the Battle of Palmetto Ranch. *(Courtesy Wikipedia Commons)*

The Palmetto Ranch expedition was not the North's first attempt to invade mainland Texas. On two previous occasions, substantial U.S. Army and Navy task forces had attempted to seize lodgments along Texas's Gulf Coast after occupying nearby coastal islands. These actions aimed to initiate a larger strategic envelopment of the Confederate Trans-Mississippi Theater from the west and provide the Union with immense quantities of war-related resources like cotton and beef that frontier industry produced in abundance. Like the first two defensive actions that turned away Union fleets, the final protection of the Gulf Coast unfolded as a remarkable example of economized defense.

The first two serious attempts at penetration of Texan coastal defenses did not involve cavalry actions; they predictably unfolded primarily as naval efforts launched from the Union stronghold at New Orleans, LA. With the U.S. Army in possession of southern Louisiana by April 1862, the nearby Texas coast became a natural target for amphibious invasion by armadas of gunships and amphibious-assault infantry. This development corresponded with a blockade of the Gulf Coast by the Union Navy to deprive the flagging Confederacy of critically needed seaborne commerce with Latin America and Europe.

The Union assaults found Texas straining under its expansive wartime commitments. Even as the state struggled to defend both its Indian frontier from a resurgent Comanche threat and its long coastline from Union invasion, it deployed thousands of soldiers to support Southern war efforts in the Trans-Mississippi and Eastern Theaters. The U.S. Navy first sought to exploit this situation Oct. 4, 1862, when it attacked the island of Galveston. After a brief cannonade, the overmatched defending garrison withdrew, thus depriving Texas of a valuable commercial port. Some 500 Massachusetts soldiers then occupied the coastal town, while a second armada in New Orleans prepared to transport several infantry regiments to reinforce the foothold.

Another important coastal town, Corpus Christi, endured naval bombardment soon after the fall of Galveston. Despite the suddenness of the attack, Texas forces managed to retain control of the port. Francis Lubbock, the secessionist governor of the Lone Star State, immediately sought to galvanize resistance with a dramatic call to arms: "The crisis of this war seems to be at hand in Texas, and we must prepare to defend our homes, or be driven from them with insult and degradation, and all the horrors of rapine and violence." Relying on his state's historical strengths in rapid mobilization to combat Indian threats on the Great Plains, Lubbock called for 5,000 volunteers to defend the coast.[3]

On New Year's Day 1863, MG John Magruder, commander of the Confederate Military District of Texas, counterattacked with a synchronized gunboat and amphibious ground offensive to repossess Galveston. Relying on the element of surprise, a small fleet of brown-water vessels first engaged the unsuspecting Union fleet with a lightning night attack. With this diversion in effect, Confederate ground forces under the command of BG William Scurry, along with an assortment of local militia, then assaulted the island. The attack succeeded, and the Confederates jubilantly captured three Union ships and more than 350 prisoners. The vengeful Texans inflicted 650 Federal casualties while suffering 26 killed and 117 wounded.[4]

The next significant Union invasion occurred in September 1863. Called the Second Battle of Sabine Pass, the day belonged to a single Texas artillery battery fortuitously stationed at Fort Griffin at the mouth of the Sabine River. In an act of notable bravery, the severely outnumbered Confederates waited until an armada transporting 15,000 infantry, cavalry and artillery troops approached within 1,200 yards of the fort and then opened a rapid-fire cannonade. After sinking one transport and severely damaging another, the 44-man contingent under Irish immigrant LT Dick Dowling compelled the other 15 ships to retreat.[5] The **Texas State Gazette** subsequently boasted with Lone Star bravado that "the ball is again opened in Texas. We have met the enemy and they are again ours."[6]

Palmetto Ranch contest

The unlikely Palmetto Ranch Campaign saw Texas's cavalry arm take its turn defending the state from a third incursion. On May 11, 1865, COL Theodore Barrett, commander of the Union regiment occupying the island of Brazos Santiago near Brownsville, ordered a sudden expedition onto the mainland. Despite the tacit ceasefire that had existed for several months due to shared understanding that the war would soon be decided in Virginia, he ordered the attack for unknown reasons. It is possible the New York officer sought to requisition horses for his dismounted cavalry, but it is more likely, as accused by the quartermaster of 34th Indiana Infantry Regiment in a

letter later published in the **New York Times**, that he hoped to "establish for himself some notoriety before the war closed." Barrett later called it a "foraging expedition" at his court martial over the matter.[7]

The attacking task force comprised eight companies from 62nd U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) and two from the dismounted 2nd Texas Cavalry Battalion (U.S.). Unionist Texans who remained loyal to the United States predominantly populated the latter companies, adding a new political and social context to the situation. The entire expedition totaled about 300 soldiers. On the CSA side, Ford commanded the lower Rio Grande defenses with the dispersed 2nd Texas Cavalry Regiment and several understrength mounted volunteer battalions. At the time of invasion, one of his volunteer units was encamped at Palmetto Ranch near old Fort Brown. The disparity in tactical mobility between opponents would prove decisive in days to come.[8]

On the night of May 11, the Union force crossed to the Texas mainland under concealment of darkness. Under command of Barrett's deputy, LTC David Branson, the expedition then marched against a suspected enemy position at White's Ranch near the Rio Grande, ostensibly to requisition horses. Finding the station abandoned, they spent the night under cover. The following morning, the Federals located and skirmished with 190 cavalrymen from a volunteer mounted battalion led by CPT William Robinson. When the fight proved inconclusive, the Union soldiers retired to the ranch. Barrett soon arrived with 200 more infantrymen and assumed personal command of the operation.[9]

The next day, on May 12, the strengthened Union task force of about 500 soldiers — now a battalion-sized element — advanced and again skirmished with Robinson's horsemen near the Southerners' camp at Palmetto Ranch. Relying on massed musket volleys, the larger infantry force pushed the Texans out onto open ground and half-heartedly pursued them a mile to the west. Uncertain of his next move, Barrett established a temporary camp around a small hill and sought to exploit the elevated terrain. Though the infantrymen had prevailed in the skirmish, the invaders would soon suffer from their mobility deficit.[10]

Despite Barrett's initial tactical success, the Texans rapidly gathered forces from across the region and planned to seize the operational initiative from the invaders. That afternoon Ford began to organize the Confederate counterattack at Fort Brown on the Rio Grande. When his own 2nd Texas joined with elements from several local units, the force totaled close to 400 horsemen. He also brought a mobile battery comprised of six light field guns to offset his lack of massed firepower and combined-arms capacity.

