

PATTON'S IRON CAVALRY – THE IMPACT OF THE MECHANIZED CAVALRY  
ON THE U.S. THIRD ARMY

William Stuart Nance, B.S.

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APPROVED:

Robert Citino, Major Professor  
Michael V. Leggiere, Committee Member  
Geoffrey Wawro, Committee Member  
Richard B. McCaslin, Committee Member  
and Chair of the Department of  
History  
James D. Meernik, Acting Dean of the  
Toulouse Graduate School

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The American military experience in the European Theater of Operations during the Second World War is one of the most heavily documented topics in modern historiography. However, within this plethora of scholarship, very little has been written on the contributions of the United States Cavalry to this era. The six mechanized cavalry groups assigned to the Third Army served in a variety of roles, conducting screens, counter-reconnaissance, as well as a number of other associated security missions for their parent corps and the Army. Although unheralded, these groups made substantial and war-altering impacts for the Third Army.

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## Fiddler's Green

Halfway down the trail to Hell,  
In a shady meadow green  
Are the Souls of all dead troopers camped,  
Near a good old-time canteen.  
And this eternal resting place  
Is known as Fiddlers' Green.

Marching past, straight through to Hell  
The Infantry are seen.  
Accompanied by the Engineers,  
Artillery and Marines,  
For none but the shades of Cavalrymen  
Dismount at Fiddlers' Green.

Though some go curving down the trail  
To seek a warmer scene.  
No trooper ever gets to Hell  
Ere he's emptied his canteen.  
And so rides back to drink again  
With friends at Fiddlers' Green.

And so when man and horse go down  
Beneath a saber keen,  
Or in a roaring charge of fierce melee  
You stop a bullet clean,  
And the hostiles come to get your scalp,  
Just empty your canteen,  
And put your pistol to your head  
And go to Fiddlers' Green.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Here is [Napoleon's magnificent definition of genius in full]. He says, "Genius is the ability to utilize all the means at hand for the accomplishment of the end sought."

The thought applies equally to weapons. We must use them all. To us it seems that those persons who would scrap the old and rely only on the new are on a mental parity with the poor man who pawns his shirt and trousers to buy an overcoat, only to find that it is burdensome in summer and not wholly satisfying even in January. Wars are fought with men, not weapons. It is the spirit of the men who fight, and the spirit of the men who lead, which gains the victory. In biblical times this spirit was ascribed, probably rightly, to the Lord. It was the Spirit of the Lord, courage, which came mightily upon Samson at Lehi that gained the victory. It was not the jawbone of an ass.

In the nation's first high intensity mechanized war, World War Two, the American military rode into combat without robust cavalry formations dedicated to the twin missions of reconnaissance and security, despite having observed the conflict from the sidelines for over two years. Even more startling was that the American military possessed the doctrine for just such an organization a mere two years prior to the entry of the United States into the war. However, organizational changes within the army due to the creation of the new armored force crippled the nation's cavalry formations with an inadequate doctrine and organization by the early 1940s. Interestingly, the reconnaissance-only doctrine espoused then is remarkably similar to that being proposed for today's modern cavalry formations. Thus, the battlefield utility and experiences of the American cavalry of the Second World War is a remarkably timely and relevant subject.

Cavalry has long been misunderstood by historians and military thinkers alike. At the heart of the issue is confusion between the two basic missions of cavalry, reconnaissance and security. Cavalry can, and has, performed other roles throughout history, but these two missions have always remained. The two are very similar in how they are conducted, but security

missions entail much more than simply finding the enemy. They demand the defeat of enemy reconnaissance or security forces in order to allow the friendly main body time and space in which to maneuver. Additionally, military analysts are often taken in by the idea that a unit can always conduct reconnaissance and avoid fighting for information through either stealth or technology. Unfortunately, neither is a panacea in the brutally chaotic and unpredictable environment that is war. Units designed solely for reconnaissance (finding the enemy) will often find that in order to accomplish this mission, they will have to engage in combat, sometimes merely to survive long enough to report. The American cavalry branch prior to 1940 had long understood this dichotomy, and emphasized robust combat formations that were capable of conducting reconnaissance and security operations while surviving to continue the mission.

The creation of the armored force in 1940 created serious doctrinal confusion in the army over the exact roles that would be played by the fledging tank force and the much older cavalry branch. Most saw the armor force assuming the role of cavalry in combat operations, however the idea of a security force was essentially ignored other than admonishments in official doctrine that each unit must maintain its own security. Furthermore, the introduction of the armored division as an exploitation force meant that the new organization would not be leading assaults, but rather, following them through. Combat would demonstrate that the armored divisions were most commonly used as standard line divisions, albeit with more tanks and less infantry than their counterparts. Regardless of the final fate of the armor force, Army Ground Force's (AGF) changes to official doctrine left the cavalry branch with only reconnaissance as its previous roles were filled by the armor force or institutionally ignored outside of the branch. Moreover, the double blow of the enforced retirement of the horse as a weapon of war followed by the dissolution of the branch chiefs in 1942 meant that the cavalry would be left with the half-formed

reconnaissance-only doctrine that had been created for its experimental mechanized formations. Unfortunately, this doctrine relied upon the presence of an organic robust combat element working in close conjunction with the reconnaissance force. This formation would never be created prior to 1945 due to the doctrinal confusion of the branch and the general apathy towards cavalry present in Headquarters, AGF.

In a further dose of irony, the *1944 FM 100-5 Operations*, the premier doctrinal capstone of the U.S. Army in the Second World War, still provided for cavalry divisions conducting operational counter-reconnaissance and security of corps-level organizations. It notes:

A Cavalry Division protects the disposition and other ground forces by counter-reconnaissance or screening, which may be conducted either offensively or defensively. In executing a counter-reconnaissance mission, the division seeks to defeat or neutralize enemy ground reconnaissance forces.<sup>1</sup>

However, by June 1944 (the publication date of the manual) the only division designated as cavalry was the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, which was dismounted and fighting as infantry in the South Pacific. Thus, doctrinally, the army understood the need for cavalry to perform security as well as reconnaissance. Unfortunately, the reality was that AGF merely paid lip service to the idea, continuing in its basic, albeit flawed, assumptions of how mechanized combat would proceed.

The mechanized cavalry deployed to western Europe were specifically designed only for stealth reconnaissance without the survivability, firepower, or manpower to conduct sustained combat operations. In mobile combat, they were intended to identify enemy locations, pass off the information, then bypass these points and continue the mission. Hard won experience in North Africa and Italy taught the army the importance of having fighting reconnaissance and security formations. However, little was done other than noting that the groups would now have

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<sup>1</sup> War Department, *FM100-5: Field Service Regulations: Operations, 1944* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1944), paragraph 1026.

to consider fighting for information, and allowing for the reinforcement of the cavalry groups by outside combat multipliers such as tank and tank destroyer battalions.

The combat history of the cavalry groups is uniformly impressive. The cavalry performed a number of different roles for which they were neither organized, equipped, or trained. However, an old cavalryman of the 1930s would have been perfectly at home with them. Cavalry led the breakout during Operation Cobra and conducted offensive guards for their parent organizations across France. Cavalry conducted economy of force missions, security missions, prisoner of war (POW) rescue missions, and by the end of the war, had even participated in a daring rescue of the Lipizzaner breeding herd. In short, the cavalry was ordered to perform, and executed, traditional cavalry missions without regard to official doctrine. There were some notable exceptions to the cavalry's success, with the battle of the Losheim Gap, and the subsequent loss of two regimental combat teams of the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division being especially memorable. Despite such occasional disasters, overall, the American cavalry accomplished their missions with skill and *elàn*.

Studies of the American cavalry in the Second World War are few and far between. In fact, for a number of years, there was no significant scholarship on the topic at all. Even the United States Army green book series barely recorded the achievements of the mechanized cavalry. All that remained to remember the cavalry's accomplishments were a small number of histories published at the close of the war by those groups' veterans.

In the mid 1990s, a small group of army officers (specifically cavalrymen and tankers) began to address this oversight. John Tully conducted perhaps the first study of this new renaissance in his very personal master's thesis recounting the deeds of the 4<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group, commanded by Tully's grandfather. Dean A. Nowowiejski followed shortly thereafter with a

monograph arguing that cavalry branch failed to adapt to the changing nature of warfare and that this failure led to battlefield difficulties. Louis DiMarco then wrote his master's thesis on the failed doctrine of the mechanized cavalry, and argued that the cavalry's success hinged upon ignoring the new doctrine while retaining the best of the old procedures of the horse cavalry. Matthew Dooley then followed DiMarco's thesis with his own, in which he rails against separating reconnaissance and security into different formations, using the mechanized cavalry as his first exhibit.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this small surge in scholarly work, it was not until 2006 that the first book on mechanized cavalry in nearly a generation arrived, George F. Hofmann's *Through Mobility We Conquer*. Creating the seminal background work on the topic, Hofmann nevertheless steered away from controversy in his book. Harry Yeide followed two years later with his *Steeds of Steel*, a brief synopsis of the cavalry's combat operations in the war, with much less detail than Hofman, though he did include information on cavalry operations in the Pacific. Matthew Morton's recent work, *Men on Iron Ponies*, presents a narrower but more tightly focused work on the cavalry, and is currently the best work on the subject, except for Hofmann's overarching work. Finally, Robert Cameron, best known for his synthesis on the history of the armor branch, *Mobility, Shock, and Firepower*, has produced the newest scholarship on cavalry in his work, *To Fight or Not to Fight?* published in 2010. This work addresses many of the same issues of mechanized cavalry as the others, but continues the story of Hofmann's work that ends in 1950, by recounting the history of cavalry and reconnaissance forces to the present day. All of these

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<sup>2</sup> John N. Tully, "Doctrine, Organization and Employment of the 4<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group During World War II," Master's Thesis, United States Army Command and General Staff College, 1994; Dean A Nowowiejski, "Adaptation to Change: U.S. Army Cavalry Doctrine and Mechanization, 1938-1945," Monograph, U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies, 1994; Louis A. DiMarco, "The U.S. Army's Mechanized Cavalry Doctrine in WW II," Master's Thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1995; Matthew A. Dooley, "Ignoring History: The Flawed Effort to Divorce Reconnaissance from Security in Modern Cavalry Transformation," Master's Thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2006.

works combined have come to one solid conclusion: the American mechanized cavalry of the Second World War was more effective than anyone believed it could be, and it achieved this record despite serious flaws in organization and equipment. Furthermore, it was the trauma of having to fight cavalry operations at a disadvantage that led to the evolutionary process that created the armored cavalry regiments and divisional cavalry squadrons of the 1980s era Army of Excellence that would sweep to crushing victory in Operation DESERT STORM.<sup>3</sup>

Most of these works have been general in nature, without following the entire battle history of a cavalry group's impact upon its supported formation. The battle analyses presented by these authors have been excellent, but also episodic, jumping from one group to the next, without a great deal of continuity for any unit. Moreover, these works make no distinction between the different kinds of cavalry available to the U.S. Army. This trend is acceptable in these works as they are making generalized statements about the mechanized cavalry and doctrine, and are not focused on the achievements of a specific formation. Tully stands alone in presenting in great detail the achievements of the 4<sup>th</sup> Group, but does not assess its sister groups in the First Army and their cumulative effect on that formation.

This gap between generality and specificity is where this study fits. For the first time, cavalry's entire operational impact upon a senior headquarters is examined from entry into combat to the end of the war. This study has no desire to challenge the growing consensus of its predecessors as their conclusions are considered to be correct and non-controversial. However, a

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<sup>3</sup> George Hofman. *Through Mobility We Conquer – The Mechanization of U.S. Cavalry* (Lexington: University Press of Kansas, 1999); Harry Yeide, *Steeds of Steel – A History of American Mechanized Cavalry* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2008); Matthew Morton, *Men on Iron Ponies* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009); Robert S. Cameron, *To Fight or Not to Fight? Organizational and Doctrinal Trends in Mounted Maneuver Reconnaissance from the Interwar Years to Operation IRAQI FREEDOM* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2010).

more focused study of the effects of mechanized cavalry will only strengthen the foundations of this growing school of thought.

There were three types of cavalry formations fighting in Europe from 1944 to 1945. The smallest of these, Cavalry reconnaissance troops, were assigned one to each infantry division to serve as the divisional commander's personal reconnaissance formation. Progressing in size, armored reconnaissance battalions (ARB) (later renamed squadrons) performed much the same role in the armored divisions, but possessed greater capabilities due to their increased size as well as supporting elements including light tanks and assault guns. Finally, the mechanized cavalry groups were regimental sized formations, generally consisting of two squadrons similarly equipped to the ARB, assigned to corps or armies to provide operational level reconnaissance. These groups will be the focus of this study. The cavalry reconnaissance troops and the armored reconnaissance battalions performed admirably, but their contributions were generally limited to the tactical level. The mechanized cavalry groups however, contributed to the operational success of the U.S. Army in the European Theater of Operations (ETO).

The American Army deployed thirteen mechanized cavalry groups to the ETO. A study of all of these formations would become prohibitive in length for a work of this type. Moreover, the four field armies to which the groups were attached used their cavalry in similar ways and for similar missions. Additionally, several groups spent significant times with multiple armies, with the 106<sup>th</sup> Group being an extreme example, having served with the First, Third, and Seventh Armies. Thus, a study of the mechanized cavalry of one field army provides a basic understanding of how cavalry impacted the larger war effort. The Third Army is the most useful organization for this analysis, as it possessed, at various times, six of the thirteen groups in the theater. Moreover, this army participated in every major action of the theater, except for the

Normandy and Southern France campaigns, thereby providing a dramatic range of different environments in which to assess the mechanized cavalry.

Each group has its entire combat history assessed critically from its entry into combat with the Third Army to either its transfer away from the army or the end of the war. Additionally, as cavalry is, at its heart, a supporting branch designed to enable the success of larger formations, the achievements of the group were analyzed for their impact upon the success or failure of the supported unit. Thus, a group was only assessed as a success if their parent formation achieved success, or their contributions could be physically measured.

The six cavalry groups (2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>d</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 106<sup>th</sup>) discussed in this study provide a good cross section of the army as a whole during the early 1940s, including storied regular army formations, national guard units, and recently activated regiments with relatively short histories. However, they shared much in common. Most of the commanding officers were West Pointers and professional cavalrymen, while their junior officers were a mix of ROTC, OCS, and West Point. In contrast to their senior officers, many of the troopers were recruits or draftees, new to the profession of arms. Furthermore, many of the old regular cavalry regiments had had their personnel transferred to form the armored force, and thus even most of these 'old' formations were in essence new. Therefore, the average quality of the soldiers in the cavalry groups was no greater or worse than found in any other formation in the U.S. Army of the period.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group possessed the distinction of being the oldest cavalry regiment currently in service with the transition in 1940 of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Regiment into the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Regiment.<sup>4</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> had been formed in 1836 and seen continuous service since, serving in all the nation's wars until 1941, with the exception of the Philippine Insurrection and the China

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<sup>4</sup> Although the cavalry were designated from 1943 to 1946 as groups, the term is interchangeable with regiment in this particular context.

Relief Expedition, earning 46 campaign streamers. Most famous for its actions at the battle of Resaca de la Palma in the Mexican War, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry was considered a mainstay of the old army. In 1942 the personnel and equipment of the regiment were transferred to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Regiment, and a newly raised regiment was designated as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Regiment in early 1943.<sup>5</sup>

The 3d Cavalry Group came from a similarly historic background as the 2<sup>nd</sup>, having earned 32 campaign streamers in six wars prior to the U.S. entry into the Second World War. Formed in 1846, the 3d was seen as the elite of the cavalry having been stationed for a number of years as the Army's honor guard at Fort Myer, Virginia. Once again, despite such an illustrious history, the group that actually fought in Europe was only activated in January 1943, with the old regiment with most of its personnel being re-designated as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Regiment in 1942.<sup>6</sup>

The 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry group was one of the few regular army cavalry formations to retain the majority of its personnel during the creation of the armored force. A unit with a long and proud history, the 6<sup>th</sup> had been raised in 1861 and served continuously prior to the Second World War, earning 31 campaign streamers in seven conflicts, perhaps most notably, the China Relief Expedition. The 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry had participated in the branch's modernization experiments in the 1930s, and prior to the outbreak of war had been organized as horse-mechanized regiment with horse trailers assigned to the regiment for additional operational mobility. The stability of the group's personnel would allow it to achieve an enviable combat record in Europe.<sup>7</sup>

The 15<sup>th</sup> Cavalry group was newly activated in March 1942 after a long period of inactive status. Originally raised in 1901, the regiment had served in the Philippine Insurrection

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<sup>5</sup> James A. Sawicki, *Cavalry Regiments of the U.S. Army* (Dumfries, VA: Wyvern Publications, 1985), 153-154.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 155-157.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 162-164.

and the First World War, earning three campaign streamers. Inactivated in 1921, the regiment was reformed in the expansion of the army after Pearl Harbor.<sup>8</sup>

The 16<sup>th</sup> Cavalry group was similar to the 15<sup>th</sup> in that it was also reactivated in 1942 after having been disbanded in 1921 by order of the National Defense Act of that same year. With no battle history or campaign streamers to their credit, the troopers of the 16<sup>th</sup> Cavalry in Europe would have to create their own legend.<sup>9</sup>

The 106<sup>th</sup> Cavalry group is the lone National Guard representative in this sample. Originally created in 1921 from existing units, some of which had been in service since 1897, the 106<sup>th</sup> possessed no battle history of its own, but had inherited three First World War campaign streamers from pre-existing formations. The regiment was formed from the National Guards of Illinois and Michigan with a squadron from each state. Like the 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, the 106<sup>th</sup> had participated in the horse-mechanized experimentation of the 1930s and early 1940s. Additionally, its status as a National Guard formation allowed its personnel to remain relatively stable in the massive reorganization and growth of the army from 1940 to 1943. This stability would help the 106<sup>th</sup> gain a reputation as a remarkably fierce and deadly adversary.<sup>10</sup>

This study assesses these groups' impacts upon the Third Army and demonstrate that the mechanized cavalry groups, despite serious issues with organization and equipment, were absolutely critical to the success of the army as a whole . Furthermore, it sheds light upon a largely forgotten portion of the history of the U.S Army in the ETO.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 179-181.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 181-183.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 219-222.

