The Army's Rio Grande Campaign of 1859:
A Total Force Case Study

MAJ NATHAN JENNINGS

Total Force cooperation between the U.S. Army's active, Guard, and Reserve components has long been a hallmark of its warfighting capability. From participation by patriot volunteers in the American Revolution to the societal mobilization for World War II, America's primary landpower institution has habitually integrated a wide range of Soldiers that has included professionals, reservists, militia, draftees, and both state and federal volunteers to conduct expeditionary campaigns of mass and scale. These types of multi-component efforts, often transitioning to costly stabilization efforts in distant theaters, have allowed the nation's oldest military service to, as required by U.S. joint doctrine, "be synergistic... with the sum greater than its parts."[1]

American military history is replete with instances of the Army fulfilling its mandate to, as defined in its 2014 Operating Concept, integrate the "unique civil-military expertise" of citizen Soldiers "across military, government, economic, and social spheres" into a Total Force approach that complements and enhances the active component's capabilities.[2] While tectonic wars like the Civil War and World Wars garner the most attention, the little-known Rio Grande Campaign of 1859 along Texas's southern border offers a modest case study where an infantry task force of Army regulars joined with state mounted forces, in the form of para-military Texas Rangers, to defeat a hybrid Tejano adversary. This minor campaign, where professionals and volunteers complemented strengths, resulted in restoration of relative, though ethnically biased and temporary, stability along a troubled section of the U.S.-Mexico border.

The Rio Grande Frontier

The First Cortina War exploded along the Rio Grande in South Texas in the summer of 1859 as an ethnically driven political confrontation between the emerging Anglo-Germanic majority and the long-standing Hispanic residents. Rising tensions between aggressive white settlers and resisting Tejano trans-nationals, which exacerbated centuries of discontentment amongst isolated and disenfranchised Rio Grande border communities, had inflamed as Texan merchants, ranchers, and settlers seized lucrative properties and resources from vulnerable owners. The rapid transfer of local political power across South Texas began in earnest following the United States' crushing victory over Mexico in 1848, and the territorial annexation that followed catalyzed social discontentment and ultimately an armed uprising.

Tejano militancy exploded on 13 July 1859 when Juan Nepomuceno Cortina, a prominent Hispanic-Texan rancher and Mexican army veteran of the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, killed a Brownsville constable who was subjecting a

Map of Texas, 1859

Brownsville

Hispanic ranching hand to harsh treatment. Cortina then escaped across the international border to Matamoros while angry Tejanos and Mexicans along both sides of the Rio Grande hailed him as a hero. Texas Ranger John Salmon Ford — a former soldier, newspaper editor, and physician who would lead the state military response — later complemented the firebrand as "fearless, self-possessed, and cunning" while noting that he "acted decisively and promptly."[3] As a strong leader who intuitively understood hybrid warfare, Cortina would soon demonstrate a remarkable ability for combining guerrilla and conventional tactics with acts of terrorism.

Major John "Rip" Ford," a Mexican-American War veteran, led the Texas Ranger volunteers during the First Cortina War.

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

Samuel P. Heintzelman, pictured here as a major general during the Civil War, commanded the combined federal-state effort against the Cortina rebels.

On 28 September, the revolutionary militant exacted his revenge. Cortina led approximately 75 horsemen to attack Brownsville directly. In order to maximize political impact, he aimed to execute the offending town marshal as well as a former ranching partner, Adolphus Clavaecke, in addition to rescuing several Tejano prisoners. With surprise and shock the raiders, popularly called Cortinistas, descended upon the unsuspecting town and, according to Ford's admittedly biased account, "killed whomever they wished, robbed whomever they pleased." Cortina then set up camp seven miles away and on 24 October easily repulsed a hasty counterattack by an ad hoc militia called the "Brownsville Tigers." The brazen rebel's legend was expanding across the Rio Grande Valley and threatened to engulf the region in violent chaos.[4]

