



## Waking Up from the Dream: The Crisis of Cavalry in the 1930s

by Jon Clemens, ARMOR Managing Editor

Reading the *Cavalry Journal* of 1939, the year World War II broke out, one cannot help but be amazed at the distance that separated the United States and the changing world across the Atlantic. Safe behind the rampart of an ocean, insulated from these changes by distance and a habit of isolationism, the United States — as a nation and as an Army — was slow to wake up.

In so many ways, the Army's cavalry branch reflected the nation's inertia. Stubborn and sleepy, steeped in

the tradition of a dream world of ritual, ceremony, and privilege, our cavalry seemed locked in a decisive engagement with reality, an engagement it finally lost in 1940, when the Chief of Staff of the Army took the major responsibility for mechanization from the cavalry branch and ordered the creation of a separate Armored Force.

Surely by September of 1939, one would think, the shape of the future would have been obvious. In a matter of weeks, the new German ar-

mored divisions had shredded the Polish Army, which included the largest force of horse cavalry in the world. At that point, the pattern of German expansion was clear - the Rhineland had been reoccupied three and a half years earlier, Austria had been blackjacked into the Reich in March 1938, the Germans had marched into the Sudetenland — part of Czechoslovakia — in the fall of 1938, and the following spring, at Munich, the Allies had given Hitler the rest of that country without a fight.

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Poland was only the most recent installment, and remarkably, the *Cavalry Journal* covered the action: an article in the November-December issue reported the triumph of blitzkrieg in Poland in some detail. But it was written by a staff officer of the German Army!

A picture of the cavalry emerges in that same issue, and it is a pastoral picture, indeed. Military critics often complain that armies train for the last war, but in page after page of articles and notes and "organization activities," the *Journal* reflected the thoughts of a branch that seemed to deny World War I had ever taken place, or that if it had, it was somehow an aberration. As the Chief of Cavalry begged Congress for more horsemen, he seemed plagued by a terrible amnesia that denied the machine gun, the gas barrage, and the totally obliterating power of modern artillery that had altered the geography of Belgium 20 years earlier.

What could have been happening here? Wasn't this the nation that pioneered the mass production of the motor car? And that had been 10 years, even 15 years, earlier. Yet here was a report, in the "Notes from the Cavalry Board," of problems in tests of horse gas masks (the tests weren't going well), field tests of a new unbreakable syrup pitcher, reports of changes in dismounted drill for horse soldiers, accounts of horse shows and polo matches, the retirement at Fort Bliss of Sergeant White (who had traveled with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show), and the 8th Cavalry's participation in the filming of Paramount Pictures' "Geronimo."

It was not clear then, as it is today in hindsight, what caused the cavalry to cling to the horse, but history hints that the reasons were not military. Mechanization's threat to

horse cavalry involved more than military obsolescence; to let this change happen would destroy a world of social rituals based on the horse and the romance of the cavalry. As long as one could justify a military role for horse soldiers, the polo matches, the fox hunts, and the horse shows all fell into place as perfectly appropriate — good training — as if it would always be this way.

This life of ceremony and ritual had a certain attraction in the rapidly changing world of threats and "isms" that epitomized the Thirties. At a time when millions of intelligent, able-bodied Americans were reduced to selling apples and pencils on street corners, there was some security and safety in being a Cavalry soldier. And for the Cavalry officer, there was much more. Insulated from the Depression, the life Patton and Truscott and others describe at cavalry posts like Fort Riley and Fort Myer was truly a dream world accessible to very few. At Fort Myer, especially, a young cavalry officer close to the social whirl of Washington must have felt very secure, so close to the rich and famous and powerful that one might easily imagine he was one of them.

In one of Patton's correspondences as post commander at Fort Myer, he was writing to the Chief of Cavalry to recommend four officers for attendance at the War College. But one of these officers, he said, might be excluded: "He is of more value to the Cavalry in his present position as a riding companion to Mrs. Roosevelt than he would be at the War College, at least for the next few years."