## CHAPTER 2

### DOCTRINE

Before an assessment can be made about the utility of mechanized cavalry groups to the U.S. Third Army, a basic understanding of the background of these units is essential. The history of the creation of the mechanized cavalry groups and their accompanying doctrine shed a great deal of light onto how Second World War American commanders used these formations, and why some of them encountered serious impediments to mission success.

A common truism in the modern United States Cavalry is “the mission – not the platform.” In essence, the modern cavalry argues that it must retain the ability to accomplish its doctrinal missions regardless of the vehicles or weapons systems provided to the organization. All that matters to the cavalry is mission success, not the vehicle used to provide that success. Thus, American cavalry formations can be found in Strykers, High Mobility Multi-Purpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWV), and even Abrams tanks and Bradley Fighting Vehicles all performing the same core doctrinal missions of reconnaissance and security that have been the cornerstone of American cavalry doctrine since the Civil War.

However, this same devotion to mission regardless of platform has not always been the hallmark of the United States Cavalry. From the end of the First World War to 1943, Cavalry Branch would undergo a wrenching doctrinal debate over how to modernize and mechanize its forces. This struggle would see advocates of horse cavalry stubbornly resisting calls for the introduction of motorized and mechanized vehicles to the branch. At the heart of the issue was a belief by the more traditionalist portions of the branch that the horse could still serve with success on the modern battlefield. However, this stubborn adherence to a single ‘platform’

resulted by 1943 in the marginalization of the Cavalry Branch as well as a confused doctrine with poorly equipped formations.

Cavalry doctrine remained remarkably consistent in army thinking from the Civil War to after the First World War. During the Civil War, American cavalry performed a number of roles, but their key missions emerged as reconnaissance, security, and economy of force. Reconnaissance is defined as “a mission undertaken to obtain, by visual observation or other detection methods, information about the activities and resources of an enemy... or to secure data concerning the meteorological, hydrographic, or geographic characteristics of a particular area.”<sup>11</sup> This function has long been the province of cavalymen, and is utterly vital to the success of any operational maneuver. Robert E. Lee’s lack of cavalry blinded him to the locations and movements of the Army of the Potomac during the Gettysburg campaign, allowing him to blunder into battle under unfavorable circumstances. Conversely, J.E.B Stuart’s cavalry’s successes in the Second Bull Run campaign allowed Lee to gain a superiority in situational awareness and set the conditions for a major victory.

Security operations are less well known than reconnaissance. In fact, many times, the two are often confused, with historians mistaking one for the other. The problem lies in the concept that a unit conducting security operations often, almost by definition, is also conducting either reconnaissance or counter-reconnaissance. Thus security operations are defined simply as “those operations undertaken by a commander to provide early and accurate warning of enemy operations, to provide the force being protected with time and maneuver space within which to react to the enemy, and to develop the situation to allow the commander to effectively use the

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<sup>11</sup> Department of the Army, *FM 1-02: Operational Terms and Graphics* (Washington, D.C: Government Publishing Office, 2004), 1-158.

protected force.”<sup>12</sup> Note how reconnaissance can be included in this doctrinal task, but the primary mission under security operations is protecting the ‘main body,’ not finding the enemy. John Buford’s division at Gettysburg conducted a security operation by allowing the main Union army time to mass under favorable circumstances. If Stuart had been conducting offensive security operations, it is highly likely that the battle would have unfolded much differently.

Security missions are further broken down into the tasks of screen, guard, cover, and area security. Screen protects the main body from observation by hostile forces. Guard protects the main body against direct fire, whilst cover protects against indirect fire as well. Thus, the distance from the security force to the protected force increase with each mission, with cover requiring it to be beyond friendly artillery support, thereby necessitating it having its own artillery. Traditionally, cavalry performed all of these roles for the United States Army at the operational level from before the Civil War to the beginning of the Second World War.<sup>13</sup>

The First World War began what many in the United States cavalry viewed as a struggle for no less than the survival of their profession. The Western Front had quickly demonstrated the alleged futility of horses on the modern battlefield. Although the British kept large mounted reserves to exploit a breakthrough, this was impractical considering the extreme vulnerability of horse-mounted troops to machine guns and artillery, as well as the nature of the trench battlefield. Additionally the invention and use of tanks and armored cars promised a new form of warfare that beckoned away from the use of the horse. However, despite the difficulties of open warfare throughout World War One, American military leadership still believed in the

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<sup>12</sup> Department of the Army, *FM 1-02: Operational Terms and Graphics*, 1-168.

<sup>13</sup> Albeit not necessarily under these precise terms, and also understanding that prior to the invention of indirect fire, a cover was essentially a guard.

concept and the inherent superiority of this type of warfare. This conviction resulted from the successes of open maneuver warfare at the end of the war.<sup>14</sup>

The result of American military leadership's trust in movement over positional warfare is summed up in the *1923 Field Service Regulations (FSR 1923)*, the U.S. Army's capstone doctrinal statement that would stand until 1939. In this document, cavalry is noted as a highly mobile force that "executes the missions of reconnaissance, counter-reconnaissance, and security in the service of large units and delivers combat in the execution of these missions and in combination with the operations of other elements of the large units to which it is assigned."<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the authors of FSR 1923 argue that cavalry screening operations are "most effective when the cavalry is employed as a mass to engage and defeat the hostile cavalry."<sup>16</sup> Note how the Army expected its cavalry to not only find the enemy, but expected it to fight in order to gain information and prevent enemy reconnaissance efforts. Finally, cavalry was expected to conduct offensive operations against targets of opportunity, as seen from the following excerpt from *FSR 1923*:

Cavalry constitutes a mobile fire element in the hands of higher commanders. It is especially adapted to combat missions requiring rapidity of attack and delaying action. Rapidity of movement enables cavalry to take advantage of opportunities to strike a sudden blow at weak points in the hostile dispositions. It may thus be employed to attack hostile forces in process of concentration, to operate against exposed enemy flanks or rear, and to exploit by pursuit the successes obtained by other arms. Its rapidity of movement enables cavalry to meet critical situation arising in the course of operations.<sup>17</sup>

Nowhere throughout the entire portion on cavalry does FSR 1923 insist that horses are the only means for cavalry to accomplish its mission. The inclusion of horses was probably

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<sup>14</sup> William O. Odom, *After the Trenches – The Transformation of U.S. Army Doctrine, 1918-1939* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 25.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. War Department, *Field Service Regulations 1923* (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1923), paragraph 80.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 81.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 82.

assumed, especially since cavalry troopers were still to be armed with the saber, and that there were few alternatives in 1923 to horses. However, the descriptions of what the cavalry was intended to accomplish in FSR 1923 do not limit them to merely equine transportation. In fact, any platform that offered cavalry the same mobility and combat capabilities would suffice, when the topic is viewed utterly dispassionately. Moreover, cavalry already assumed the use of limited numbers of armored cars in larger formations, such as at the regimental and divisional level. Thus, the great debate over retention of the horse throughout the 1920s and 1930s would center upon what platform(s) or combination thereof, would provide the most efficient means of accomplishing the cavalry's mission.

The U.S. Army began the 1920s with the National Defense Act of 1920 abolishing the Tank Corps and placing all tank development under the auspices of the Infantry Branch.<sup>18</sup> The U.S. armored forces were given two doctrinal missions. The first was to penetrate enemy lines, and then to accompany infantry forces in order to prevent a reversion to positional warfare. Both of these tasks are a direct reflection on the standard view of tanks held across Europe. Brigadier General Samuel Rockenbach, the first commander of the American Tank Corps, and the first commandant of the American Tank School, also insisted upon development of armored vehicles that would serve multiple roles. While still acknowledging the tank as a support weapon, Rockenbach started the American drive for a reliable medium tank in order to perform these two doctrinal roles and thereby reduce the economic cost of maintaining a tank corps.<sup>19</sup>

Early in the 1920s, American officers began debating the appropriate role for the tank. Although official doctrine tied the tank to the Infantry Branch, Cavalry officers viewed the tank and other mechanized vehicles as an appropriate platform to enhance the abilities of the Cavalry.

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<sup>18</sup> Robert S. Cameron, *Mobility, Shock, and Firepower – The Emergence of the U.S. Army's Armor Branch, 1917-1945* (Washington D.C: Center of Military History, 2008), 21.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

MAJ Bradford Chynoweth published an article extolling the virtues of cavalry tanks.<sup>20</sup> These views were reinforced by British experiences in Palestine during the First World War, when United Kingdom cavalry forces equipped with armored cars and light tanks assisted Field Marshall Edmund Allenby in defeating superior Turkish forces. British experimentation with medium tanks in 1925 also sparked Cavalry interest, as the branch had always been more concerned with the marriage of firepower and mobility than the infantry. Cavalry Branch's desire for fast 'cavalry tanks' inspired a decade-long Army association with the inventor J. Walter Christie to create such a vehicle. Christie produced a number of very fast prototypes, but their failure to meet army specifications meant that none of them ever went into production in the United States.<sup>21</sup>

In April of 1930, Colonel James Parsons, commandant of the United States tank school, argued for the establishment of six tank divisions, one assigned to each field army. These tank divisions would essentially replace the role of cavalry in many respects, as Parsons argued that these formations could “[cover] the advance and flank of the main force, [exploit] a breakthrough..., [seize] strategical (*sic*) positions and filling gaps in the line.”<sup>22</sup> This proposal was a significant affront to the Cavalry Branch, as Infantry Branch controlled all the tanks in the Army. Thus, these new divisions would essentially place most of the Cavalry's functions under the purview of the Infantry or some other organization that was not Cavalry. Due to resistance from the Cavalry Branch, as well as many of the other branch chiefs, Parson's idea was defeated and promptly ignored.

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<sup>20</sup> George F. Hofman, “Demise of the US Tank Corps and Medium Tank Development Program,” *Military Affairs*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Feb 1973): 23.

<sup>21</sup> George F. Hofman, “A Yankee Inventor and the Military Establishment: The Christie Tank Controversy,” *Military Affairs*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Feb 1975): 17.

<sup>22</sup> George F. Hofman, *Through Mobility We Conquer – The Mechanization of U.S. Cavalry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 124.

In 1931, the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Douglas MacArthur ordered that the Army would not have a single unified mechanization doctrine, but rather that the branches would study the problem independently and create their own unique solutions to the issue. At this juncture, the Cavalry Branch did not view mechanization as a full-bore threat to the use of the horse. Rather, as seen by its interest in cavalry tanks, the branch viewed these vehicles as a way in which to augment their combat power. As noted in the *Cavalry Journal*, motorized vehicles would allow the cavalry to carry more firepower and equipment, while simultaneously reducing the load upon the cavalry's pack horses.<sup>23</sup>

The chief arguments against the full-scale mechanization of the United States Cavalry revolved primarily upon the alleged superior mobility, sustainability, and reliability of the horse. An infantryman writing in the *Cavalry Journal* summed these arguments neatly in an article where he challenged the reader to imagine the battle of Eylau fought with motorized vehicles. He asked "would the engines have started on this bleak February morning, and if so would they have any place to go?"<sup>24</sup> He additionally noted the large amount of rough terrain abounding in the world and how current vehicles are unsuited to traverse them, whilst horsed cavalry can manage these challenges. Despite these difficulties, the Cavalry decided upon a limited test for mechanized formations.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade (Mechanized), comprised of a combination of light tanks and armored cars, was formed in 1933 and served as a test bed for Cavalry mechanization. Due to legal restrictions emplaced by the 1920 National Defense Act restricting tank development to the Infantry Branch, Cavalry tanks could not be designated 'tanks' but rather 'combat cars', though

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<sup>23</sup> MSG John J. Reardon, "The Evolution of Transportation," *The Cavalry Journal* Vol. XLIV, No. 187 (Jan-Feb, 1935): 46.

<sup>24</sup> LTC Bernard Lentz, IN, "A Justification of Cavalry," *The Cavalry Journal* Vol. XLIV, No. 187 (Jan-Feb 1935): 10.

at this particular stage in their development, Cavalry combat cars differed little from Infantry branch's experimental light and medium tanks.<sup>25</sup>

By 1934, Cavalry Branch had decided scout cars were of enough utility to provide a armored car platoon to each horse cavalry regiment.<sup>26</sup> These cars would serve as highly mobile forward scouts for the horsed elements of the regiment that would still provide the main combat power of the formation. Additionally, as noted above, the branch decided to motorized the logistics elements of the horse cavalry regiments. Thus the mechanized (more appropriately motorized) elements within the horse regiments were seen as force-multipliers but not vital to the overall success of the mission.<sup>27</sup>

The 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade faced significant hurdles to its development, including lackluster support from its own branch as well as a lack of vehicles with which to train. However, it did accomplish a significant amount of doctrinal progress, drawing upon lessons learned from primarily from German sources. In 1935 American officers were allowed to attend the German *Kriegsakademie*.<sup>28</sup> This helped to greatly increase American understanding of new German doctrinal trends and development. Moreover, one only has to look at the performance and organization of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade in maneuvers to note the German influence upon its tactics. The brigade's tactics essentially involved the armored car elements conducting reconnaissance that would then pull the heavier combat cars to the decisive point.<sup>29</sup> The armored cars were very firmly fixed to the principle of stealth reconnaissance, "[attacking] by fire only

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<sup>25</sup> Matthew Darlington Morton, *Men on Iron Ponies – The Death and Rebirth of the Modern US Cavalry* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009), 9.

<sup>26</sup> Cameron, 60.

<sup>27</sup> Motorized refers to vehicles with wheels, while mechanized relates to those with tracks. However, in the confused early stages of the introduction of vehicles to the military, the entire process became known as mechanization, regardless of propulsion type.

<sup>28</sup> Cameron, 168.

<sup>29</sup> CPT Hayden A. Sears, "Mobility – Fire Power and Shock," *The Cavalry Journal* Vol. XLVIII, No. 4 (July-August, 1939): 288.

and [seeking] concealed positions.”<sup>30</sup> This doctrine proved successful in tests. However, formations built for stealth-only reconnaissance require a close-by combat formation for battlefield survival. In the case of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade, this combat formation was near at hand in the form of combat cars (tanks) organic to the formation.

In August of 1939, the Brigade performed so well in the First Army maneuvers in New York that they had to be stopped by the exercise controllers before they prematurely ended the exercise by crushing the opposing forces (OPFOR) rear areas and supply lines.<sup>31</sup> The 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade operated as a concentrated mechanized force, utilizing its speed and mobility to pierce the OPFOR line and then completely disrupted their rear areas, in a textbook example of U.S. horse cavalry doctrine. What made the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade’s performance so special was the speed and firepower that they brought to the fight that was unlike anything previously created by the U.S. Army.

However, the American mechanized cavalry had a relative lack of infantry or dismounted personnel in the organization. This can be attributed to the Army assigning the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade to perform traditional cavalry functions. The 1941 FM 100-5 lists these as:

Cavalry is capable of offensive combat; exploitation and pursuit; seizing and holding important terrain...; ground reconnaissance; screening; security for the front, flanks, and rear of other forces on the march, at the halt, and in battle; delaying action; covering the retrograde action of other forces; combat liaison between large units; acting as a mobile reserve for other forces; harassing action; and surprise action against designated objectives deep in hostile rear areas.<sup>32</sup>

Since the mechanized cavalry could be assumed to be merely a cavalry regiment on a different platform, the lack of dismounted troopers was not something that was studied in great detail until the outbreak of World War II. Unfortunately for later mechanized cavalrymen, there

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 288

<sup>31</sup> Cameron, 230.

<sup>32</sup> War Department, *FM 100-5: Field Service Regulations: Operations, 1941* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1941), paragraph 38.

existed a fundamental lack of understanding outside the branch of the difference between a trooper dismounting a horse to fight on foot, and a vehicle mounted formation's need for personnel to remain with their vehicles at all times. The Army had understood this concept as evidenced in the 1941 version of *FM 100-5* in which it clearly states "large bodies of horse cavalry usually maneuver mounted and fight dismounted."<sup>33</sup> Cavalry Branch had accepted the fact that the mechanized cavalry would be undermanned in dismounted combat, and so provided these formations with an abundance of firepower – more so than provided a normal horse cavalry regiment.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, acknowledging the fact that full combat operations require more men on the ground than a mechanized cavalry formation could muster, the branch emphasized the mission of reconnaissance for these formations, leaving the primary fighting to the horse cavalry.

Despite growing evidence that mechanized formations were gaining in terms of reliability and mobility, Cavalry Branch still persisted in its belief that the horse should remain the dominant platform of the branch. As late as 1939, cavalry officers were still insisting that although mechanized cavalry was important, it simply could not fulfill all the mission requirements of the cavalry branch.<sup>35</sup> These officers argued that the future of the cavalry lay in the cooperation of horse and machine, with each element complementing the other. Considering the actual limitations of mechanized cavalry equipment at the time, this argument made some sense. Cavalry officers understood the dangers of enemy aircraft to mechanized columns and realized that horse formations possessed greater stealth than these units, although at the cost of firepower. Moreover, horses could operate across muddy or extremely broken terrain much more effectively than the wheel-borne forces of the mechanized forces. Reports from the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., paragraph 1061.

<sup>34</sup> Morton, 51.

<sup>35</sup> LTC R. W. Grow, "New Developments in the Organization and Equipment of Cavalry," *The Cavalry Journal* Vol. XLVIII, No. 3 (May-June 1939): 205.

Spanish Civil War also suggested that mechanized forces were not as effective as theorized. Even a highly influential mechanized cavalrymen, Brigadier General Van Voorhis, described the failings of mechanization in that war, acknowledging mechanical unreliability played a large part in these failures.<sup>36</sup> Cavalry Branch also appreciated that the increased lethality of the modern battlefield made the man on a horse a tremendous target, and thus insisted upon cooperation between horse and mechanized formations which included combat cars. Thus, the mechanized cavalry would serve to suppress the enemy with its greater firepower, while the horse cavalry would seize and hold terrain.

