

## The Hussar and the Dragoon

**STUDENTS** OF NAPOLEONIC CAVALRY operations know the French armies of the early nineteenth century featured three types of mounted soldiers: heavy cavalry, which contained armored horses and men (a paradigm never adopted in the United States), dragoons, and hussars. Dragoons were trained to fight equally effectively mounted and dismounted. Hussars were that era's fighter pilots: devil-may-care warriors riding into battle with a saber in one hand and a pretty girl in the other. Dragoons were stodgy; Hussars were flamboyant. There was an obvious fundamental tension between these two different philosophies of how to conduct mounted operations.

This tension carried over into nineteenth-century American military doctrine. The antebellum United States Army also featured three types of mounted units: two regiments of dragoons, a regiment of mounted infantry, and two regiments of light cavalry. The dragoons were much as they had always been: trained to fight equally effectively whether mounted and dismounted. Mounted infantry used their horses to move from place to place and then dismounted to use infantry weapons and infantry tactics. Light cavalry typically carried only sabers and pistols. It was not designed to fight dismounted. Rather, its primary purpose was to perform the traditional role of cavalry: scouting, screening, and reconnaissance. In short, the light cavalry served as the eyes and ears of the army, a more modern incarnation of the hussars of the Napoleonic era.

Advances in technology, however, soon made these artificial distinctions obsolete. The introduction and widespread use of rifled muskets and breech loading carbines meant that there was little need for hussars in a United States

military largely designed and trained to fight Native Americans. With the coming of civil war in 1861, the powers in charge of the U.S. Army realized this fact, and did away with the distinctions between dragoons, mounted infantry, and light cavalry, re-designating them with the catch-all name of “cavalry.” All of these Regular cavalrymen had been trained to act as dragoons—that is, they could fight effectively mounted or dismounted, *and* they had been taught how to scout, screen, and reconnoiter, critical roles traditionally reserved for light cavalry. In short, all mounted soldiers serving in the U. S. Army were to become its eyes and ears, not just the light cavalry. The units were re-designated in the order of their seniority: the 1st Dragoons became the 1st Cavalry; the 2nd Dragoons became the 2nd Cavalry; the Regiment of Mounted Rifles became the 3rd Cavalry; and the 1st Cavalry—a light cavalry regiment—became the 4th Cavalry. The 2nd Cavalry, a veritable all-star team of antebellum officers who later achieved prominence during the Civil War (including, but not limited to, Albert Sidney Johnston, Robert E. Lee, John Sedgwick, and John Bell Hood), became the 5th Cavalry. A new unit of light cavalry authorized and raised in 1861, and originally known as the 3rd Cavalry, was soon re-designated as the 6th Cavalry.

As the Army set about the grim task of putting down the rebellion of the Southern states, it did so with a newly unified command of mounted soldiers led by the so-called “Father of the U.S. Cavalry,” Brig. Gen. Philip St. George Cooke, a stuffy old Regular who had led the 2nd Dragoons for years before the Civil War. Though he was a career dragoon, Cooke’s tactics reflected those of a hussar and not a dragoon. He quickly discovered that the new era of mounted operations had passed him by.

The ending of the artificial distinctions among the army’s mounted units, however, did not end the fundamental debate about their proper role; indeed, that debate continued into the twentieth century, with no less than the future World War II hero George S. Patton, Jr., serving as the most vociferous proponent of the hussar school of thought. Others strongly advocated the dragoon theory, which was embodied by the most famous of all of the dragoons the Army produced: Maj. Gen. John Buford, the hero of Gettysburg. When Buford died of disease in December 1863, his protégé, Brig. Gen. Wesley Merritt, picked up the mantle and carried it into the twentieth century. Only the end of the horse cavalry in the 1930s and the advent of armored cavalry using tanks ended the debate for good.