Patton wrote the memorandum in September 1939.

Another correspondence written that same month appeared in the *Cavalry Journal* in November. It is

significant but anonymous. It is an opinion piece, unsigned, from a soldier who identified himself as "an Earnest Grouch." It is titled, "Time to Wake Up," and it is about Poland, rather than polo.

"Germany has recently overrun Poland," he began, as if speaking to an audience that might have missed this news. "What had Poland for defense? According to *Time Magazine*, over two million men, a tremendous army. Poland also had a very considerable time to prepare herself, for the Germans gave ample warning of their intentions...The prime mover of the German attack may be said to have been the gasoline motor, in the air and on the ground; the basis for the Polish defense was the man, propelled only by his legs or by a horse...There is no intention here of laying the entire blame for the Polish defeat upon her cavalry, but it is nevertheless apparent that 40 regiments of regular cavalry, aware of the threat of enemy mechanization and therefore presumably trained to fight it, were unable to delay the enemy sufficiently to permit the infantry to prepare anything approaching 'impregnable' positions. Now consider the United States Cavalry..."

He goes on to criticize the readiness of our cavalry in the 1930s and suggests methods of training to fight mechanized units.

Throughout the article, there is a sense of urgency. It concludes: "Somehow, German mechanization managed to push the Polish Army and its cavalry all over the map. It's time we developed an aggressive defense that will prevent the same fate from overtaking us. As a grouch, I think it's time to wake up."

But there were dissenting voices in that same issue of the *Journal*,

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among them BG Hamilton S. Hawkins, Ret., the vice-president of the Cavalry Association, who remained a stubborn proponent of horse cavalry over mechanized cavalry.

He begins his column in the November-December issue: "I have been told that I am considered by the enthusiasts for mechanization as hostile to the development of mechanized force in our Army. This is not true. But I am decidedly hostile to the ideas of those who would replace cavalry by mechanization....It may be true that a few organizations resembling the German Panzer Divisions might be useful. Especially so, if the opposing forces have no cavalry properly armed and trained and with sufficient numbers."

In the following paragraph, he is eerily prophetic about the course of the war in Europe, although history might argue with his conclusion:

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The column was titled, "Obvious Conclusions."

Six months later, the panzers would roll into France and the Low Countries. At that point in World War II, the United States Army

would have fewer than 300 tanks, only 28 of them fit for combat. Four years later, on a war footing, American industry would produce 29,497 tanks in a single year, but in late 1939, the only really obvious conclusion was that the Arsenal of Democracy was empty.

Why did the United States Army have only 28 usable tanks in 1939? Twenty years earlier, during WWI, the Army had fielded a self-contained tank brigade, mounted in French tanks, and its soldiers had fought in Allied tank units. In the postwar flush of victory, tanks were seen by the popular press as one of the reasons for Allied success, a wonder weapon that had broken the tyranny of the trenches. Cartier, the great French jewelry concern, had even designed and dedicated a special wrist watch to the valiant, "Treat 'Em Rough" boys of the American Tank Corps.

But as memories of the war faded, so did the will to pay for tanks and guns and soldiers. It soon became apparent that, while the design of the horse had been more or less frozen during millions of years of evolution, mechanical beasts could evolve quickly. What you built today would be obsolete tomorrow. There was some wisdom in waiting, as long as you didn't wait too long. The nations of the world had seen this costly phenomenon work itself out before, in the great battleship arms races, and like battleships, tanks were very expensive, specialized vehicles of their kind.

A flurry of activity in the late 1920s refocused attention on tanks, notably the British experimental mechanized force that incorporated all branches in motorized vehicles, and the American Experimental Mechanized Force that the British unit had inspired. This force, based

at Ft. George Meade, Md., was seen as "a new arm," not an extension of the traditional infantry or cavalry arm, according to a 1928 news account. The newspapers called it, "the gasoline brigade."