In May 1940 the US Third Army conducted a series of exercises to test the various mobile elements of the Army in the first ever army level exercises in the history of the Army of the United States.<sup>37</sup> The horse-mounted 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, the mixed mechanized and horse corps reconnaissance 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment, the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade (mechanized), and a provisional tank brigade comprised of Infantry tank battalions were all to participate in the exercise. The 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade and the provisional tank brigade performed well and stimulated more intense interest in forming a tank board separate from the infantry.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the ad hoc arrangement of the two brigades into a mechanized division proved to be a powerful force. This provisional division still had serious flaws, most notably the lack of a coherent staff organization and the lack of dedicated infantry or artillery support. Unfortunately for proponents of the horse cavalry, the performance of both their pure and mixed horse formations proved disappointing.

At the completion of the exercise, BG Frank Andrews, the Army G3 (operations), conducted an after action review (AAR) with the members of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade. His

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<sup>36</sup> Hofman, *Through Mobility We Conquer*, 235.

<sup>37</sup> Cameron, 238.

<sup>38</sup> Morton, 70.

conclusions, endorsed by General Marshall, recommended the establishment of an independent Armor Force with responsibility for all mechanized forces in the Army. With support from General Marshall, the Armor Force was established on 10 July 1940. Both Major General George Lynch and Major General John Herr, the current chiefs of Infantry and Cavalry respectively, opposed this move. Lynch argued that the German panzer divisions were simply “armored cavalry.”<sup>39</sup> Herr opposed the new branch as he also saw it duplicating many of the same roles as cavalry.

The creation of the Armor Force, and the resulting loss of all cavalry combat cars (as well as the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade) would prove disastrous for cavalry mechanized doctrine. The slowly emerging doctrine of reconnaissance units closely linked to combat formations immediately began to unravel with the departure of the cavalry tanks. This close relationship (and distance) between hunters and killers was what had allowed the light combat cars to survive and succeed in tests. Thus stealth reconnaissance worked, but generally only when immediately (in the same formation) backed by combat forces strong enough to fight and win against most security zone adversaries. Although the horse cavalry regiments still maintained their armored cars, cavalry mechanized doctrine was frozen into stealth reconnaissance only. Cavalry branch, relieved from the pressure of needing to advance mechanized doctrine beyond this point, simply chose not to continue experimentation along this line. It retained its horse regiments, and under the prevailing orthodoxy of the branch, continued to believe that they would be sufficient to meet the doctrinal requirements as laid out in FSR 1923 and the latest revision FSR 1939 (almost a complete reprint of the earlier manual).<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Hofman, *Through Mobility We Conquer*, 266.

<sup>40</sup> Odom, 8.

In April of 1941, Cavalry Branch published *FM 2-10 "Mechanized Elements"*. This manual emphasized the need for mechanized cavalry to conduct stealth reconnaissance, speaking only of aggressive action against enemy scouts in the counter-reconnaissance role.<sup>41</sup> Combat is mentioned in the manual, but it specifies that the mechanized cavalry should avoid fighting if at all possible, and that it should be reinforced prior to engaging anything more than minor enemy forces. The extremely limited roles given to mechanized cavalry in this manual speaks to the branch's insistence on the prevalence of its horse formations.

The 1941 *FM 100-5* still noted the unique niche cavalry played on the modern battlefield. It stated that the armored division's "primary role is in offensive operations against hostile rear areas."<sup>42</sup> Cavalry divisions still retained their roles from *FSR 1923* of reconnaissance, counter-reconnaissance (essentially security), and economy of force.<sup>43</sup> Thus, as late as 1941, the United States Army still viewed cavalry as a vital member of the total army on the battlefield. Although the Armor Force had consumed some of the cavalry's missions, the two performed in different manners, doing very different things against the enemy. Although not the subject of this work, the armor branch's mission reflected confusion within the American Army over the best utilization of this new unit. Unfortunately, for Cavalry Branch, many senior officers, notably General Leslie McNair, viewed armor as simply cavalry on tanks instead of horses. Although this comparison could hold true, it depends greatly upon how these units are used on the battlefield. As stated earlier, the mount matters less than the mission. Finally, the 1941 Louisiana maneuvers demonstrated to McNair the growing obsolescence of horse cavalry on the modern battlefield, despite the introduction of innovations like the horse-portee regiment.

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<sup>41</sup> War Department, *FM 2-10 Cavalry Field Manual – Mechanized Elements, 1941* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1941), paragraph 135.

<sup>42</sup> War Department, *FM 100-5, Operations, 1941* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1941), paragraph 1072.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraphs 1057-1069.

In 1942, responding to the increasingly bitter debates between the branch chiefs, General Marshall abolished the entire branch chief system, placing all ground forces under the newly organized Army Ground Forces commanded by McNair in an attempt to streamline the creation of a modern military force.<sup>44</sup> This move led to the loss of the cavalry's chief advocate at a time of doctrinal debate and confusion. In 1943, at the direction of McNair, the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division was sent to the Pacific as an infantry division, and the corps cavalry regiments were all transitioned to mechanized formations. However, cavalry doctrine was now placed in a quandary. There had been little thought of how to conduct the traditional cavalry missions with just mechanized forces outside of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade, which was now in the new Armor Force. Additionally, the latest doctrine coming from Army Ground Forces seemed to imply that divisions and corps could provide their own operational level security, thereby requiring the Corps cavalry regiments to only provide operational reconnaissance. Finally, as part of the overall modularization of the American Army under McNair, the cavalry regiments were redesignated as cavalry groups. Although the actual organization changed very little, this move allowed for the rapid attachment and detachment of various combat enablers. Thus, although McNair may have not seen the need for cavalry to fight on the battlefield, he created a headquarters that would be capable of handling augmentation to allow them to do just that.

*Training Circular 107*, published in September 1943, specified that mechanized cavalry units “are organized, equipped, and trained to perform reconnaissance missions employing infiltration tactics, fire, and maneuver. They engage in combat only to the extent necessary to accomplish the assigned missions.”<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the mechanized cavalry units were trained to

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<sup>44</sup> Hofman, *Through Mobility We Conquer*, 287.

<sup>45</sup> War Department, *Training Circular 107, Employment of Mechanized Cavalry Units*, (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 23 September, 1943), 1.

“employ infiltration tactics rather than combat to gain information.”<sup>46</sup> *Training Circular 107* became the primary basis for American mechanized cavalry doctrine for the rest of the war, with its statements reappearing, almost verbatim in the 1944 edition of FM 100-5.<sup>47</sup> This doctrine would help shape the table of organization and equipment of the mechanized cavalry.

A mechanized cavalry group consisted of no more than two mechanized cavalry reconnaissance squadrons with a headquarters element. This organization basically set up a headquarters that could take care of the administration for the two attached squadrons.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, these squadrons were not organic to the group, allowing for rapid detachment to other units or missions, including independent assignments. Each squadron consisted of three reconnaissance troops, a light tank company, and an assault gun company. The reconnaissance troops were made up of three platoons of three M8 Greyhounds and six ¼ ton jeeps each. Each reconnaissance troop also had 27 riflemen for use as dismounts.<sup>49</sup> The reconnaissance troops were also heavily armed with machine guns and mortars, with each troop possessing nine 60mm mortars and multiple .30 caliber machine guns. In fact, the cavalry squadron possessed more machine guns than a regular American infantry battalion.<sup>50</sup> The light tank company consisted of seventeen M5s equipped with 37mm cannons.<sup>51</sup> The assault gun troop had six 75mm HMC M8 Scott self-propelled guns organized into two platoons. Each squadron consisted of approximately thirty-one officers, two Warrant Officers, and 721 enlisted men, although the

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>47</sup> War Department, *FM100-5: Field Service Regulations: Operations, 1944* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1944), paragraph 38.

<sup>48</sup> Robert R. Palmer, Bell I. Wiley and William R. Keast, *The United States Army in World War II: The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, (Washington DC: Historical Division, 1948), 522.

<sup>49</sup> U.S. Army, *V Corps Operations Memorandum: Operation of Corps Cavalry on Terrain of Normandy 25 June 1944*, 1.

<sup>50</sup> The General Board, “Mechanized Cavalry Units” (United States Forces, European Theater, Study Number 49, 1945), Annex 8, 2.

<sup>51</sup> U.S. Army, *V Corps Operations Memorandum: Operation of Corps Cavalry on Terrain of Normandy 25 June 1944*, 1.

numbers fluctuated constantly due to casualties and the ebb and flow of replacements (See Figure 1).<sup>52</sup>

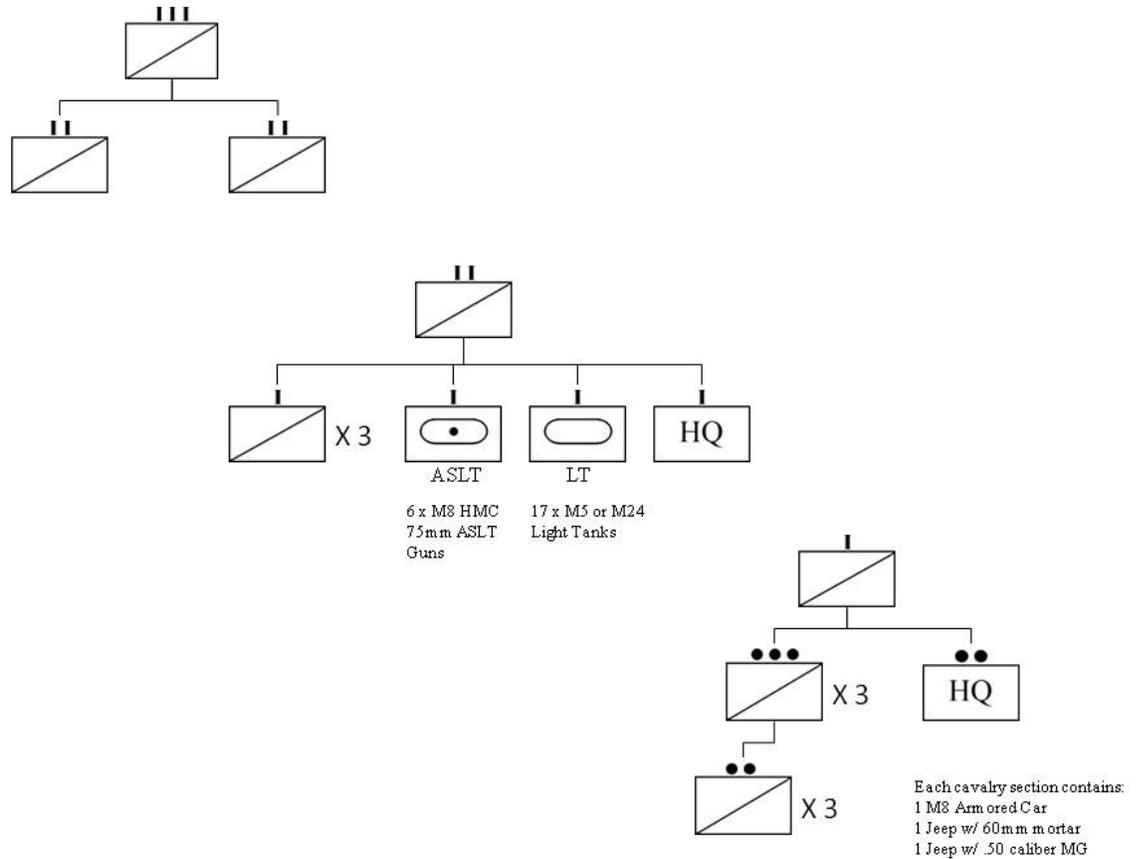


Figure 1. Standard Organization of a Mechanized Cavalry Group

As can be seen by the above organization, the mechanized cavalry groups were not organized for heavy combat at all. With only 27 dismounts in a reconnaissance troop, as compared to over 100 in a rifle company, the cavalry was not very suited to dismounted infantry-type combat where numbers are significant.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, with the heaviest vehicles in the

<sup>52</sup> “History of the 113<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron 1 Jan 1944-31 Dec 1944”, record CAVS113, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Note that the troop had significantly more men than 27 troopers, but the demands of placing soldiers as drivers of vehicles and manning all vehicle mounted machine guns reduced the numbers of available troopers that

squadron being light tanks, and the rest of the force equipped with ¼ ton jeeps and M8 armored cars, the cavalry was not suited for armored combat either. These deficiencies were acceptable to the Army Ground Forces though, as they saw the cavalry as not engaging in serious combat, either mounted or dismounted, as per the doctrine discussed earlier.

In January 1944, Army Ground Forces published *FM 2-20 Cavalry Troop*. This document was the distillation of nearly eighteen months of cavalry combat experience in the Mediterranean theater. It acknowledged the combat missions that mechanized cavalry formations could face, but still emphasized reconnaissance as the primary mission of cavalry. It stated:

The cavalry reconnaissance troop, mechanized, is organized, equipped, and trained to perform reconnaissance missions. Other types of missions are given only in the furtherance of a reconnaissance mission of the troop or the squadron of which the troop is a part, unless no other troops are available for other types of operations for the division or other larger units. Reconnaissance missions are performed by employment of infiltration tactics, fire, and maneuver. Combat is engaged in only to the extent necessary to accomplish the assigned mission.<sup>54</sup>

The same statement appears nearly verbatim in the August 1944 version of *FM 2-30 Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, Mechanized*. Note the fundamental disconnect in this doctrine with the traditional functions of cavalry. Although the admission of additional missions, including security, are mentioned, the manuals immediately caveat this statement with the addition that the cavalry would only perform this mission if no other unit was available. Thus, as late as 1944, cavalry doctrine still had not recovered from the from the transition to a fully mechanized force. A horse cavalymen of the 1930s would have been horrified to hear of tasks that he considered part and parcel of his overall mission be described in this manner. He would have understood

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could be 'on the ground'. In actual combat operations, units would improvise to put more troops on foot than what was stated by the MTO&E.

<sup>54</sup> War Department, *FM 2-20 Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop - Mechanized, 1944* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1944), paragraph 3.

that cavalry is the dedicated force for the army to accomplish security functions. Other elements may be able to do cavalry-type missions, but at the expense of their own important roles.

Unfortunately Army Ground Forces did not see things as clearly.

Additionally, the United States Army as a whole had not created an organization capable of replacing the niche which Cavalry Branch had occupied from the Civil War to 1942 because, in the imaginations of many, the Armor Force was supposed to supplant the cavalry in their traditional roles. The 1944 *FM 100-5 Operations*, made greater progress in assigning the armored divisions cavalry type missions. While still insisting that the division's primary role was to attack enemy rear areas, the manual additionally listed such missions as: "Break through an enemy protective screen and establish early contact with hostile forces... Seize ground essential to the development of the higher commander's plan... exploit a success... and pursue a defeated enemy."<sup>55</sup> However, in practice, armored divisions in the American Army were generally used to spearhead offensives but otherwise occupied a portion on the broad front, like every other division in the army. In short, the armored division was a highly mobile main body division with a lot of firepower, not a cavalry formation performing roles for the corps at an operational level.

The 1944 *FM 100-5 Operations* does demonstrate the Army realized it had a doctrinal gap, and the manual attempts to make a 1944 armor division sound like a 1941 cavalry division. Unfortunately, the 1944 armored division in the context of the standard American corps of 1944-45 was intended more for high intensity combat than the specialized security, reconnaissance, and economy of force missions traditional to cavalry. A corps commander would never place his primary armored element in an economy of force role, or even in a security screen. Rather he needed the armored division as his counterattack or exploitation force. The corps cavalry

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<sup>55</sup> War Department, *FM 100-5, Operations, 1944*, paragraph 1040.

regiment (now group) should have fulfilled these roles, and would in combat in the European theater. However, this group had now been organized and trained for strictly reconnaissance missions, and thus often did not have the appropriate organic equipment or manpower to succeed, requiring serious improvisations on multiple occasions.

Cavalry Branch failed to properly prepare its forces for war in Europe. Mechanized Cavalry doctrine remained virtually unchanged from the mid 1930s to 1945, with minor adjustments made after combat experiences in 1943. However, this doctrinal inertia was not the product of blind adherence to dogma. Cavalry leaders understood that they had a large number of specific tasks to perform for the larger Army. While infantry or artillery could concentrate on a small set of specific skill sets, the cavalry had to be proficient at a number of missions ranging from stealth reconnaissance to outright battle in an economy of force role. Moreover, the army expected the cavalry to be an all-terrain, all-weather organization. Mechanized (or motorized) vehicles throughout the 1920s and 1930s were not very reliable, and certainly not as mobile as a horse across most types of terrain. In fact, to the modern day, there are certain terrain types where vehicles simply will not go, whereas horses can.

The experiments of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade demonstrated the potential of mechanization, but also its limitations as well. In a time of extreme budget shortages, Cavalry branch was faced with the option to place its faith in vehicles that showed promise but were as yet unproven, or to rely on a platform that had proven successful in American campaigns for over a hundred years. Unfortunately, this focus on immediate mission success blinded many Cavalry officers to the possibilities of the future, allowing them to fixate on the horse than to start thinking how they could accomplish the mission with another platform. The leaders of the branch chose poorly, but had solid professional reasons for their decision. The decision to mechanize the cavalry

came at the same time that the Army removed the branch system, and shortly after a large number of cavalry officers had transitioned to the new Armor Force. Thus, Cavalry Branch was thrown into turmoil at precisely the same time that it needed to create an entirely new doctrine to perform traditional cavalry tasks with equipment and an organization that had never been intended to perform these roles. The result of this situation was a compromise that failed to meet the needs of the Army or the branch.