The events at Brownsville, though relatively minor in scale, sent political shockwaves across the region. George Woods, the governor of Texas and a veteran officer of the Creek and Mexican-American Wars, distrusted the dispersed U.S. Army garrisons to respond quickly and immediately authorized an improvised expedition of state-funded Texas Rangers to counter the militants. He appointed William Tobin, a former Marshal of San Antonio, as commander and dispatched the company south to break the ongoing "siege" at Brownsville. Despite the Texans' aggressive intentions, on 20 November Cortina's force defeated a detachment of the rangers while killing three in the fight. When Tobin found the bodies of his men, they had been mutilated and left to rot in the sun. For many Texans who yet retained ethnic enmity over atrocities at places like the Alamo and Goliad just 23 years earlier, the fight had gained a larger significance.[5]

Combined Arms Integration

Skirmishing continued over the next two weeks as both sides mustered additional forces to the Rio Grande. By mid-December, the U.S. Army finally consolidated its dispersed garrisons to suppress the uprising. Major Samuel Heintzelman, an infantry officer who had won distinction in Winfield Scott's capture of Mexico City in 1847 and had previously served with the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Infantry Regiments in various frontier assignments, assumed command of both federal and state military efforts. Seeking to leverage combined arms superiority, he created a task force comprising two infantry companies, one artillery company, one cavalry troop, and several companies of fast-moving, though indisciplined, mounted rangers. The improvised battalion then marched against the rebels on 14 December while bringing two 24-pound howitzers to provide mobile fire support.[6]

The combined force of 165 regulars and 125 state volunteers marched down the Laredo road with, according to Heintzelman, "Rangers in advance and on the flanks" to conduct route reconnaissance. This order of battle reflected the commander's appreciation of the Texans' strengths in speed, agility, and environmental familiarity on the Southwestern frontier. The advance scouts soon discovered that the Cortinistas had evacuated camp and established a fortified position with support from captured cannon in a "dense chaparral" farther down the road. Upon making contact, the major, sought to immediately overwhelm the rebels by neutralizing their cannon with his own and then charging their position with his infantry. However, when the soldiers arrived they discovered that the wily Cortina had displaced again.[7]

Rangers and federal cavalry pursued the Tejano rebels along parallel roads with the Texans making first contact. They discovered that Cortina had left a rear guard in a dense brush, allowing their inspirational leader to escape. Tobin dismounted his men and cleared the position with intense close-quarters fighting where they relied upon both rifles and revolvers. Heintzelman — who held undisciplined volunteers in low regard like most regular army officers — offered rare praise when he admitted that "the Rangers, supported by the foot, soon routed them again." Despite the commendation, later reports by Tobin and the major conflicted on who owned fault for allowing the rebels to withdraw. In actuality, a combination of indecision and challenging terrain conspired to slow the task force's advance. Cortina, ever the elusive guerrilla, escaped to fight another day.[8]

Simultaneous to the escalation at Brownsville, the Texas governor in Austin had dispatched Ford with another company of 53 volunteer horsemen as reinforcements. The rangers, who rode horses acclimatized to the arid Texan environment, rode 350 miles at maximum speed to reach the scene of battle. Ford later wrote that his men "reached Major Heintzelman's regulars shortly after they had driven Cortina from the field" and that "the two commands went into camp." Much to Tobin's disappointment, Runnells had also appointed Ford as the senior commander of all state troops at the rank of major.[9]

On 20 December, after several days of reconnaissance patrols and collaborative planning between Ford and Heintzelman, the improvised battalion once again marched against the Cortinistas. Far to the east, the *New York Times* sensationally reported that Cortina was "burning the ranchos as he went" and had "declared his intention to plunder and burn Edinburgh, Rio Grande City, and Roma."[10] Seeking to make a stand in complex terrain, the revolutionary leader had established a new defensive position in Rio Grande City with approximately 600 fighters. As a veteran of earlier wars, he hoped that larger numbers, massed firepower, and defensive fortifications would allow him to repel the impending attack.[11] Ford described the events that led to the culminating battle of the campaign from his perspective:

"About the twentieth of December a forward movement was made. The main body consisted of regular infantry, cavalry, and artillery. Tobin's and Tomlinson's companies followed the road leading from Brownsville to Rio Grande City... the third day's march brought to light many acts of vandalism. Houses had been robbed and fired, fences burned, property destroyed or carried into Mexico... Cortina had committed these outrages upon citizens of the United States regardless of race and upon Mexicans suspected of being friendly to the Americans."[12]

The federal-state task force halted on 26 December, 18 miles from the town, to plan its final approach.