Figure 2. Mobile light artillery proved decisive at the Battle of Palmetto Ranch. *(Drawing: "The Alamo City Guards of San Antonio," Edgar's Battery, First Texas Light Battery, CSA, 1862. Courtesy of the Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University)*

Skirmishing had continued between the Texan volunteers and Union soldiers while Ford and the reinforcements deployed from Fort Brown. Upon arrival, the commander, according to his memoir, immediately "made reconnaissance and determined to attack." Since Barrett had let himself be caught in open terrain that suited cavalry, the Texan chose to maximize his superiority in mobility with a double envelopment. He planned to use artillery "in advance of the line," flank with "enfilading fire" on the right and assault another wing to "turn the enemy's right flank."[11] Despite the audacity of the scheme, it held great risk for horsemen since they would be charging entrenched infantry – an immensely perilous task by this time in the war due to improving tactics and weaponry among the Union foot regiments.

Ford grossly overestimated the size of the Federals. He privately worried that "this may be the last fight of the war and from the number of Union men I see before me, I am going to be whipped." Regardless of concerns, the Confederates initiated the assault as planned with battery fire against the Union front. They then followed the barrage with a charge by 2nd Texas companies in the center and the simultaneous flanking of Barrett's left and right with volunteer horsemen. Ford described the action on his left where he intended to deliver the decisive blow: "very soon … Robinson charged with impetuosity. As was expected, the Yankee skirmishers were captured and the enemy troops were retreating at a run."[12]

The shock of the artillery, rapid flank assaults and loss of its forward positions placed the Union task force in an untenable situation. With his front collapsing, Barrett began a retrograde under pressure toward the coast. The enraged Texans "pursued at the gallop" and harassed the retreat, which proved so unorganized that two infantry columns marched into each other and caused further chaos. Barrett eventually assigned, and sacrificed, a detachment from 62nd USCT to screen his escape. By day's end the dismayed Federals lost four dead, 12 wounded, 102 captured and two missing soldiers. Adding sting to defeat, they also suffered the disgrace of losing two "battle flags" of 34th Indiana Regiment.[13]

Battle analysis

Texan maneuvers during the final battle of the Civil War provided a veritable display of cavalry advantages during offensive operations, though extremely conditional, on mid-19th-Century battlefields. It first manifested when Ford used speed available only to mounted forces to mobilize and reinforce the Texan garrison at Palmetto Ranch. He next used his cavalry to fix and envelop the Federal position before its slower infantry ranks could react. At the battle's culmination, the same maneuverability facilitated rapid shock charges, which, along with supportive artillery fires, compelled the Federal retreat. He finally pursued the retreating adversary to complete the rout and cement the victory.

While no two battles are exactly comparable, the Confederate employment of fundamental cavalry strengths at Palmetto Ranch are instructive. By employing the mobility superiority inherent in mounted formations to apply decisive effects, the Texans fulfilled the modern U.S. Army's operational imperative to "operate dispersed over wide areas because they are able to integrate intelligence and operations to develop situational understanding through action, while possessing the mobility to concentrate rapidly."[14] This application of offensive fundamentals allowed the Confederate horse, who normally supported infantry throughout the war, to marginalize their enemy's strengths while maximizing their own. It ultimately allowed the Confederates to present the Union commander with cascading tactical dilemmas that dislocated and desynchronized his ability to either defend or maneuver.

Looking to the 21st Century, the storied U.S. cavalry will likely remain focused on traditional reconnaissance and security tasks in support of brigades and divisions. However, just as 2nd Texas hastily attacked at Palmetto Ranch, it will occasionally be required to attack to fix or destroy opposing forces. Whether armored, Stryker or motorized in platform, U.S. Army scouts and tankers will, if unleashed properly, defeat their enemies through decisive application of fire and maneuver. Just as in ages past, these instances will see mounted U.S. Soldiers employ their structural advantages in mobility and firepower to assault into the teeth of their enemy's defenses and emerge victorious on the other side.

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Notes

[1] FM 3-98, **Reconnaissance and Security Operations**, July 2015.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Lubbock quoted in Allen Ashcraft, **Texas in the Civil War: A Resume History**, Austin: Texas Civil War Centennial Commission, 1962.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Harry Henderson, **Texas in the Confederacy**, San Antonio: The Naylor Company, 1955; Ralph Wooster, **Lone Star Regiments in Gray**, Eakin Press, 2002.

[6] **Texas State Gazette**, Sept. 16, 1863.

[7] **New York Times**, June 18, 1865; Jeffrey Hunt, **The Last Battle of the Civil War: Palmetto Ranch**, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002.

[8] Hunt; John Ford, **Rip Ford's Texas**, edited by Stephen Oates, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ford.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid; Hunt.

[14] U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command Pamphlet 525-3-1, **The U.S. Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World**, October 2014.

Acronym Quick-Scan

BCT – brigade combat team
CSA – Confederate States of America
FM – field manual
USCT – U.S. Colored Troops