Army Ground Forces (AGF) and its commander must also bear a portion of the blame. General McNair made a conscious decision to strip away capabilities that had existed for over a century, to replace it with a new doctrine. The American Army often blindly mimicked the early German organizations that led to their early battlefield successes. The early war German reconnaissance forces looked much the same as American mechanized cavalry, using light vehicles (often motorcycles and small cars) to conduct stealthy reconnaissance forward.<sup>56</sup> These formations were brutalized in France as well as the early stages of Barbarossa, with casualties so heavy that entire formations were disbanded.<sup>57</sup> By 1943 the Germans had learned from their earlier losses and created robust mechanized cavalry formations capable of fulfilling all the traditional cavalry roles.<sup>58</sup> The German's early failings and AGF's can be traced to confusion over the new role of the tank. While the creation of the Armor Force was a tremendous advancement for the army, AGF failed to understand that the armor division was a completely new addition to the battlefield, and did not replace the role of cavalry. Rather, armored divisions had their own unique role to play on the modern battlefield. This failure to understand that there

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<sup>56</sup> Matthew A. Dooley, "Ignoring History: The Flawed Effort to Divorce Reconnaissance from Security in Modern Cavalry Transformation," Master's Thesis, Army Command and General Staff College, 2006, 30.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 35.

still existed a need for a dedicated force to perform cavalry missions hampered U.S. doctrine and tables of organization and equipment for the rest of the war.

Thus, both Cavalry Branch and the larger army lost sight of the larger goal of fielding a fully capable force, but for different reasons. The branch failed to see the promise of mechanization technology, whereas AGF overstated the impact of and capabilities of the new Armor Force. Combined, these failings produced a muddled doctrine and organization that would significantly hamper American cavalry forces throughout the war. The troopers of the mechanized cavalry groups would have to become very adept at creative solutions to tactical problems, as well as improvise routinely in order to accomplish their missions.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE SECOND CAVALRY GROUP “DRAGOONS”

On the night of 19 July 1944, the Second Mechanized Cavalry Group (MCG), “Dragoons”, disembarked at Utah Beach. The oldest active cavalry regiment in the U.S. Army, and the only American cavalry formation to possess named battle streamers for the First World War, had returned to France. However, this time, instead of riding into battle on horses armed with 1903 Springfield rifles, these modern cavalrymen rolled ashore in quarter-ton jeeps (“peeps” in cavalry parlance), 6-wheeled armored cars, and light tanks, while packing a variety of ordnance including M1 carbines and Thompson submachine guns.

Although American commanders eventually planned on placing the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG in the Third Army, in late July that Army was still forming and had no use for cavalry formations. Thus, the Dragoons were assigned to Headquarters, Advanced Section Communications Zone (ADSEC). This unit maintained responsibility for the rear areas of the Allied forces, providing order to the chaos involved in feeding two full field armies in combat as two more arrived over the same beaches needed for resupply of those elements already in contact. ADSEC ordered the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG along with its sister formation, the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG, to secure the rear areas of the First Army in order to prevent any remaining German forces or commandos from disrupting the orderly flow of men and supplies to the front line.<sup>59</sup> Though the cavalrymen may have wished for a more active first assignment, rear area security has long been a vital cavalry mission. Moreover, the positional fighting in Normandy precluded the Dragoons from using their mobility to conduct reconnaissance or security operations, and their equipment was generally too light to provide effective protection in the confined battle space of the hedgerow country. Although the 2<sup>nd</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> “2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, July 1944” record CAVG2, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 22 July.

MCG was never truly tested in this role of area security, their performance of such a mission allowed General Omar Bradley to commit more combat power forward while not having to worry about the security of his rear areas.

On 31 July ADSEC released the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry to the Third Army, which promptly attached them to General Troy Middleton's VIII Corps, then in the process of conducting and exploiting Operation COBRA. This corps was leading the entire Third Army in the breakout from the Normandy beachhead, and had the mission of isolating and seizing the Brittany Peninsula with its vital ports of Brest and Saint Nazaire. Middleton had originally planned on using the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG as part of a special purpose combined arms task force (Task Force "A") with the mission of seizing key rail junctions in the Brittany Peninsula. However, the rapid success of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division (AD) in its drive to the south to isolate the Brittany Peninsula prompted a re-tasking of the Dragoons, in which Middleton attached them to that division for use as flank security as the following infantry divisions were too slow to keep pace with the armor. Thus, rather than participate in Task Force "A's" charge west into Brittany, the group raced south in an attempt to link up with its new senior command.<sup>60</sup>

By the evening of 2 August, the group had made contact with the 4<sup>th</sup> AD and were ordered to conduct a reconnaissance and screening mission to the south east of the division to protect its flank. While the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (ID) contained the city of Rennes, the 4<sup>th</sup> AD continued the attack south along a broad front from St. Nazaire to Lorient. The Second Cavalry conducted a squadron sized (the 42<sup>nd</sup>) screen along the eastern flank of the division and corps for approximately a week, allowing the main effort (the 4<sup>th</sup> AD) to concentrate all available forces for the drive south to isolate the Brittany Peninsula. The remaining squadron (the 2<sup>nd</sup>) conducted

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<sup>60</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Association, *The Ghosts of Patton's Third Army – A History of the Second U.S. Cavalry* (Munich, Germany: Münchner Graphische, 1946), 91.

route security along the division's supply lines.<sup>61</sup> This period saw minor contact for the group, with the majority of the Wehrmacht in this particular region in a state of disarray. However, the Germans still possessed the ability to interdict lightly defended supply columns along the American's wide open flanks. Momentum in combat can be easily lost if the main effort is constantly distracted by threats to its flanks and rear, thus making the Dragoons' mission essential to allowing VIII Corps to maintain its drive to the south. There were several short, sharp engagements between the group and scattered German resistance around the towns of Vitre and Segre, but they were generally resolved with little effort by the individual troops involved in these actions.<sup>62</sup> Through these actions, the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG performed a traditional cavalry security mission, despite their published reconnaissance-only doctrine.

By the middle of August, the Group moved in front of the 4<sup>th</sup> AD, conducting reconnaissance of German positions guarding the city of Nantes. Once again, despite the official doctrine of stealth reconnaissance, the group used its armor and firepower to aggressively discover the leading edge of the Wehrmacht's defenses, though heavy German fire from prepared positions prevented the lightly equipped cavalry from decisively closing with the enemy. In one particularly notable example, A troop of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron used assault guns to destroy a roadblock halting forward progress. However, despite initial success the troop found itself unable to advance past the roadblock due to concentrated enemy fire, including massed small arms and artillery so intense that the small reconnaissance force withdrew.<sup>63</sup> These actions are extremely typical cavalry operations in an offensive screen, though the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG may have been handicapped in this particular case due to the extremely light nature of their

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<sup>61</sup> "2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, August 1944," 3-7 August.

<sup>62</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Association, *The Ghosts of Patton's Third Army – A History of the Second U.S. Cavalry*, 93-102.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

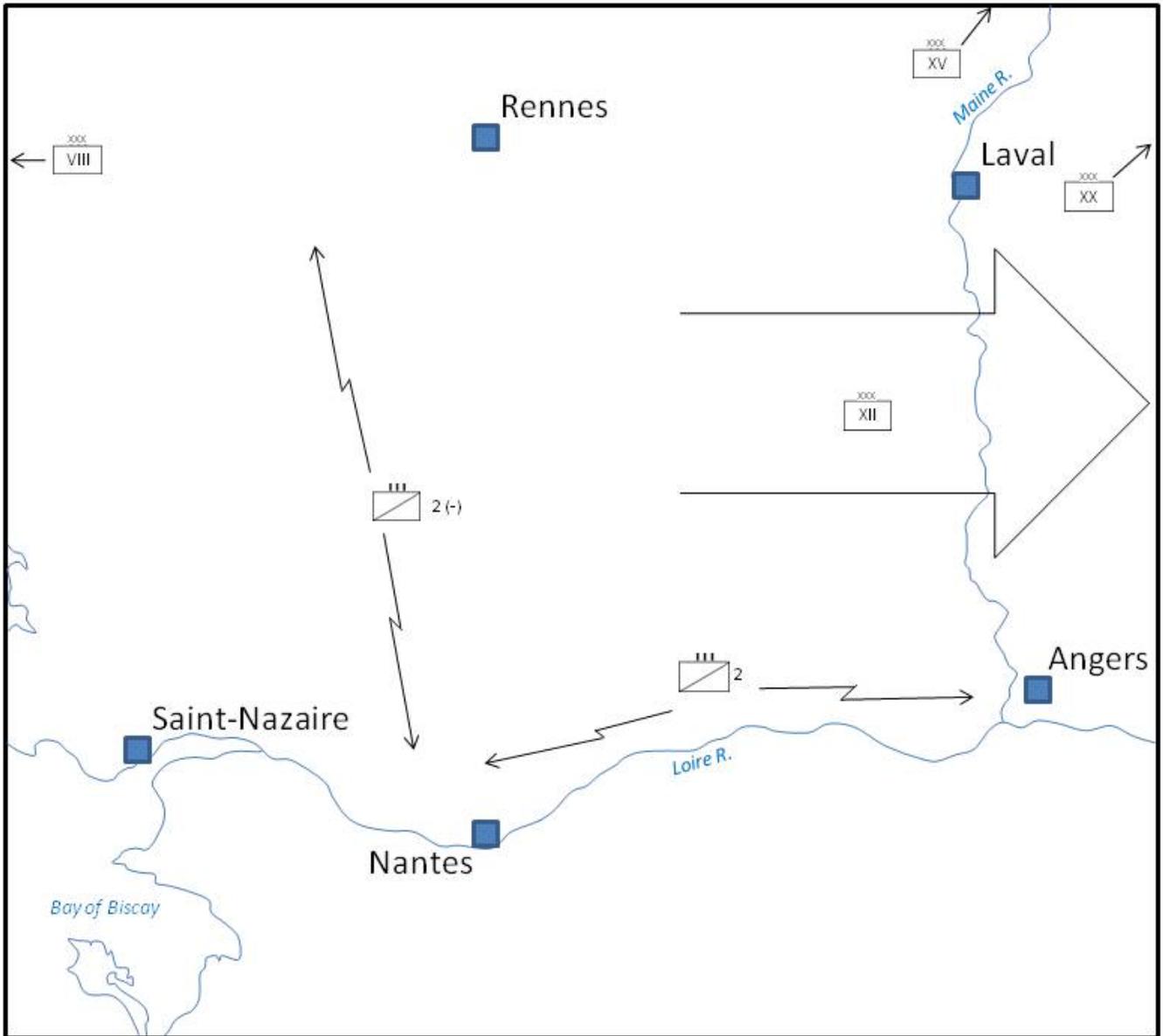
equipment. However, the reconnaissance conducted by the Dragoons aided in the success of the 4<sup>th</sup> AD's assault on the city.

After the fall of Nantes, VIII Corps assigned the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG responsibility of the entire region from Nantes to Angers, a tremendous frontage of over 45 miles oriented to the South along the Loire River. Moreover, the Dragoons were also responsible for the frontage to the west of Nantes, with the mission of preventing loose German formations in the Brittany Peninsula from interfering in the friendly movements through the Rennes – Nantes Corridor.<sup>64</sup> This sector had been the province of the entire 4<sup>th</sup> AD before its relief from the VIII Corps for missions to the east. Although the focus of battle had moved from this particular region of France as the VIII Corps invested Brest while the rest of the Third Army moved to the East, maintaining a presence in this vital hinge of the Army prevented the disorganized German resistance in the area from coalescing into a threat which would draw combat power away from the spearheads. In fact, the remaining Wehrmacht along the French coast which were strong enough to defeat small patrols of the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG comprised of armored cars and jeeps, most certainly would have caused grievous harm to the lightly defended supply columns keeping the XII Corps moving east.<sup>65</sup> Of course, given the extremely large area of responsibility, the cavalry patrols were rarely more than platoon strength, and often much smaller, so the threat should not be overestimated. However, the mission was essential to the success of the corps, and despite some small setbacks, the group succeeded in their mission of protecting the Third Army's hinge (see Map 1).

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<sup>64</sup> “2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, August 1944,” 13 August.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 August.



MAP 1. Holding the Southern Hinge of Third Army. 2nd MCG 13-23 August 1944. Map courtesy of Mariann K. Nance

The Dragons held their positions in the Nantes – Angers region for ten days, until 23 August, when Third Army relieved the group from VIII Corps and attached it to XII Corps, then conducting offensive operations in Central France heading towards the province of Lorraine. The group moved a distance of nearly 200 miles to join the corps that was operating 70 miles to

the south-southeast of Paris.<sup>66</sup> XII Corps assigned the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG to relieve a squadron of the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG (the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron) that was then protecting the corps' southern flank as it continued moving to the east.<sup>67</sup> On the 26 August, the 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron attacked a regimental sized grouping of German army and forced it to withdraw from the town of Carisey, less than thirty miles from the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division's main effort assaulting the city of Troyes.<sup>68</sup> This action prevented possible enemy interference in the decisive point of the corps' operations, and also stands as a perfect example of a defensive guard operation. It is also somewhat surprising given the relatively weak combat power of a mechanized cavalry squadron. However, the 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron used heavy air support and the disorganization of the German forces to their advantage, and were able to hit the superior enemy force hard enough to force them to withdraw. Despite this success, it is hard to envision the squadron achieving a similar success without Allied command of the air or if it had faced a more coherent foe.

By the 28 August, the group's protective screen stretched an incredible 70 miles, considering that doctrine indicated that a squadron could cover no more than 25 miles in reconnaissance, a task involving a less dense concentration of power.<sup>69</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron manned this line, while the 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron conducted reconnaissance of additional crossing points along the Seine River. On that same day, XII Corps relieved the group of its screen mission, ordering it to prepare to conduct an offensive guard preceding the corps as it attacked to and past the Marne River.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 23 August.

<sup>67</sup> "XII Corps Report of Operations 12 August 1944 – 31 August 1944," 212, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 24 August.

<sup>68</sup> "2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, August 1944," 26 August.

<sup>69</sup> War Department, *FM 100-5 Operations 1944* (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1944), paragraph 39; "2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, August 1944," 28 August.

<sup>70</sup> "2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, August 1944," 28 August.

The corps' offensive began on the 30 August with two divisions abreast, the 80<sup>th</sup> ID to the north, and the 4<sup>th</sup> AD to the south. The Dragoons led the assault, with a squadron in front of each leading division (the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron preceding the 80<sup>th</sup> ID, and the 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron conducting reconnaissance for the 4<sup>th</sup> AD).<sup>71</sup> The group met little resistance as it drove to the Moselle River. By the 2 September, elements of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron had reached the river at Toul, approximately eleven miles due west of the major city of Nancy, and conducted reconnaissance to find likely crossing points.<sup>72</sup>

The next two days saw the group conduct a series of patrols in order to ascertain enemy strength defending the river. To the north, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron required an additional day to close with the main path of the river due to its natural curve to the west, of which Toul was the apex. On 3 September patrols of the squadron encountered a large number of German forces withdrawing across the Moselle River to the village of Mousson on the east bank. Additionally, the squadron identified a German headquarters with three anti-air guns in the vicinity of Marbache seven miles to the south of Mousson. Finally, at least a company of German Army were identified in the town of Villey-Saint Etienne, approximately seven miles to the southwest of Marbache.<sup>73</sup> The villages of Mousson and Marbache were extremely significant as these comprised two of three planned crossing sites for the 80<sup>th</sup> ID, the chosen main effort for the river crossing.<sup>74</sup> The division's attack occurred on the evening of 4 September, meeting fierce

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 30 August.

<sup>72</sup> "2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, September 1944" record CAVG2, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 2 September.

<sup>73</sup> "XII Corps Report of Operations 1 September 1944 – 30 September 1944," record 212, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 7.

<sup>74</sup> Hugh M. Cole, *United States Army in World War II: European Theater of Operations: The Lorraine Campaign* (Washington D.C.: Historical Division of the Army, 1965), 58-60. The other crossing point was the town of Toul.

resistance from recently arrived and well dug in German reinforcements and ultimately failed with heavy casualties.<sup>75</sup>

Although the Army's official history of the Lorraine Campaign states that "cavalry patrols operating west of the Moselle, indicated that the Germans were not in sufficient strength to make a stand on the east bank" the aforementioned reports seem to indicate otherwise.<sup>76</sup> The records of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron for this period are incomplete, but even assessing the XII Corps records of the these three days, it seems difficult to argue as some have that there was an "intelligence vacuum" in front of the corps.<sup>77</sup> If there was such a vacuum, it was of the Corps commander's own making. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron was able to only partially complete its doctrinal mission in the case of the 80<sup>th</sup> ID's attack on 4 September due to a lack of time to conduct reconnaissance across a broad defended river. Additionally, it did not have the combat power to attempt to force a crossing itself to force the Germans' hands by making them reveal hidden defenses. The initial reconnaissance reports note the beginnings of a developing German security zone along the river and should have demanded a more in-depth reconnaissance prior to committing one third of the corps into an attack. However, perhaps the past month had bred overconfidence in the men and leadership of the XII Corps as well as the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG. Regardless of the issue of fault, this episode stands as a strong reminder of the importance, not only of identifying the enemy, but having a security force with enough strength to forcefully sound out the enemy if time does not permit a lengthy reconnaissance. Perhaps as penance for its perceived reconnaissance failures, XII Corps withdrew the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron from the line on 7

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<sup>75</sup> Cole, *United States Army in World War II: European Theater of Operations: The Lorraine Campaign*, 65.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>77</sup> John Rickard, *Patton At Bay – The Lorraine Campaign, 1944* (Washington, D.C.: 2004), 78.