Federal-State Cooperation

Under mounting political pressure to rapidly defeat the rebels and stabilize the region, Heintzelman elected to attack with an envelopment maneuver designed to definitively end the uprising by killing or capturing its ringleader. Ford, after conducting night reconnaissance of the disposition of the defenses, discovered that Cortina's position was sound: his right was protected by the river, the main road in the center by two light infantry companies and cannon, and his left by infantry and cannon hastily entrenched in a cemetery. The rebel commander finally held limited cavalry in reserve, perhaps revealing previous training with the Mexican army.[13]

Despite the Tejanos' readiness, Heintzelman launched a broad assault with simultaneous attacks against the rebel perimeter at daybreak. While the rangers commenced a dismounted assault against Cortina's center and left positions, the infantry regulars moved to fix his right and the cavalry regulars provided security. After taking "terrific fire," Ford's men outflanked the central cannon and routed the enemy. The Texan commander recalled how they rode to position for an infantry-style assault: "Our mounted men advanced at a brisk gallop, and left the road by an inclination to the right at less than a hundred yards from the enemy artillery. Cavalry halted, dismounted about 40 yards from the cannon, and opened fire. I now instructed them to advance under cover of chaparral and take the pieces in flank."[14]

Cortina launched infantry and then his mounted reserve to reinforce his crumbling front. The rangers in the center immediately assumed a hasty defensive line and shattered the charge with precision rifle fire and then blazing revolvers. Tobin, in command of the task force right, then turned back the remainder of the Tejano counterattack. Ford wrote of their fire on the Tejano cavalry: "Many a charger galloped off, carrying an empty saddle; Cortina's bold riders were left on the ground." As the combat in the center intensified, Heintzelman's regular infantry conducted an echeloned advance on the enemy's right flank to complete the route. Relying on discipline, massed volleys, and ultimately bayonets, the foot soldiers then defeated and scattered the remaining rebels.[15]

Despite the decisiveness of Heintzelman's victory, Cortina and the core of his fighting force managed to escape the envelopment and retreat up the road towards a small town called Roma. After moving several miles and realizing that they could not outpace the pursuing task force, they set blocking positions with light cannon support. The rangers, relying on their cavalry mobility, again led the task force advance and, upon making contact, charged through scattershot to reach the Cortinista position. Ford recalled that "the matter of nationality was decided right there. A furious charge scattered Cortina's bodyguard and left one of his pieces in our possession." The ranger recalled how the "enemy attempted no further resistance" and "seemed panic-stricken, and abandoning the other cannon, fled."[16]

Heintzelman, moving up with the task force infantry and artillery, feared that Cortina would move to the nearby town of Roma to "rob it" for supplies. The major accordingly launched another rapid pursuit up the river valley with his mounted contingent of cavalry and rangers. The fear turned out unfounded; Cortina had appreciated the scale of his tactical setbacks and left the road to find refuge in the wilderness. The horsemen then continued to Roma where Ford, as the

senior officer present, "gave the inhabitants assurance of protection." They then rode east to rejoin the slower elements under Heintzelman as the task force began to consolidate their wounded and dead.[17]

The U.S. Army's victory over the Cortinistas was complete, if regrettably temporary. Ford later assessed adversary casualties: "the loss of the enemy was officially reported at 60 killed. We afterwards ascertained it was much greater."[18] As the task force commander, Heintzelman likewise boasted of distances marched against the rebels: "We marched yesterday about 20 miles & this morning 20 more & then 9 in pursuit. Near 50 miles & a fight is pretty good business. I hope the matter is ended."[19] Despite the severity of Cortina's defeat and the major's sincere hopes for peace, the Tejano rebellion would survive.

Federal and state forces scoured the Rio Grande on both sides of the international border for the next three months as Cortina shifted to guerrilla methods in the form of vicious strikes and raids against civilian communities. Texan volunteers under Ford continued to support Heintzelman with dispersed and long-ranged patrolling to clear the area. The combined team, known as the Rio Grande Squadron, again defeated Cortina at the Battle of La Bolsa on 4 February and at the Battle of Ranch La Mesa on 17 March. Though the revolutionary icon survived the engagements and suspended his activism, the onset of peace would be illusory due to continued ethnic inequities between Anglo and Tejano residents.[20] In the summer of 1861, even as Texas mobilized against the might of the Union Army, Ford would lead the 2nd Texas Cavalry Regiment, CSA, in the Second Cortina War to defeat the ever-defiant rebel for the last time.