By the early 1930s, the Depression forced all institutions of the government to contract, including the Army. There was no money to fix the aging equipment of the Mechanized Force or buy new equipment. When senior officers went up to Capitol Hill for funding, they knew that little money was available to try new things, so they tended to ask for what they could get. By 1931, the mechanized force had been disbanded, and General Douglas MacArthur, the Chief of Staff, urged the separate branches to do all they could, in reduced circumstances, to foster mechanization.

The natural proponent for mechanization was the cavalry branch, the branch that most required mobility for success and survival. Some clearly saw that the employment of tanks in WWI paralleled the traditional exploitative role of cavalry, and even many traditional horse cavalymen saw some possible future use for mechanized units, but given the reliability of the equipment of the time and the limitations of both tracked and wheeled vehicle suspensions, it was reasonable to keep a grip on the reins until mechanization matured.

It would have been better, of course, to try to develop both horse and mechanized units, but in the nation's straitened circumstances, the generals could not have both. Asked which they would prefer, the chiefs of cavalry held on to the reins.

But there were exceptions and exceptional people ready to exploit them. Adna Chaffee was certainly

one of them. He served with the 81st Division and III Corps staff in the American Expeditionary Force in WWI, during the St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne offensives. He was a brilliant rider and horseman (he had attended the French Army's cavalry school before WWI) and was known as a high-goal polo player. In 1927, he was assigned to the General Staff and was one of the officers who prepared the 1928 report of the War Department Mechanization Board. This farsighted document urged the need for a separate armored force, a branch apart, led by its own chief. This force of all arms and services was to be mechanized, from tanks to signal troops. This self-contained mobile regiment would cost about \$4 million.

Although the Secretary of War approved the concept, there was no money in the budget to pay for it. The independent nature of the force made the other branches nervous, too. Why buy expensive new gadgets when soldiers were so poorly paid?

In his revealing memoir of the Cavalry branch, "The Ten Lean Years" (Serialized in *ARMOR* in the first four issues of 1987), MG Robert Grow argues that Cavalry lost its opportunity to lead the Army into the future when it insisted on keeping its horses and resisting the shift to mechanization. Grow defines cavalry as men who fight mounted, whether in machines or on horseback. He implies that what became the independent armored force could have been the successor to traditional cavalry, that cavalry could have dominated mechanization if its leaders had been willing to let go of the reins.

Grow concludes: "The Armored Force had been created, not be-



Despite the creation of the Armored Force in 1940, the horse cavalry didn't just go away. Here, 6th Cavalry troopers practice crossing a stream at Fort Jackson in 1942.

cause a new arm was necessary, but because Cavalry did not grasp the opportunities that were available....The Chief of Cavalry...staunchly refused to give up a horse unit. So he lost it all."

There is evidence that while Grow and other cavalry officers saw mechanization as simply an extension of traditional cavalry roles and missions, the wartime Chief of Staff of the Army, General Marshall, realized early on that the mech force would have to be a force of combined arms. We know that Herr and General Lynch, his counterpart in the Infantry, had refused to back combined arms divisions (they called them "panzer divisions") in September and October 1939, and were still opposing such organizations as late as the spring of the following year. But Marshall's mind may have already been made up. He was using the phrase "armored divisions" in a radio address in early 1940, noting that the Louisiana Maneuvers would test the concept.

Perhaps by that time, Marshall had simply given up on the traditional branch chiefs and felt that only a new organization could overcome the bitter branch insularity and turf

fight that had stymied progress in the 1930s.

Herr was still opposing a separate armored force in June, 1940, when Marshall called the key figures in mechanization together in Washington. At a meeting June 10, he announced that the agenda was open, but that there would be no debate on one point: the United States would create two armored divisions. The maneuver in Louisiana that May had satisfied Marshall that the combined arms armored division would work, and for the war looming up, would be essential. The order to create an armored force was issued July 5.

By October, the Armor School at Fort Knox was activated and the first troops arrived the following month.

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