September and used it as a security force around the corps headquarters as the remainder of the corps closed on the Nancy battlefield.<sup>78</sup>

While the drama of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron and the 80<sup>th</sup> ID unfolded to the north, the 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron continued to probe to the east across the Madon River, while maintaining a screen to the south, protecting the corps' flank against German forces arriving from Southern France (See Map 2).<sup>79</sup> Faced with both tasks, the squadron maintained a generally defensive posture, though it kept actively patrolling to its front and flank. To aid in this task, XII Corps attached the 696<sup>th</sup> Armored Field Artillery Battalion to the rump 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG in order to provide immediate indirect fires. The first part of September would severely challenge the 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron as large formations of Wehrmacht made their way north into Lorraine. Despite the light nature of their equipment, the Dragoons used the terrain to their advantage. Establishing observation points on several commanding heights, the cavalymen called down extremely accurate fire upon several German columns during this period forcing their withdrawal. Perhaps one of the most notable occasions came on 4 September, when B/42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron, reinforced with light some tanks from F/42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron, defeated a column of over 1,000 German soldiers through a combination of artillery and direct fire, forcing their withdrawal, while preventing their penetration of the corps' flank.<sup>80</sup> This achievement is extremely impressive considering that even under the best of manning situations, the Dragoons were outnumbered at least 5:1 in this battle.<sup>81</sup> However, for perspective, it must be remembered that once again, the Germans were retreating, under continuous air attack, and more interested in escape to the north than in causing significant harm to XII Corps.

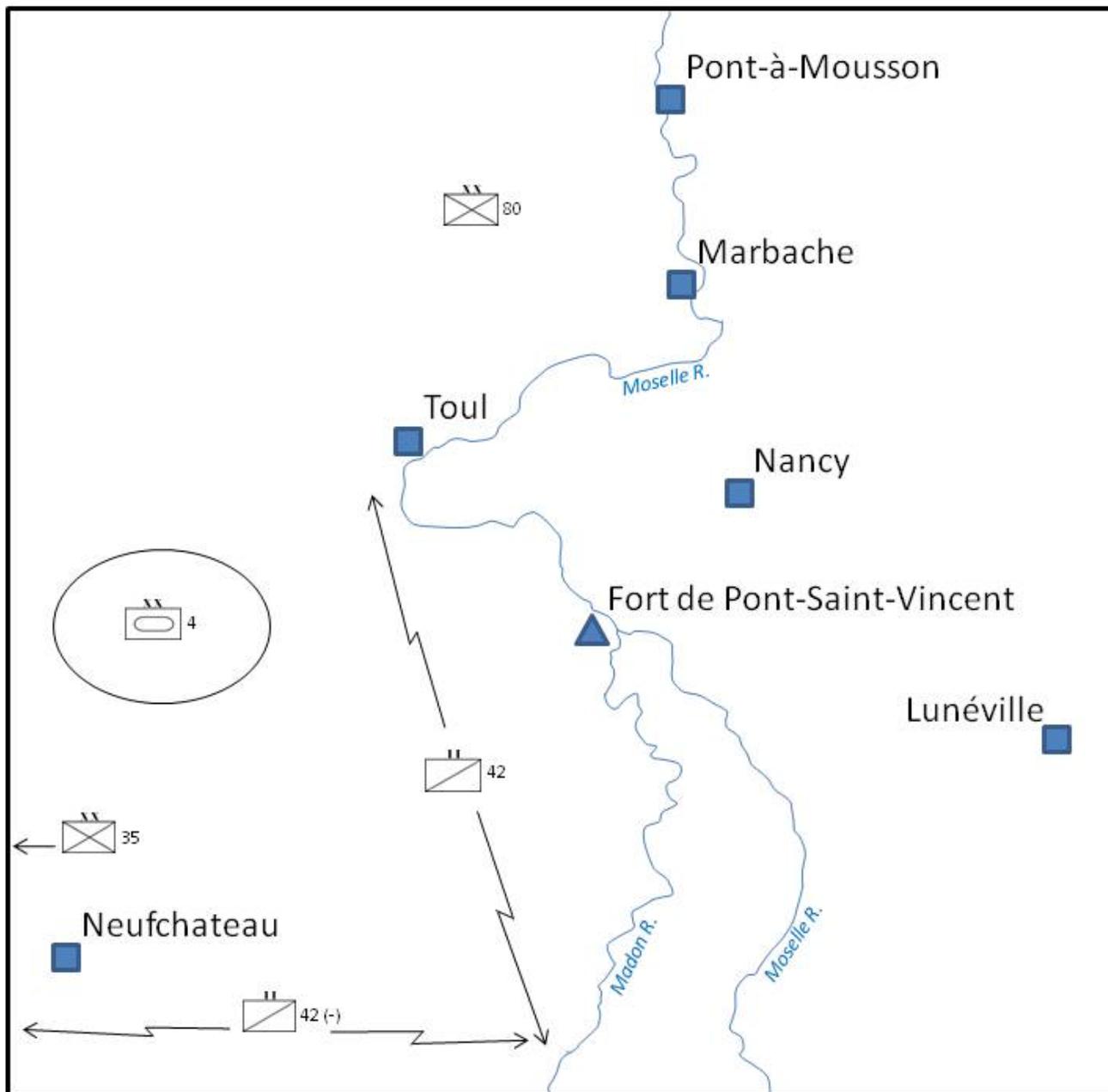
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<sup>78</sup> "2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, September 1944," 7 September.

<sup>79</sup> The Madon River is a small tributary of the Moselle running from south to north, intersecting the main river four miles southwest of Nancy; "2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, September 1944," September 4-10.

<sup>80</sup> "2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, September 1944," 4 September.

<sup>81</sup> A cavalry troop consisted of approximately 140 officers and men.



MAP 2. XII Corps Preparing for the Second Assault Across the Moselle River. 7 September 1944. Map courtesy of Mariann K. Nance.

On 7 September, XII Corps attached the 602<sup>nd</sup> Tank Destroyer (TD) Battalion (Self Propelled or SP), equipped with M18s, to the group as it assumed a greater role in the protection

of the corps' flank.<sup>82</sup> This allowed the 35<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, which had been covering the corps extreme western flank, to concentrate in preparation for an assault across the Moselle south of Nancy.<sup>83</sup> The next day, the 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron conducted an assault on Fort de Pont St. Vincent, a fortification overlooking the confluence of the Madon and Moselle rivers, that also dominated much of the ground that the 35<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division would have to cover in preparation for its assault across the Moselle.<sup>84</sup> The attack was fraught with difficulty, owing to the general lack of foot soldiers in the cavalry troops, but skillful use of the squadron's assault guns, light tanks, and attached artillery allowed the Dragoons to succeed in their attack, as well as defeat a concerted dismounted counterattack the next day. On both occasions, the cavalry's heavy firepower proved decisive, although on the second day, they were also aided by recently captured defensive positions that also helped compensate for their lack of numbers and survivability. Once the 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron had secured the objective, it was then handed over to the 35<sup>th</sup> ID in preparation for their planned offensive. The possession of this fortification would prove important to both the 35<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and the German army, as evidenced by continued fighting for the position for the next several days until additional American advances past the river made further German attempts to regain the position fruitless.<sup>85</sup>

The actions of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Group, specifically that of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron, greatly facilitated the eventual assault crossing of the Moselle by the 35<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. The group's reconnaissance and constant skirmishing between the Madon and Moselle rivers had identified the majority of enemy strong points, allowing the infantry to bypass them and quickly strike the

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<sup>82</sup> "2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, September 1944," 7 September.

<sup>83</sup> "XII Corps Report of Operations 1 September 1944 – 30 September 1944," 9.

<sup>84</sup> This fort was found to be held by members of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Fallschirmjäger Division, considered an elite German formation; 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Association, *The Ghosts of Patton's Third Army – A History of the Second U.S. Cavalry*, 137; "2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, September 1944," 8 September.

<sup>85</sup> "XII Corps Report of Operations 1 September 1944 – 30 September 1944," 12.

weak points in the German defenses.<sup>86</sup> Additionally, the group protected the south flank of the division as it assaulted forward, allowing more force to be projected into the main effort.

Finally, by direct actions such as holding bridges over the Madon river, and the seizure of Fort de Pont St. Vincent, the group allowed the 35<sup>th</sup> ID to penetrate the German security zone with relative ease and attack into the main enemy defensive positions.

On 11 September, the reconnaissance battalion of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, reinforced by the 602<sup>nd</sup> TD Battalion, assumed the mission of corps flank guard, allowing the 2<sup>nd</sup> Group (minus the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron still conducting security around Corps HQ) to cross the Moselle and protect the southern and eastern flanks of Combat Command B (CCB) of the 4<sup>th</sup> AD as it fought to envelop the city of Nancy.<sup>87</sup> The group continued in this mission, often engaged in heavy contact, as later information would disclose that they were moving across the front of a buildup of German counterattack forces including elements of the 15<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Division, the 111<sup>th</sup> and 113<sup>th</sup> Panzer Brigades, and the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer Division.<sup>88</sup> Due to the difficulties encountered by the cavalry, XII Corps released the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron back to the group on the 15 September in order to allow them to continue to protect the rear of CCB, 4<sup>th</sup> AD.<sup>89</sup> This infusion of combat power allowed the Dragoons to commit to a squadron-sized assault on Lunéville on 16 September. This town was a major road junction as well as a crossing point of the Meurthe river. Possession of this town would greatly assist in isolating Nancy as well as preventing German interference with the 4<sup>th</sup> AD's envelopment of the city. The Wehrmacht fought hard for the city,

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71. <sup>86</sup> Cole, *United States Army in World War II: European Theater of Operations: The Lorraine Campaign*,

<sup>87</sup> "2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, September 1944," 11 September.

220. <sup>88</sup> Cole, *United States Army in World War II: European Theater of Operations: The Lorraine Campaign*,

<sup>89</sup> "2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, September 1944," 15 September.

but did not have the combat power to fight off the combined strength of two cavalry squadrons working in concert.<sup>90</sup>

In the early morning of 18 September, elements of the 111<sup>th</sup> Panzer Brigade attacked the 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron then occupying Lunéville. The cavalry estimated this initial attack as “six [Panther] tanks and two companies of infantry.”<sup>91</sup> The group attempted to ambush the this force with the 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron’s assault gun troop, but their 75mm low velocity guns were insufficient to penetrate the armor of the German tanks, and the Dragoon’s defense crumbled in the face of tanks that they could not kill. Half (three guns) of the assault gun troop were destroyed in the initial encounter. The squadron conducted a delaying action, having more success against the German infantry than their armor. The difficulties of their infantry kept the Germans at bay until approximately 1100 that morning. This time allowed the remainder of the group to withdraw as well as provided time for reinforcements from Combat Command Reserve (CCR) of the 4<sup>th</sup> AD, CCA 4<sup>th</sup> AD, CCB 6<sup>th</sup> AD, and the 603<sup>rd</sup> TD battalion to arrive. These reinforcements forced the Germans to break off their attack. Although the attack had not inflicted much damage on the American main body elements, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Group, and the 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron in particular, had taken serious losses including its commanding officer, COL Reed, who was badly wounded in the

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<sup>90</sup> “XII Corps Report of Operations 1 September 1944 – 30 September 1944,” 16.

<sup>91</sup> The number of tanks present in the attack varies from the number quoted here (6 tanks) in the unit AAR to over 40 in the Group’s official history. Additional confusion over the numbers of enemy is also created by the unit only identifying the full force of the leading edge of the attack, and not the full assault. Furthermore, the group’s history (not the AAR) reports the tanks as Tigers. However, later scholarship has challenged this assumption, as most German tanks were called Tigers regardless of the actual type. The determination that these were panther tanks comes from Cole, *United States Army in World War II: European Theater of Operations: The Lorraine Campaign*, 221. A cavalry instructor might admonish the troopers of the 42<sup>nd</sup> that day for inaccurate reporting, a cardinal sin for reconnaissance soldiers. Still, perhaps the troopers might be forgiven for exaggerations in what was surely a traumatic day. “2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, September 1944,” 18 September.

engagement.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, the losses to the assault gun troop of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron, the heaviest anti-tank firepower organic to the cavalrymen, would take at least three months to recover.<sup>93</sup>

The action at Lunéville stands as a perfect example of the need for dedicated and robust security forces. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Group absorbed the blow that otherwise would have fallen upon the main body of the 4<sup>th</sup> AD while its attention was focused to the north and west. Moreover, the cavalry held long enough to allow the corps commander to react and develop the situation under his own terms. The resulting battle, though hard fought, could have been much bloodier for the American army had the cavalry not been in position. Unfortunately for the cavalry, their organization and equipment were not well suited for such a role. The assault guns assigned to the squadrons were the only vehicles capable of defeating even some German armor. Although the American army struggled with German tanks as a whole in World War II, the cavalry were particularly challenged. Each group possessed a mere twelve weakly armored vehicles with any chance against heavy armor. However, the cavalry were constantly placed in situations wherein it encountered enemy tanks, forcing them to take often inordinate risks. In the case of Lunéville, the Dragoons accomplished their mission, but at excessively high cost. Moreover, the threat of continued German armored offensives against that sector required the stationing of significant elements of CCA, 4<sup>th</sup> AD to assist the Dragoons in their mission.<sup>94</sup>

The remainder of September saw the 2<sup>nd</sup> Group maintaining a screen along the southern flank and wing of XII Corps, maintaining contact with the XV corps to the south. A continuation of the German counterattack begun against the Dragoons flared to the north and east

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<sup>92</sup> Cole, *United States Army in World War II: European Theater of Operations: The Lorraine Campaign*, 221-223.

<sup>93</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Association, *The Ghosts of Patton's Third Army – A History of the Second U.S. Cavalry*, 152.

<sup>94</sup> Cole, *United States Army in World War II: European Theater of Operations: The Lorraine Campaign*, 223.

of the group's positions, involving large elements of the 4<sup>th</sup> AD. This fighting also pulled away the armored reserve left with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Group after the Lunéville fighting, leaving the cavalry on their own once more.<sup>95</sup> However, except for some artillery barrages and light probing, the Germans did not test the Group for the rest of September, as their attention was on the large tank battles occurring around Arracourt.

The Group spent the majority of October conducting minor reconnaissance patrols and probes as it held the extreme south of the XII Corps line in an economy of force role. Towards the end of the month, XII Corps planned a limited attack involving the newly arrived 26<sup>th</sup> ID in order to “blood” the unit as well as establish better positions for future offensive operations.<sup>96</sup> This attack would seize the Moncourt Ridge. However, the southern end of the ridge in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Group's sector dominated the approaches to the 26<sup>th</sup> ID's planned point of attack. Thus, XII Corps ordered the Dragoons to seize this portion of the ridge to facilitate the success of the 26<sup>th</sup> ID. The 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron dismounted and attacked on 20 October in column of troops on an extremely narrow (less than two miles) front. Despite some fierce resistance from the German defenders, the squadron achieved its limited objectives, thereby aiding in the success of the 26<sup>th</sup> ID's assault five days later.<sup>97</sup>

What is remarkable about this assault is that it was conducted entirely dismounted, with the cavalymen acting as infantry (one might even say as “dragoons”...) demonstrating their remarkable flexibility. Moreover, this attack was against dug-in German infantry committed to holding their positions, as opposed to attacks made by the group in August where the Germans were in full retreat. However, the point of attack was extremely limited, with a front of less than

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<sup>95</sup> Cole, *United States Army in World War II: European Theater of Operations: The Lorraine Campaign*, 224.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>97</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Association, *The Ghosts of Patton's Third Army – A History of the Second U.S. Cavalry*, 166-173.

two miles. Considering that the same squadron that in August had covered a frontage of over 70 miles mounted, could effectively attack on a frontage of two miles says a great deal about the limitations of the cavalry when dismounted. Additionally, as the squadron had attacked in column of troops, the entire dismounted weight of the unit had been committed to this one point of attack. Thus, the mechanized cavalry could succeed in a direct infantry-style assault without reinforcement, but only in extremely controlled situations.

Following a brief period of reorganization and defensive patrolling, the XII Corps initiated another offensive on 8 November. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Group, still working with the 26<sup>th</sup> ID on the southern flank of the corps, performed two roles in this attack. At the onset of the fighting, the Dragoons moved about a kilometer forward of the 26<sup>th</sup> ID's positions in order to protect the infantry as they moved from their defensive positions into the attack. After passing the 26<sup>th</sup> ID's soldiers forward of their position, the Dragoons maintained a screen protecting the southern flank of the 26<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and XII Corps as they advanced to the northeast.<sup>98</sup> This screen was doubly important due to the fact that the southern flank of XII Corps was not only the southern boundary of Third Army, but also of the 12<sup>th</sup> Army Group. Although the XV Corps to the south was conducting its own assault, such higher level boundaries are often the scene of missed communications, gaps in defenses, and enemy counterattacks. Therefore, the Dragoons performed a vital mission in ensuring that the flanks of the 26<sup>th</sup> ID, XII Corps, Third Army, and the 12<sup>th</sup> Army Group were secure, allowing combat power to mass forward without need for worry about a German strike behind their spearheads. A tremendous example of the cavalry's impact on the larger battle can be seen on 16 November, when elements of the Dragoons relieved an entire infantry regiment (the 101<sup>st</sup>) of the 26<sup>th</sup> ID that had been holding the shoulder of the

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<sup>98</sup> "2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, November 1944" record CAVG2, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 8 November.

division's penetration. Two days later, that regiment would participate in a renewed divisional level assault.<sup>99</sup> Unbeknownst to the group, they were aided in their efforts to guard the corps' flank by the general lack of large German mechanized formations in the region as the Wehrmacht massed these formations to the north in preparation for their December counter-offensive.

On 22 November, XII Corps split the Dragoons, sending the 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron and group headquarters to the north to work with the 80<sup>th</sup> ID and to maintain contact with the XX Corps. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron remained in the south to maintain liaison between XII Corps and the XV Corps of the Seventh Army.<sup>100</sup> Although no record seems to remain for the reason behind this shift, it is reasonable to assume that the recent offensives undertaken by the entire Third Army had shaken loose the connections between the various corps, and great care had to be taken in order to ensure that gaps which the Germans could exploit in a counterattack did not develop. The lightly armed but highly mobile Dragoons were perfect for such a mission. Although they were never tested beyond minor enemy patrolling, one wonders what the result would have been if a major German offensive had struck the cavalymen patrolling these weak links in the army's line. The 14<sup>th</sup> MCG in the First Army would soon test that theory.

By the beginning of December, as more forces entered the line, first the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron (by now returned to the group), then the 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron were pulled from the line for rest and recuperation. From 8 to 14 December the troopers recovered from the previous campaign and prepared for the next.<sup>101</sup> At the end of this period, the group moved to the town of Sarraguemines, seven miles to the south-southeast of Saarbrücken. There, they joined the 35<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> "XII Corps Report of Operations 1 November 1944 – 30 November 1944," record 212, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 14-16.