Total Force Unity

The First Cortina War, though virtually unknown in American military history, caused the deaths of an estimated 151 combatants, 80 Hispanic civilians, and 15 Anglo residents.[21] Throughout the campaign, federal and state forces united, with varying degrees of friction, to balance each of their particular strengths and mitigate weaknesses to create a more effective combined arms team. While the U.S. Army contingent provided command and control, legitimacy, infantry mass, and responsive cannon fire, the Texas Rangers brought increased tactical mobility, frontier experience, and local political legitimacy. This integration — in large part achieved by cooperative planning and execution between Heintzelman and Ford — eventually allowed government forces to defeat, pursue, and again defeat Cortina and his rebels.

These lessons, centering on the imperative for task force commanders to appreciate and integrate both traditional and innovative contributions, have withstood the test of time. Now, just as in 1859, the U.S. Army's active, Guard, and Reserve components contribute optimized capabilities that make the Total Force successful. As emphasized by the institution's 39th Chief of Staff, GEN Mark Milley, "it is impossible for the United States of America to go to war today without bringing Main Street – without bringing Tennessee and Massachusetts and

> *While the U.S. Army contingent provided command and control, legitimacy, infantry mass, and responsive cannon fire, the Texas Rangers brought increased tactical mobility, frontier experience, and local political legitimacy. This integration... eventually allowed government forces to defeat, pursue, and again defeat Cortina and his rebels.*

Colorado and California."[22] This fact will not change and will likely become more acute as the nation's primary landpower force conducts expeditionary operations with more modestly sized components. Just as regulars and rangers united efforts along the Rio Grande, their heirs will do so again across equally challenging frontiers in the 21st century.

Notes

[1] Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, 25 March 2013, I-2.

[2] TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1, *The U.S. Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World*, October 2014, 18.

[3] John Ford, edited by Stephen Oates, *Rip Ford's Texas*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 261-262; Jerry Thompson, *Cortina: Defending the Mexican Name in Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 15-16, 37-39.

[4] Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 264; Thompson, Cortina, 37-39.

[5] Frederick Wilkins, *Defending the Borders: The Texas Rangers, 1848-1861* (Austin: State House Press, 2001), 106-107.

[6] Samuel Heintzelman, edited by Jerry Thompson, *Fifty Miles and a Fight: Major Samuel Peter Heintzelman's Journal of Texas and the Cortina War* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1998), 136, 138.

[7] Ibid, 138-141.

[8] Ibid, 140-141.

[9] Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 267.

[10] *The New York Times*, 13 January 1860.

[11] Thompson, Cortina, 77.

[12] Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 270.

[13] Ibid, 271.

[14] Ibid, 270.

[15] Ibid, 273; Heintzelman, Fifty Miles, 155; Thompson, Cortina, 78-80.

[16] Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 273; Thompson, Cortina, 81-82.

[17] Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 274.

[18] Ibid, 274-275.

[19] Heintzelman, Fifty Miles, 155.

[20] Thompson, Cortina, 83-85; these engagements were closer to skirmishes than actual battles.

[21] Darren Ivey, *The Texas Rangers: A Registry and History* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1970), 84.

[22] GEN Mark Milley, "There is Only One Army," Army National Guard News, 22 September 2015.

MAJ Nathan Jennings is currently a FA59 Strategist serving in the Combined Arms Doctrine Directorate at Fort Leavenworth, KS. His previous positions include strategic planner in Resolute Support headquarters, Afghanistan; assistant professor of history at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, NY; headquarters and cavalry troop commander in the 1st Cavalry Division; security force platoon leader in the 1st Infantry Division; and 19D Cavalry Scout in the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment (light) with combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. Jennings, who earned a master's degree in history from the University of Texas at Austin, is a graduate of the Advanced Military Studies Program. In 2015, he won the U.S. Army Armor School's Starry Writing Competition. He is also the author of the book, *Riding for the Lone Star: Frontier Cavalry and the Texas Way of War, 1822-1865*.