Wesley Merritt was the quintessential dragoon. He was quiet, competent, and a hard-fighting career Regular. Nobody would ever describe him as flamboyant or as hell-bent-for-leather. Instead, he was solid and dependable. Like his mentor Buford, Merritt believed that cavalrymen needed to be equally proficient at fighting

as well as at the less glamorous roles of the cavalry. His soldiers admired and respected him, but they did not love him. Merritt was something of a martinet, and did not have a charismatic personality. He was, however, a great soldier, and he ended his career after 40 years of service as the second highest ranking officer in the Army.

By contrast, George Armstrong Custer was the ultimate hussar. Flamboyant, handsome, with his long, curly blond hair streaming behind him, nothing thrilled Custer quite so much as leading a mounted charge, his saber glinting in the afternoon sunshine while waiting to be brought to bear against some unfortunate foe. The men in the ranks loved George Custer. They called him the “Boy Soldier with the Golden Locks,” and they would follow him anywhere he led them. There is no better description of Custer than to call him a hell-bent-for-leather trooper, just the sort of fellow the young Georgie Patton desperately longed to be. Custer had no particular talent for the traditional roles of cavalry, and if given a choice, he preferred the saber to dismounting and fighting with a carbine. He always led from the front.

While it is easy to dismiss Custer because of the end he met at Little Big Horn, doing so is a tragic mistake, and one I fell into for many years. After carefully studying his nearly unprecedented record of accomplishment in the Civil War while simultaneously disregarding the events of June 1876, I came to regret that mistake a great deal. Custer was an extremely capable cavalryman, particularly during the Civil War, where he made a meteoric rise from captain to brevet major general and division commander in a span of about three years. He was an expert horseman and a charismatic leader. Tall and handsome and seemingly bulletproof, he embodied the stuff that legends are made of, at least in part because of the spectacular record of success he accumulated in putting down the Southern rebellion.

These two young men—Merritt and Custer—were a year apart at West Point and ought to have been friends. Both were career cavalrymen, and both left indelible marks on the mounted service during the Civil War. And yet, they became bitter rivals and even enemies. In short, their personal relationship was a microcosm of the tension between the hussars and the dragoons. There were only so many opportunities for advancement, and only so many opportunities for glory, and both gained their fair share of each. Somewhere along the way their relationship deteriorated to the point of open warfare, particularly when Merritt ascended over Custer as commander of the Army of the Potomac’s First Cavalry Division.

In *The Boy Generals: George Custer, Wesley Merritt, and the Cavalry of the Army of the Potomac*, author Adolfo Ovies closely examines the relationship between Custer and

Merritt. His study, a detailed and comprehensive trilogy, demonstrates how that cordial relationship broke down, grew into a fierce rivalry, and eventually turned into bitter enmity. The result is a monumental and unprecedented study of how these two men—seemingly so unlike in personality and temperament—cast such a long shadow over the United States Cavalry during the second half of the nineteenth century. Along the way, Ovies addresses their respective Civil War campaigns in great detail and demonstrates how each man exemplified the paradigms they represented: Merritt the dragoon, and Custer the hussar. Much like the friction between these two disparate schools of military doctrine, the respective dissimilar personality traits of Merritt and Custer eventually brought them into outright conflict, with Custer being openly insubordinate to the former friend who became his commander. No other study of either man, or of Civil War cavalry operations, has ever addressed these issues, let alone in the detail tackled by Ovies.

Of course, the career paths of both men deviated in the postwar army. Custer never advanced beyond the rank of lieutenant colonel and met a horrific death along the banks of the Greasy Grass River in Montana on June 25, 1876, along with nearly 300 troopers of his vaunted 7th Cavalry. Merritt, by contrast, found glory in commanding the expedition that captured Manila during the Spanish-American War, and lived well into old age. The irony of Merritt belatedly leading a column of the 5th Cavalry to rescue Custer's 7th Cavalry is striking. At the same time, it also represents a closing of the circle begun during the Civil War. Theirs is the story of the ultimate ascendance of the dragoons over the hussars. George Armstrong Custer was the last hussar.

There are lessons to be learned here, and we have Adolfo Ovies to thank for taking the time and trouble to teach them to us.

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