<sup>100</sup> "2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, November 1944," 22 November.

<sup>101</sup> "2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, December 1944" record CAVG2, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 8-14 December.

ID as it prepared to continue its offensive to the north east. The group relieved the 137<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment from its position holding the western edge of the division line, allowing the 35<sup>th</sup> ID to mass combat power along its desired axis of attack. They maintained that position for a week allowing the 35<sup>th</sup> ID to continue its assault against the leading edges of the Siegfried Line.<sup>102</sup> On 22 December the Dragoons were relieved by elements of the 44<sup>th</sup> ID, and moved to join the XII Corps as it participated in the counterattack into the southern flank of the Germans then besieging Bastogne.<sup>103</sup>

XII Corps assigned the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group the important mission of maintaining the eastern flank of the of the corps along the Moselle River as it assaulted to the north. However, as the corps realized that the cavalry did not have enough organic combat power to fully hold the flank against a determined assault, the group was heavily reinforced. Task Force (TF) Reed, as the Dragoons came to be called during this time, consisted of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadrons, the 808<sup>th</sup> TD Battalion (-), the 372<sup>nd</sup> and 398<sup>th</sup> Engineer Regiments (GS), and the 276<sup>th</sup> Armored Artillery Battalion (105mm).<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, two additional battalions of artillery were in direct support of the Task Force.<sup>105</sup> On 23 December, the Dragoons relieved a regimental-sized formation of the 4<sup>th</sup> ID and assumed its positions along the Moselle, a frontage that would eventually stretch over 25 miles from Grevenmacher in the north to Thionville in the South.

This area of responsibility was over four times the size of any of the infantry divisions (4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>,

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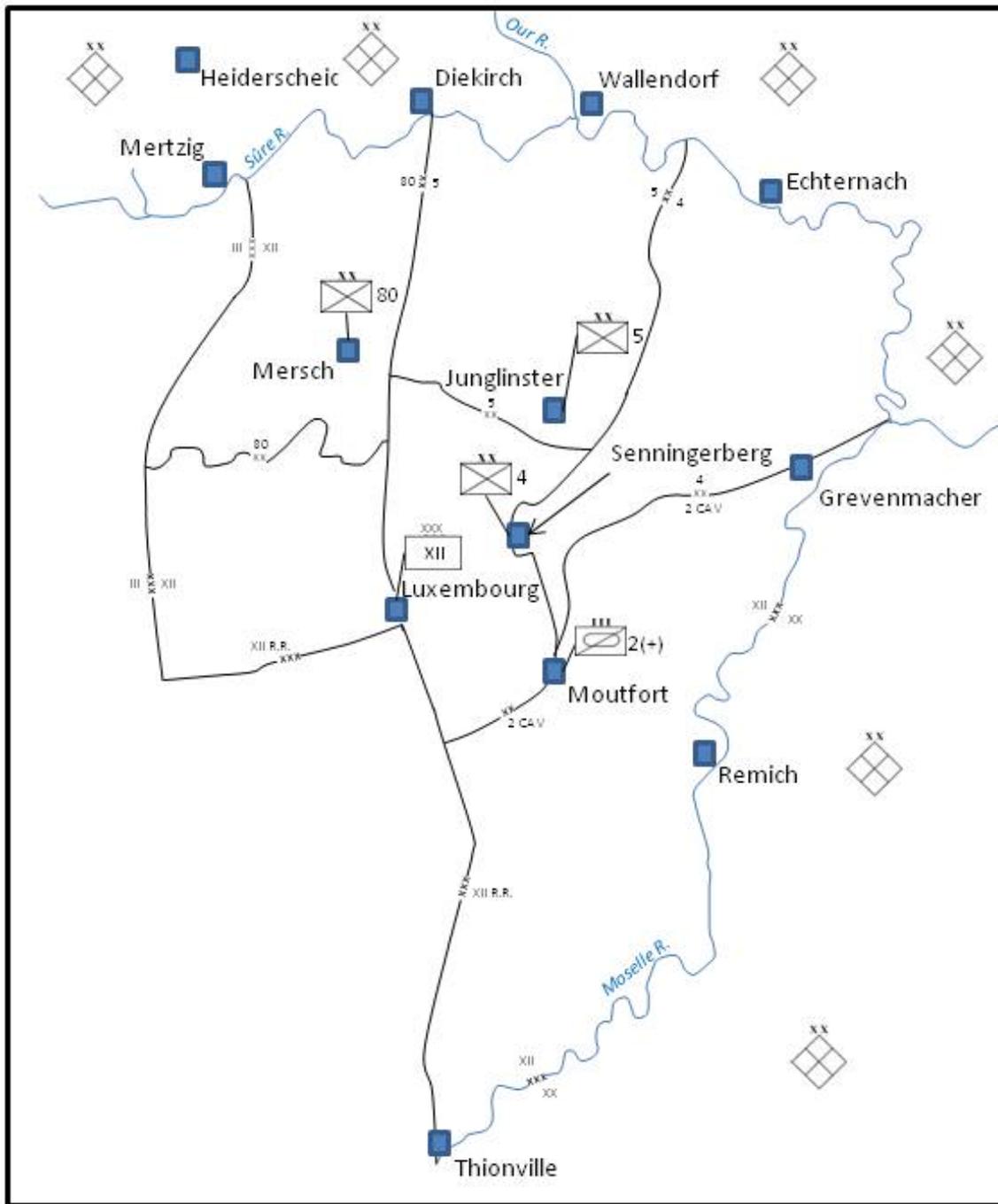
<sup>102</sup> “XII Corps Report of Operations 1 December 1944 – 31 December 1944,” record 212, entry 427, RG 407, Nation Archives II, 19-21.

<sup>103</sup> “2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, December 1944,” 22 December.

<sup>104</sup> The 808<sup>th</sup> TD Battalion was short one company, assigned elsewhere. General Support (GS) Engineer Regiments were generally expected to perform construction as well as build obstacles, in essence non-specialized engineers. 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Association, *The Ghosts of Patton’s Third Army – A History of the Second U.S. Cavalry*, 211.

<sup>105</sup> Direct support differs from assignment in that the group has priority access to the fires of that unit, but does not dictate their positioning, and fires from that unit can be pulled to other units if the DS unit does not have a competing demand. 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Association, *The Ghosts of Patton’s Third Army – A History of the Second U.S. Cavalry*, 211.

80<sup>th</sup>) of the XII Corps attacking north. <sup>106</sup>



MAP 3. Dragoons Holding the Flank. XII Corps 23-26 December 1944. Map courtesy of Mariann K. Nance

<sup>106</sup> The actual frontage would be significantly more. 25 miles is simply the straight line distance between these two points, not accounting for bends and curves in the river and front line.; “XII Corps Report of Operations 1 December 1944 – 31 December 1944,” Ops Map #8.

The cavalry's ability to cover so much ground allowed the XII Corps to mass its combat power in the drive against the southern shoulder of the Bulge (see Map 3). The highly mobile nature of the cavalry, especially in comparison to the generally dismounted infantry, allowed the group to cover this ground more effectively than a similarly sized infantry formation. Without the presence of such a unit as the Dragoons, the corps commander would have been forced to detail more troops to protect the flank in order to achieve the same degree of protection offered by TF Reed. Moreover, that infantry was put to much better use in the heavy fighting to the north for which the lightly protected and numerically inferior cavalrymen were unsuited.

The month of January found TF Reed still in position along the Moselle River guarding the flank of XII Corps. The period was characterized by active patrolling and small attacks to gain key ground. One such attack involved the use of one troop(C/ 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron) to seize the small town of Machtum held by German forces amounting to an under strength platoon. The attack proved highly successful with only three cavalrymen wounded in the entire affair, while killing nine Germans and capturing fourteen.<sup>107</sup> However, the town was very small, mostly consisting of a single street a third of a mile long.<sup>108</sup> Additionally, the dragoons were heavily supported by artillery, and attacked with a better than 3:1 ratio of troops. While taking nothing away from the bravery and skill of the cavalrymen of C troop, the attack on Machtum serves to highlight the limitations of the mechanized cavalry in direct combat.

Towards the end of the month, four newly arrived battalions of combat engineers (284<sup>th</sup>, 285<sup>th</sup>, 1252<sup>nd</sup>, 1258<sup>th</sup>) were attached to the Task Force to replace the two general support Engineer regiments that were currently working with the cavalry.<sup>109</sup> This seemed to follow the

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<sup>107</sup> “2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, January 1945” record CAVG2, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 11 January.

<sup>108</sup> This information gathered from Google Earth.

<sup>109</sup> “2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, January 1945,” 20 January.

new custom of XII Corps of placing engineer units with the cavalry for training as infantry while aiding in protecting the corps flank. This practice worked well for the Dragoons also, as it gave them large numbers of dismounted soldiers, a feature missing in their own table of organization and equipment. Finally, XII Corps attached the headquarters of the 9<sup>th</sup> TD group (with no organic units of its own) to TF Reed in order to assist in command and control of the various elements of the task force.<sup>110</sup> This headquarters would serve as a third combat command headquarters for the cavalry, who had been limited to two battalion-level maneuver command posts, thereby increasing by half the flexibility of the organization.

At the beginning of February, XII Corps began planning its next offensive across the Moselle and Sauer Rivers. As the attack would be fighting through portions of the Siegfried Line, the attacking divisions would need to mass their efforts in order to fight through the heavily fortified and rugged terrain. Thus, the corps ordered TF Reed to assume over seven additional miles of front that had belonged to the 76<sup>th</sup> ID, while relieving it of a small sector to the southwest that was now safely behind friendly lines.<sup>111</sup> The revised line still stretched over nineteen miles. However, this extension of frontage for the cavalry allowed the infantry divisions to attack along fronts less than four miles wide.<sup>112</sup> Additionally, two of the four combat engineer battalions (284<sup>th</sup> and 1252<sup>nd</sup>) of the task force were relieved from cavalry control and attached to Combat Command A (CCA) of the 6<sup>th</sup> AD in preparation for that division's mission to exploit success in the upcoming offensive.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> "Ibid., 22 January.

<sup>111</sup> "2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, February 1945" record CAVG2, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 3 February.

<sup>112</sup> "XII Corps Report of Operations 1 February 1945 – 28 February 1945," record 212, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, Ops map #3.

<sup>113</sup> "2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, February 1945," 8 February.

The corps offensive began on 7 February 1945. A fierce three day battle to gain bridgeheads across the Sauer River ensued, with victory coming slowly and with great difficulty. In fact, over a week into the attack, the corps had barely moved more than a couple miles over the river.<sup>114</sup> Without question, if the three infantry divisions of the corps (76<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 80<sup>th</sup>) had had to cover more frontage, they would not have had the combat power to force their way across the river at all without accepting substantial risk all along their lines.

On 19 February, XII Corps ordered TF Reed to conduct an assault across the Moselle to seize the town of Wincheringen in order to support the attack of the 10<sup>th</sup> AD of XX Corps to the southeast. This assault was part of the clearing of the Saar-Moselle Triangle that had bedeviled the Third Army since November.<sup>115</sup> Wincheringen was believed to be held by garrison troops or members of a *Volksgrenadier* division.<sup>116</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Squadron, reinforced by engineers, led the dismounted attack. The attack proved a great success, with the cavalry seizing their objectives prior to the arrival of the elements of the 10<sup>th</sup> AD that were supposed to assist in the attack. The squadron lost five killed, and twenty two wounded while capturing thirty four Germans and killing an unknown number.<sup>117</sup> The casualty ratio is indicative of not only the superior firepower of the cavalry but also the growing combat skill of the Dragoons. Even though they were facing essentially rear echelon troops, a night assault across a defended water obstacle is difficult even in the best of circumstances.

However, despite the overall success of the attack, and the fact that the majority of the Dragoon's wounded were quickly returned to duty, twenty-seven casualties is a rather significant

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<sup>114</sup> "XII Corps Report of Operations 1 February 1945 – 28 February 1945," 11-19.

<sup>115</sup> For more on this particular region, read about the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG's actions from November to February in this region.

<sup>116</sup> "2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, February 1945" 19 February.

<sup>117</sup> "2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron After Action Report, February 1945" record CAVS2, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 14-15.

number for a squadron that only numbered just over 700 total. As stated earlier, a casualty rate of just under 4% is not bad at all for such a dangerous assault, but it could have been much worse. Wincheringen was not part of the main German defensive belt, but rather part of its security screen in front of the Siegfried Line. Additionally, the Dragoons had conducted a thorough reconnaissance of the town, having lived across the river from it for over a month. Thus, the cavalry were tasked with an objective well within their abilities – the removal of a small strongpoint forward of the main German defensive belt. Had they been required to conduct an assault to the north with the rest of the corps, casualties would have been much higher, and the cavalry would not had the combat power to persist in the face of heavy casualties.

With the success of the attack on Wincheringen, the Dragoons were now able to focus more of their attention to the northeast, as XX Corps was now coming alongside their eastern flank. This shift allowed the Dragoons to concentrate more combat power along the remaining length of their screen, in preparation for combat operations across the Sauer River. On 21 February, the 808<sup>th</sup> TD Battalion was attached to the 76<sup>th</sup> ID, but the 691<sup>st</sup> TD battalion was sent to TF Reed to make good its absence.<sup>118</sup> Additionally, on 23 February, XII Corps took the 1258<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineer Battalion away from the task force, leaving its attachments at one combat engineer battalion, one TD battalion, a company of Belgian Fusiliers, and two battalions of field artillery in direct support.<sup>119</sup>

By 2 March, TF Reed's screen along the Moselle River was no longer necessary, and XII Corps removed all attachments of the group, and then attached the group with its two remaining squadrons to the 76<sup>th</sup> ID.<sup>120</sup> The 76<sup>th</sup> ID had already crossed the Sauer River and was now

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<sup>118</sup> “2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group After Action Report, February 1945,” 21 February.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 23 February.

<sup>120</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Association, *The Ghosts of Patton's Third Army – A History of the Second U.S. Cavalry*, 249.

looping in front of the Dragoon's front, headed to the southeast. The division assigned the cavalry the mission of clearing the pocket of Germans between the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG (and the Sauer River) and the south flank of the 76<sup>th</sup> ID. The troopers accomplished this mission with enthusiasm after the nearly two months of limited activity along the Moselle River. The two squadrons quickly cleared the pocket of disorganized German forces who had been dislocated and cut off by the thrust of the XII Corps to Bitburg as well as the more localized *manoeuvre sur les derrieres* of the 76<sup>th</sup> ID. By the third of March, the group established a screen along the Moselle and Kyll Rivers in order to protect the 76<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division as it cleared the remaining German forces in zone.<sup>121</sup>

The attack soon resumed as part of the general drive of the 76<sup>th</sup> ID and XII Corps to the east. The 76<sup>th</sup> ID gave the Dragoons the mission of covering the southern flank of the division (and thus the Corps) as the attack progressed. The group also had to maintain the connection with the 10<sup>th</sup> AD of XX Corps to the south. The offensive began to gather momentum and soon the cavalry were making dramatic advances alongside the rest of the Corps. The German defenses crumbled, although some units still fought hard as was the case at the town of Zemmer (approximately two miles to the east of the Kyll River) on 7 March. There the Germans defended the town with approximately an under-strength battalion backed by rocket and tube artillery. The 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron attacked with dismounted elements of A Troop supported by a platoon of light tanks (from F Company), a platoon of attached tank destroyers, and a platoon of assault guns. The heavy firepower of the supporting elements as well as the rapid assault of the cavalrymen broke the German defenders. The squadron killed ten and captured 61 Germans for

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<sup>121</sup> “2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron After Action Report, March 1945” record CAVS2, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 2.

little loss in the assault.<sup>122</sup> This attack stands as a great example of the power of combined arms in cavalry action. With the exception of the tank destroyers, the rest of the support came from organic cavalry assets. Though the light tanks and assault guns were not a match for heavier German positions, they sufficed to dig enemy infantry out of fortified houses and other hasty field fortifications.

By 12 March, the group's zone, along with the 76<sup>th</sup> ID's, had become pinched out by the closing of the XX Corps to the south and the movement of the 89<sup>th</sup> ID to the north. XII Corps relieved the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG of attachment to the 76<sup>th</sup> ID and moved it to the north of the corps sector. There, the group conducted a screen along the Rhine River, protecting the north flank of the corps as it attacked east towards the Mainz-Weisbaden region.<sup>123</sup> The cavalymen allowed the corps to mass combat power forward by preventing enemy forces on the right (or northeast) bank of the Rhine from conducting spoiling attacks into the lightly defended rear. The group used artillery and massed fires from its assault guns and light tanks to break up concentrations of German forces on the right bank as well as harassing any visible enemy movement. This protection allowed the lead divisions of XII Corps to increase their speed without having to worry about providing for their own flank or rear security. The corps did not reinforce the Dragoons at this point, as the German army was too fragmented to conduct the effective massed combined-arms counterattacks that were the worst enemy of the cavalry by this stage in the war.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Group maintained their positions along the left (western) bank of the Rhine until 25 March, when elements of the newly arrived 16<sup>th</sup> MCG took over their positions.<sup>124</sup> By this time, the XII Corps had succeeded in crossing the Rhine south of Mainz and was attacking

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<sup>122</sup> "42<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron After Action Report, March 1945" record CAVS42, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 11.

<sup>123</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Association, *The Ghosts of Patton's Third Army – A History of the Second U.S. Cavalry*, 259.

<sup>124</sup> "42<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron After Action Report, March 1945," 15.

towards the city of Frankfurt. The corps ordered the Dragoons to reprise their screening mission, this time conducting a mobile guard of the corps' southern flank as it moved ever deeper into Germany. Additionally, the group was to maintain communications with elements of the XV Corps of Seventh Army to the south as it attacked alongside the XII Corps.<sup>125</sup>

On 2 April, the Dragoons liberated 3,328 American POWs and 3,205 Allied POWs, including a Russian major general near Bad Orb.<sup>126</sup> They continued their advance to the south east against lightening resistance. Due to the lack of threat along the corps flank, XII Corps ordered the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron to be detached from the group and provide route security along the corps main supply route (MSR).<sup>127</sup> This mission was extremely vital to maintain the momentum of the attack. Large numbers of German units had been bypassed in the rapid advance, and although these cut off and often broken formations posed little danger to the main combat units of the corps, they were deadly to the lightly guarded supply columns keeping the forward units going. Though not as glamorous as duty on the front or flank, rear area security has long been a vital cavalry mission in the American doctrinal lexicon.

On 10 April, German forces, determined to be about 300 SS supported by three tanks, made a small stand against the 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron around the town of Gleicherweisen, just to the north of the Bavarian border.<sup>128</sup> The squadron made a concerted attack with all three line troops supported by the assault guns and light tanks of E Troop and F Company. Although the Dragoons failed to fully clear the enemy from their positions, the cavalymen seized enough key terrain in order for them to mask the remaining Germans and bypass the position. Three days

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<sup>125</sup> "42<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron After Action Report, March 1945," 16.

<sup>126</sup> "XII Corps Report of Operations 1 April 1945 – 30 April 1945," record 212, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 10.

<sup>127</sup> "XII Corps Report of Operations 1 April 1945 – 30 April 1945," 12.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 16; "42<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron After Action Report, April 1945" record CAVS42, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 13.

later, the squadron was maneuvering against the city of Bayreuth, 50 miles to the south-southeast of Gleicherweisen, and deep in the heart of Bavaria. By this point, German resistance had nearly ceased, with the cavalymen capturing 312 enemy in a single day.<sup>129</sup> After the fighting around Bayreuth subsided on the 16<sup>th</sup> of April, XII Corps ordered the group to move to the rear and conduct maintenance and resupply operations for two days. During this time the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron rejoined the group after completing its rear area security mission.

The Dragoons moved back into action on 18 April, this time protecting the north flank of the Corps as it attacked towards Czechoslovakia. The Wehrmacht's resistance began to stiffen as the group moved east. On 20 April, a battalion-sized element of Germans attempted to prevent the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG from seizing the town of Aš, just inside the Czechoslovakian border, 30 miles to the east, northeast of Bayreuth. After heavy fighting, the group, reinforced by the 358<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment drove the Germans from the town, taking 250 prisoners.<sup>130</sup> This action demonstrates the potential of the cavalry against a dismounted enemy when its firepower was paired with substantial dismounted forces of its own.

One of the most remarkable episodes in the history of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry began on 28 April. A Troop, 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron attacked and seized the town of Hostouň in Czechoslovakia in an effort to rescue Allied POWs. This town contained not only approximately 300 friendly prisoners of war, but also a remount station containing approximately 670 horses, including a significant number of the Lipizzaner Stallion breeding herd.<sup>131</sup> Once this was reported to General George S. Patton, he ordered these horses removed from Czechoslovakia, which was to fall under the Soviet occupation zone into Germany. Thus, shortly after the cessation of hostilities, on 12 May,

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<sup>129</sup> “42<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron After Action Report, April 1945,” 14.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>131</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Association, *The Ghosts of Patton's Third Army – A History of the Second U.S. Cavalry*, 294.

“Operation Cowboy” occurred where the cavalrymen returned to their equestrian roots and rode or herded this irreplaceable stock of horses into the American occupation zone.

The Second Cavalry Group would continue reconnaissance and screening operations inside Czechoslovakia until the official cessation of hostilities on 8 May. Shortly after the success of Operation “Cowboy” the group along with all remaining U.S. forces withdrew from Czechoslovakia and took up positions along the German side of the new border. There it would remain, first as part of the army of occupation, then as part of the American commitment to defend West Germany against the aggression of the newly formed Warsaw Pact. The group amassed an impressive combat record in the European theater, including participating in the deepest penetration of American forces into Nazi held territory with their assault into Czechoslovakia.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE THIRD CAVALRY GROUP “BRAVE RIFLES”

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Mechanized Cavalry Group (MCG), “Brave Rifles”, arrived off the Normandy Coast on 9 August 1944, with one squadron (the 3<sup>rd</sup>) disembarking at UTAH Beach, while the other (the 43<sup>rd</sup>) landed on OMAHA Beach. One of the most respected regiments in the United States Cavalry, and the former command of General George S. Patton, the Brave Rifles had served in France during World War 1, but their service had consisted almost entirely of service behind the lines operating remount stations, providing fresh horses for couriers and horse drawn supply and artillery. This time, the members of this venerable formation looked forward to a much more active role as the reconnaissance group for XX Corps, which by 10 August was fully involved in exploiting the success of Operation COBRA, fighting to maintain the corridor through which the rest of the Third Army was flowing. The corps had followed the VIII Corps in the breakout and was now in the process of beginning a wide turn to the east in order to outflank the German positions still holding in Normandy. The XV Corps was following the XX Corps, and would take the inside track of the turn, maintaining contact with First Army. The XII Corps would take the outside track of the turn, protecting the southern flank of Third Army as it assaulted towards Paris.<sup>132</sup>

The afternoon of 10 August saw the Brave Rifles swing immediately into action, with the squadrons widely separated. The commander of XX Corps, LTG Walton Walker, ordered the group to conduct reconnaissance east, between its widely scattered divisions that were in the process of shifting their attack from the south to the east. Then once the group reunited its

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<sup>132</sup> This order of events is extrapolated from analysis of maps from the following sources: Thomas E. Griess ed., *West Point Atlas for the Second World War – Europe and the Mediterranean* (Wayne, NJ: Avery Publishing Group, Inc., 1998) and, and Martin Blumenson, *United States Army in World War II: European Theater of Operations: Breakout and Pursuit* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Division of the Army, 1961).

squadrons on the eastern flank of the Corps, it was to continue reconnaissance to the east in order to identify enemy positions and protect the flank as the Corps attacked to the south. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron conducted reconnaissance and liaison duties between the 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (ID) near Evron, France and the 1<sup>st</sup> ID at Mayenne, France, a distance of approximately 14 miles, while the 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadron reconnoitered the region between the 80<sup>th</sup> ID and the 5<sup>th</sup> ID near Angers, a tremendous frontage of 47 miles. This movement took a little over a day, with linkup between the squadrons occurring at 0700 12 August.<sup>133</sup> The group then continued its movement east, ending on a line from Sées in the north to Blois in the South, a remarkable frontage of over 85 miles.<sup>134</sup> Due to the continuing light resistance from the Germans in the region, the Brave Rifles continued its reconnaissance further east, finally ending on the evening of 13 August along the line Orléans – Étampes, a mere 40 mile front for the cavalrymen. In three days, the group had covered approximately 120 miles, losing a single scout car in the process.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, the Brave Rifles had discovered that the entire southern flank of the German Seventh Army was exposed and ripe for an encircling assault. This discovery would lead to a series of successful attacks by the XV Corps that would contribute to the gutting of this German formation.<sup>136</sup> This type of zone reconnaissance has always been a part of the cavalry lexicon from ancient times to the present. That the troopers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG accomplished such a significant mission on their first outing in combat speaks well of the preparation and training of the unit prior to deployment. However, the cavalry was only able to move so fast and with so few casualties because it was operating in the rear areas of the Wehrmacht, and not against its front-line combat formations

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<sup>133</sup> “*Patton’s Ghost Troops*” – *After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, (Phoenix: 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Veteran’s Association, 1974), 49.

<sup>134</sup> “XX Corps After Action Report, 1 August 1944 – 31 August 1944,” record 220, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 5.

<sup>135</sup> “*Patton’s Ghost Troops*” – *After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 49.

<sup>136</sup> “XX Corps After Action Report, 1 August 1944 – 31 August 1944,” 5.

than to any inherent superiority in organization or equipment. Moreover, due to the extremely confused nature of the fighting in western France, the cavalry could take advantage of loosely defined front lines to infiltrate German positions or bypass strong-points where necessary.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, XX Corps shifted its direction of attack from the northeast to due east in order to prevent closing out XV Corps. The corps objective became the city of Chartres as well as seizing crossing points over the Seine River. Third Army detached the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron, sending them to assist XII Corps in flank security at this time, leaving the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG with only one squadron. The 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadron led the Corps in its movement to the Chartres region, having patrols already near the area as a result of the previous lunge across France. The cavalry moved slower on this assault as German resistance began to stiffen along the approaches to the Seine River. Although the cavalry could still bypass pockets of resistance, the small nature of most cavalry patrols combined with their light armor made patrolling inherently more dangerous as enemy opposition began to solidify. While a chance encounter with an anti-tank gun supported by a platoon of infantry could be a bad day for a tank or infantry company, it had the potential for disaster for a small cavalry patrol that typically consisted of an armored car and two jeeps. Thus, as the enemy began to appear more often, the cavalry had to proceed in a more deliberate fashion for survival.<sup>137</sup>

On 17 August, Wehrmacht defenses outside of the city of Étampes, approximately 30 miles east of Chartres, stopped the cavalry in their tracks, defeating every effort to penetrate, infiltrate, or bypass.<sup>138</sup> Seizure of Étampes by the cavalry would have helped isolate Chartres by the capture of one of the only major road junctions to that city outside of Paris still in German hands. The 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division (AD) had fought its way into the city on 15 August, but fierce

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<sup>137</sup> *“Patton’s Ghost Troops” – After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 49-50.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50.

counterattacks by the defenders had turned the battle into a fierce multiple day struggle that would eventually involve the 5<sup>th</sup> ID as well as substantial corps artillery support.<sup>139</sup> Thus, the capture of Étampes would have greatly facilitated the success of the corps' attack and also prevented the escape of the Wehrmacht formations fleeing the fighting around Chartres. However, the Brave Rifles did not possess the combat power to fight their way through such heavy resistance. In the end, this failure meant little to the corps as it succeeded in seizing Chartres, although victory at Étampes would have meant more Germans captured.

The following day, XX Corps ordered the group to reconnoiter east to identify crossings over the Seine River. Additionally, elements of the 43<sup>rd</sup> continued to patrol and conduct reconnaissance in the Chartres area. At one point during this operation, the 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadron was spread over 43 miles, with B troop engaged in combat near Rambouillet, 19 miles northwest of Étampes, while A and C troops fought their way into the vicinity of Fontainebleau on the Seine River, 24 miles east of Étampes.<sup>140</sup> The Brave Rifles' movements were more successful now as German resistance in the Paris region was collapsing, allowing greater freedom of maneuver to the lightly armored cavalry. However, the group (at this point, really only the 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadron) still encountered heavy resistance that often had to be bypassed in order to achieve its reconnaissance objectives.

On 20 August, XX Corps assigned a TD company as well as a combat engineer company to the group, assigning it the mission of protecting the western flank of the 7<sup>th</sup> AD as it attacked a German strongpoint near the city of Melun, along the Seine River 9 miles north of Fontainebleau. This drive was part of a larger corps assault to the Seine River on 21 August to

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<sup>139</sup> *The XX Corps: Its History and Service in World War II* (Osaka, Japan: XX Corps Association, 1951), 79.

<sup>140</sup> "Patton's Ghost Troops" – *After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 50.

seize a bridgehead and then continue operations eastward.<sup>141</sup> The extensive reconnaissance of the Brave Rifles allowed the corps to rapidly reach the river, and then conduct assault crossings on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. The group's participation in this assault was limited to shielding the 7<sup>th</sup> AD's flank as it seized the city of Melun. However, its earlier efforts greatly increased the odds of success for XX Corps as it breached the German defenses along the Seine.

The group crossed the Seine on the 25<sup>th</sup> of August at Tilly, a small town approximately four miles west of Melun, and one of the 7<sup>th</sup> AD's bridgeheads. Once across the river, the Brave Rifles continued their attack to the east, leading the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division in its drive to the Marne River. Here the cavalry truly 'earned their pay' discovering multiple road blocks and ambushes in front of the division. Lacking the combat power to fight through these positions themselves, the cavalymen passed on the locations and compositions of the enemy to the 7<sup>th</sup> AD, who, armed with this information made short work of these attempts at delaying actions.<sup>142</sup> Interestingly, this action is a textbook example of the kind of reconnaissance-only mission that was envisioned for the mechanized cavalry in 1942. Unfortunately, such an open battlefield as was presented south of Paris turned out to be more of an anomaly than the norm for combat in western and central Europe.

The 26<sup>th</sup> of August saw the return of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron from XII Corps, who linked up with the main body of the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG at Nogent sur Seine, 29 miles to the northwest of Troyes.<sup>143</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron then moved out in a zone reconnaissance to the Marne River as it screened the

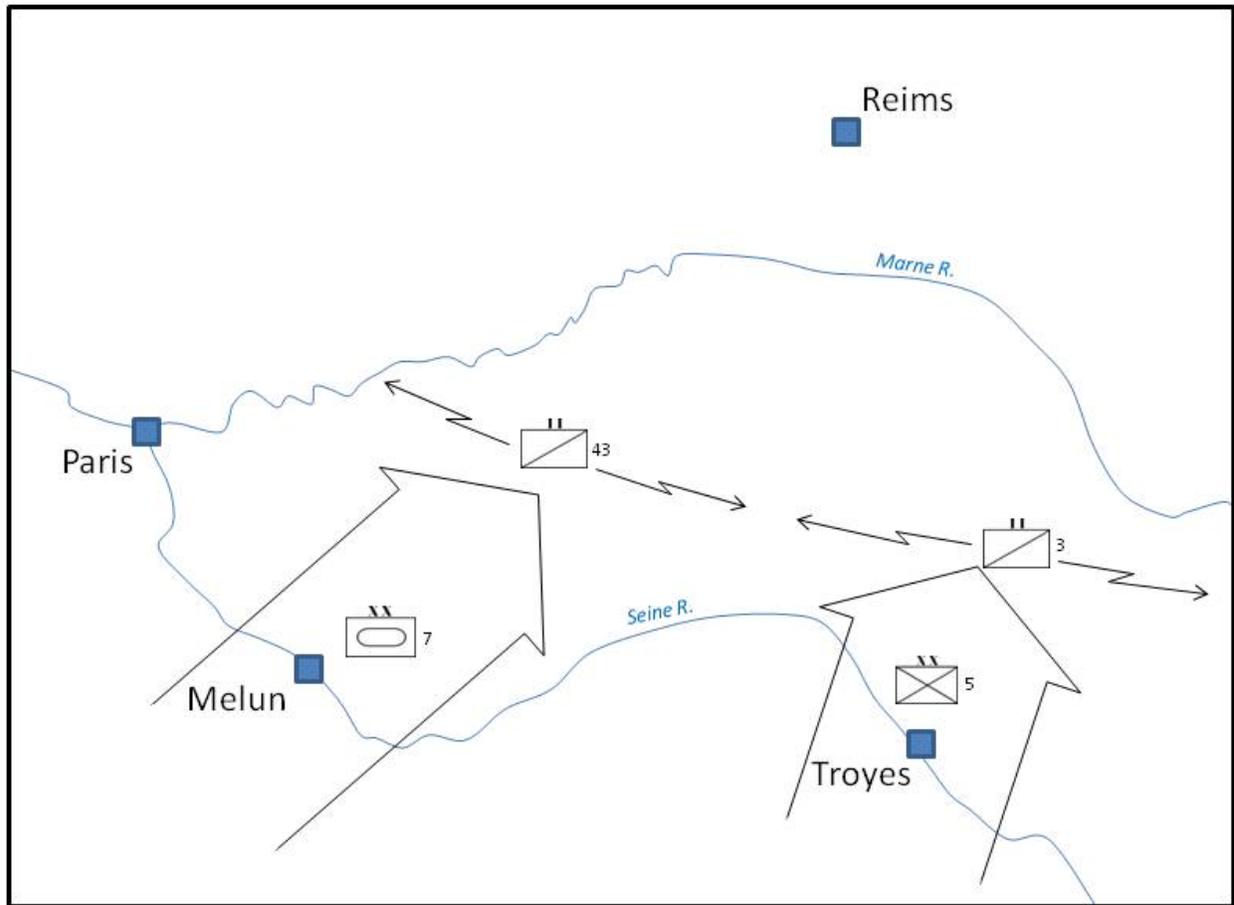
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<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>142</sup> *The XX Corps: Its History and Service in World War II*, 91.

<sup>143</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron had been relieved by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Group, who had been released from their mission along the Nantes-Angers region. Incidentally, the records of the XII Corps show this unit to be the 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadron, at least for a while, but the records of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Group, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron, and XX Corps show the detached unit to have been the 3<sup>rd</sup>. There seems to be no explanation for this discrepancy other than an error in the XII Corps record. Also of interest, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Group AAR records the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron as being attached to XXX Corps, an obvious error.; *"Patton's Ghost Troops" – After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 50.

5<sup>th</sup> ID in its attack to the Marne. Thanks to the efforts of both squadrons, XX Corps vaulted over the Marne River, and seized the important city of Rheims (see Map 4).



MAP 4. XX Corps Assault to Rheims 25-28 August 1944. Map courtesy of Mariann K. Nance

Following the capture of Rheims, the Brave Rifles rested a day, and on 30 August, led the corps assault to the Meuse River. XX Corps ordered the cavalry to conduct a zone reconnaissance bounded on the north by Sedan and in the south by St. Mihiel, a frontage of over 60 miles. Enemy defenses along the Aisne River prevented the 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadron from crossing, necessitating the commitment of Combat Command (CC) A, 7<sup>th</sup> AD to clear the road. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron, with the luxury of not having to contend with attempting an opposed river crossing, penetrated German delaying positions along the main roads, reaching Verdun and seizing its

bridges on the afternoon of 31 August.<sup>144</sup> Here the terrain played a significant role in success or failure. Where the terrain (and enemy situation) allowed the cavalry to use its mobility, they succeeded, where they were faced with an obstacle (such as the Aisne) and had to fight their way forward, the mechanized cavalry had to pass other units forward.

The beginning of September found the bulk of the XX Corps immobilized by a fuel shortage. However, the corps provided the lightly equipped Brave Rifles with enough supply to conduct probing reconnaissance missions to the Moselle River to set the conditions for future operations. On 2 September, a platoon of B troop, 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron penetrated all the way to Thionville, a distance of over 70 miles from their starting position. The platoon seized the Moselle River bridge in the town and held on for several hours before retiring due to the concentrated German response. The 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadron also managed to infiltrate several patrols to the Moselle, establishing observation points along the river.<sup>145</sup>

On 4 September, XX Corps ordered the group to advance to the Moselle River and attempt to seize any remaining bridges. The group attacked in column of squadrons, with the 3<sup>rd</sup> leading, with the 43<sup>rd</sup> trailing to exploit success. However, the group met intense resistance and were stopped short of the river.<sup>146</sup> During this operation, on 5 September, the group commander, COL Frederick Drury, along with a small patrol became trapped by German forces, and the colonel was captured along with some of his men.<sup>147</sup>

On 6 September, reacting to the failure of the cavalry to reach the river, the Corps Commander committed the 7<sup>th</sup> AD to the assault, with the Brave Rifles still in the lead. With the added weight of the 7<sup>th</sup> AD the cavalry were able to gain the river, but no bridgeheads were

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<sup>144</sup> "XX Corps After Action Report, 1 August 1944 – 31 August 1944," 13-14.

<sup>145</sup> "*Patton's Ghost Troops*" – *After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 51.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

seized, and the cavalry were withdrawn from the front to allow the line divisions to conduct a deliberate assault over the river.<sup>148</sup> The failures of the cavalry from 4 to 6 September demonstrate the weaknesses of the mechanized cavalry in high intensity combat, especially against an enemy in positions that cannot be bypassed. The lightly armed and armored cavalry simply did not have the firepower to bludgeon their way forward. The loss of the group commander during this critical operation did not help either. Of course, it is also notable that the divisions that followed also struggled to achieve success as well. The corps commander gambled on the cavalry being able to seize a crossing before resistance had hardened, but the Wehrmacht had had ample warning of his advance due to the nearly weeklong delay caused by the Third Army's fuel shortages to prepare their defenses. Against a well entrenched enemy equipped with heavy guns and tanks, the cavalry, unreinforced, stood no chance.

From 7 to 14 September the Brave Rifles moved to the flanks of the corps, the 43<sup>rd</sup> to the north to maintain contact with the V Corps of First Army, the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the South to establish contact with XII Corps. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron was further detached from the group and attached to the 5<sup>th</sup> ID. The 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadron faced a difficult fight in closing the gap between First and Third Armies, but by 14 September, had made contact with the 5<sup>th</sup> AD at Flaxweiler in Luxembourg.<sup>149</sup> The group was further aided in their efforts by the appointment of a new commander, COL James H. Polk, a personal selection by General George S. Patton. After establishing contact with the First Army, the 43<sup>rd</sup> received orders from XX Corps to patrol from Wormeldange, Luxembourg to Garche, France, along the Moselle River, a frontage of over 23 miles. The squadron would hold this front from 14 to 19 September, during which time the 23<sup>rd</sup> Headquarters 'Special Troops', 12<sup>th</sup> Army Group established a fake armored division in the area

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 52-53.

through the use of various methods.<sup>150</sup> The cavalry participated in this deception by denying the Germans the ability to patrol into the region to confirm or deny the presence of that unit. Thus, during the first half of September, the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG served not only as an economy of force for the XX Corps, but aided in a diversionary effort to draw German forces away from the main effort.

On 19 September, XX Corps established “Task Force (TF) Polk”, attaching the 135<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineer Battalion, 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Task Force (comprising two assault gun troops and a tank company of the 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group), and the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, Paris Division. These forces were added to provide the under-strength group (the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron though reattached, was still south patrolling a gap between the 90<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> IDs) with enough combat power to hold an additional eight miles of front while becoming more aggressive in patrolling.<sup>151</sup> The Task Force conducted reconnaissance across the river, identifying portions of three Wehrmacht formations (36<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadiers, 19<sup>th</sup> and 559<sup>th</sup> IDs) in its area of responsibility.

On 24 September, the Brave Rifles relieved the 357<sup>th</sup> and 358<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments of the 90<sup>th</sup> ID in order to allow that division to mass for its attacks against the north side of the Metz fortified region.<sup>152</sup> Also, at this time, the Task Force was placed under the control of the newly arrived 83<sup>rd</sup> ID, who assigned the cavalry a front of nearly 20 miles from Richemont, 5 miles south of Thionville, to Kontz, 10 miles north of Thionville.<sup>153</sup> The task force continued to hold its positions along the flank, allowing the infantry and armored divisions of the corps to mass their efforts against the Metz forts. As October began, XX corps attached the 135<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineer Battalion, the rest of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment Paris Division, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Paris Regiment (the French forces were all organized under Group Lorraine) the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 330<sup>th</sup> Infantry

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 53

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 53-54.

<sup>152</sup> These attacks, unfortunately, were unsuccessful despite application of large amounts of mass and firepower.

<sup>153</sup> “Patton’s Ghost Troops” – *After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 54.

Regiment, and the 807<sup>th</sup> Tank Destroyer (TD) battalion. Additionally, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron had now rejoined the group, providing COL Polk with a tremendous amount of combat power, though some of it perhaps dubiously equipped.<sup>154</sup> On 11 October, XX Corps relieved TF Polk from the 83<sup>rd</sup> ID and attached it to the 90<sup>th</sup> ID, as the 83<sup>rd</sup> ID left the corps and joined VIII Corps to the north. However, the cavalry's positions remained the same. On 13 October, XX Corps removed Group Lorraine from Task Force Polk, seriously curtailing the infantry strength of the cavalry.<sup>155</sup>

The remainder of the month saw a war of outposts with both sides sending patrols across the Moselle River attempting to gain insight into the other's intentions. Although there was a fair amount of give and take, the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG generally gave better than they received. As the month of November began, XX Corps resumed direct control of TF Polk as it completed its preparations for its offensive across the Moselle. This change in command relationship also brought about further changes in task organization. On 2 November, TF Polk consisted of its two organic squadrons, the 135<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineer Battalion, the 705<sup>th</sup> TD Battalion, and the 40<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery (FA) Group consisting of the 689<sup>th</sup> FA Battalion (155mm) and the 241<sup>st</sup> FA Battalion (105mm).<sup>156</sup> However, before the planned assault could begin in the Koenigsmacker area, a small battalion-sized German outpost on the west bank of the Moselle in Berg inside the cavalry's zone had to be reduced. The Germans in this position could identify forces moving up to conduct an assault crossing as well bring accurate fires on the planned staging areas as well.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 56. The Free French of the Paris division were notoriously short of crew served and anti-tank weapons, as evidenced by one battalion having a strength of 320 soldiers with 190 rifles, 12 heavy machine guns, and 13 BARs. The battalion possessed two trucks, and did not have uniforms for all its soldiers. "*Patton's Ghost Troops*" – *After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 59.

<sup>155</sup> "*Patton's Ghost Troops*" – *After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 62.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.



the hill, wounding five and capturing five.<sup>158</sup> The next morning, the 43<sup>rd</sup> squadron attacked the town itself with B Troop reinforced with a platoon of engineers, supported by F Company (the light tank company). The fighting for the town took a brutal four hours, and required the light tanks to spearhead the penetration into the town in order to protect the pinned down dismounted cavalymen. Additionally, the 705<sup>th</sup> TD Battalion suppressed German forces in the town of Malling, immediately across the Moselle, preventing their interference in the operation. Once the 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadron had secured the town, A troop attacked the high ground from which they had been repulsed the day before. The 689<sup>th</sup> FA Battalion preceded the attack with a massive barrage of eighty 155mm rounds in under three minutes.<sup>159</sup> After such a crippling blow, the Germans on the hill put up little resistance as A Troop recaptured the hill. The squadron captured a total of 45 German soldiers and inflicted an estimated 60 additional casualties.<sup>160</sup> Interestingly, over half of the casualties inflicted on the Germans seem to have occurred in the final stages when the assault guns in over watch opened fire on boats carrying soldiers attempting to escape to the east bank.<sup>161</sup> The cost to the cavalry was fairly substantial with four dead and thirty-six wounded.<sup>162</sup>

The attack on Berg demonstrated the power of the cavalry when focused against a small objective. Of particular note, the cavalymen were actually somewhat outnumbered, as prisoner interrogations reported that elements of three companies of the 713<sup>th</sup> German Infantry Regiment were in the town during the attack. However, the Germans did not have adequate anti-tank weapons, instead relying on mines to keep the American armor at bay. Once the attached engineers breached the German's defensive minefields, the American Stuart tanks were then able

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>160</sup> "XX Corps After Action Report, 1 November 1944 – 30 November 1944," record 220, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 12.

<sup>161</sup> Preston Utterback ed., *The 150 Year Saga of the 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S. Cavalry* (Phoenix: 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Veteran's Association, 1996), 145.

<sup>162</sup> "Patton's Ghost Troops" – *After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 69.

to move to positions where they could effectively engage the Wehrmacht positions and put them out of action with direct cannon fire. This suppressive fire, and the use of the tanks as cover, allowed the dismounted cavalry the opportunity to close with the remaining Germans and force them out of the village. The use of armor, combined with engineers and artillery, in this attack shows the true power of combined arms in the cavalry. Unfortunately, the most decisive elements of the action – the artillery that devastated the German hilltop position, the tank destroyers who suppressed German reinforcements, and the engineers who cleared the way for the tanks – were not organic elements of the cavalry and had to be provided from other sources. Furthermore, the success at Berg should be acknowledged as a victory against a lightly equipped formation that could not match the cavalry's weaponry. The casualties were bad enough against the forces that were there. The outcome would have been much different if the Germans had possessed either anti-tank guns or armor.

Regardless of the quality of the German defenders, the Brave Rifles had provided a major service to the 90<sup>th</sup> ID's assault by removing the threat to the potential bridgehead that Berg had posed. Additionally, the cavalry's screen along the Moselle prevented the Wehrmacht from identifying the build-up of the 90<sup>th</sup> ID in the Cattenom area. This was no small feat as the infantry had massed two full infantry regiments for the assault. According to later prisoner reports and captured documents, TF Polk had been so successful in their efforts that the attack at Koenigsmacker came as a complete surprise.<sup>163</sup> This role of providing a security zone to allow friendly forces to mass for an assault is one of the oldest missions in the mounted lexicon, and is still practiced to this day. The cavalry impose a 'fog of war' for the enemy, while creating as clear a picture as possible for their own forces. The Brave Rifles executed this mission nearly perfectly in early November 1944, though it is interesting to note that the entire mission was well

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<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 71; "XX Corps After Action Report, 1 November 1944 – 30 November 1944," 5.

beyond what had been envisioned for the mechanized cavalry when its doctrine was established in 1942.

On 9 November, the 90<sup>th</sup> ID's assault across the Moselle began, supported by TF Polk's artillery and assault guns. Due to the requirements of the assault, XX Corps stripped the task force of the 135<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineer Battalion and the 705<sup>th</sup> TD Battalion. As some consolation, the cavalrymen were given the 802<sup>nd</sup> TD Battalion (-). Additionally, on this day, Corps attached the task force to the 83<sup>rd</sup> ID, which was back under XX Corps control for the purposes of the offensive across the Moselle. The cavalrymen quickly moved to their new positions to the north along the river, relieving elements of the 83<sup>rd</sup> ID, so that they could participate in the fighting to the south. The Brave Rifles new front ran from Kontz, their old northern boundary to Oberbillig, Germany in the north, a frontage of over 20 miles. The group held these positions until 11 November, when the 83<sup>rd</sup> ID was returned to First Army, whereupon the cavalry returned to XX Corps control, losing the 802<sup>nd</sup> TD Battalion, but regaining their old friends, the 705<sup>th</sup> TD Battalion and the 135<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineer Battalion.<sup>164</sup>

In the middle of November, TF Polk moved across the Moselle River through the Koenigsmacker bridgehead that it had helped establish. Then the cavalry relieved elements of the 90<sup>th</sup> ID from the responsibility of holding the northern shoulder of the bridgehead, allowing the infantry to mass forces in their drive to the south to envelop the city of Metz. Simultaneously, the Brave Rifles moved east, mopping up German forces bypassed by the 10<sup>th</sup> AD as it had stormed through the region on a deeper envelopment of the city. XX Corps also ordered the cavalry to attack north to the vicinity of Saarburg, a major crossing over the Saar River, 19 miles to the northeast of Koenigsmacker. This move would accomplish two goals. The

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<sup>164</sup> These units might be forgiven for feeling a bit of whiplash from the rapid pace of attachment and detachment, but this process was fairly commonplace in the modular WW II American Army. *"Patton's Ghost Troops" – After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945, 71-72.*

first would be to seize a crossing over the Saar River. The second would be to protect the northern flank of the 10<sup>th</sup> AD and 90<sup>th</sup> ID as they encircled the city of Metz.

The Brave Rifles began their move on 14 November, with their drive to the north kicking off in earnest on 17 November. The next day saw both squadrons engaged in heavy urban combat as they fought from town to town north into the Saar-Moselle Triangle. 18 November saw the cavalymen advance a little over a mile on a five mile frontage. The addition of the M18 Hellcats of the 705<sup>th</sup> TD battalion proved decisive in much of the fighting as their 76mm high velocity cannons were able to destroy most German positions with a few well placed rounds, and were vastly superior to any organic firepower carried by the cavalry. The fighting around and in the town of Büschdorf, Germany was typical of the day's action. A company sized formation of Germans (approximately 100 men) entrenched behind roadblocks attempted to resist the efforts of C Troop (reinforced by a platoon of M18s and a squad of engineers) and F Company, 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadron as they assaulted into the town. Once again, the cavalry demonstrated an understanding of combined arms, by using its tanks and tank destroyers to suppress the enemy, its engineers to clear the roadblocks, and then dismounted cavalymen moving under the suppressive fire to clear the enemy from their positions. The next day, 19 November, TF Polk advanced to portions of the Siegfried Line. While the 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadron on the east flank made limited progress (one mile) seizing its objectives for the day, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron on the west flank met such determined resistance from heavily entrenched German forces in bunkers and pillboxes that they were obliged to withdraw to their start lines for the day.<sup>165</sup>

The fighting on 18 and 19 November again revealed the strengths and weaknesses of the mechanized cavalry in direct combat. The combined arms nature of the organization allowed the

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<sup>165</sup> "Patton's Ghost Troops" – *After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 72-74. "XX Corps After Action Report, 1 November 1944 – 30 November 1944," 14-21.

Brave Rifles to blend mounted and dismounted action very well. Unfortunately, their lack of organic dismounted strength as well as powerful tank cannons, meant that they were extremely reliant on other formations to achieve the desired effects, much like the fighting at Berg.

Interestingly, TF Polk found itself fighting for information in pitched combat as it probed the Siegfried Line, a role commonly envisioned in pre-war American cavalry doctrine, but wholly against that expected of the mechanized cavalry after 1942.

After the Brave Rifles encountered such heavy resistance in the Saar-Moselle triangle, XX Corps ordered the group to be relieved by the 10<sup>th</sup> AD in an attempt to use heavier combat power to force a way through. The cavalymen, once relieved, were to go into reserve, the first rest the group had received since 10 August.<sup>166</sup> The 10<sup>th</sup> AD tried for five days to break through the defenses that had stymied TF Polk, but ultimately failed. Thus, on 27 November, the cavalymen found themselves back along the same line, as XX Corps pulled the bulk of the 10<sup>th</sup> AD off the front to rest it in order to prepare for an exploitation to the east once the rest of the corps (the 5<sup>th</sup>, 90<sup>th</sup>, 95<sup>th</sup> IDs) crossed the Saar River.<sup>167</sup> XX Corps assigned the task force the responsibility for screening the entire base of the Saar-Moselle triangle, a frontage of seven wooded and hilly miles, studded with enemy defensive positions. The first week of December, XX Corps ordered TF Polk to take over the remainder of 10<sup>th</sup> AD's position, adding another two miles to their front, allowing the division to be completely pulled back into reserve, a move that would have great benefits for Third Army within the month.<sup>168</sup> Additionally, the cavalry's mission allowed the corps to continue its attack to close the rest of its formations to the Saar River without worrying about the threat of a counterattack from the north. The German forces in

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<sup>166</sup> "Patton's Ghost Troops" – *After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 72.

<sup>167</sup> "XX Corps After Action Report, 1 November 1944 – 30 November 1944," 21.

<sup>168</sup> "XX Corps After Action Report, 1 December 1944 – 31 December 1944," record 220, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 13.

the Saar-Moselle triangle had been extremely active and aggressive, so there existed a very real threat that a spoiling attack from this region could have dislocated the corps' main effort attack to the east.

During the Battle of the Bulge, the Brave Rifles held its position, though XX Corps reorganized after the loss of the 10<sup>th</sup> AD to the VIII Corps. The 90<sup>th</sup> ID was ordered out of its Saar River bridgehead, and TF Polk was attached to it. The contraction of the 90<sup>th</sup> ID's frontage allowed it to take some of the cavalry's responsibilities, shortening the group's line to a mere four miles of front.<sup>169</sup> The rest of December saw the Brave Rifles hold their positions, while conducting active patrolling to maintain current information on enemy positions and strengths to their front, as well as maintaining contact with their brethren of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dragoons across the Moselle River.

In the first part of January, XX Corps relieved TF Polk from the 90<sup>th</sup> ID and attached it to the 94<sup>th</sup> ID, in conjunction with those two divisions exchanging battle-space. As this change took place, the 94<sup>th</sup> ID moved the cavalry to a four mile front on the east flank of the division along the Saar River, as the division prepared for combat operations against the Saar-Moselle Triangle. As the 94<sup>th</sup> continued its attacks north, the Brave Rifles extended their front to ten miles, relieving 94<sup>th</sup> ID infantry regiments of the necessity of guarding the Saar River as they attacked to the north. The group also maintained contact with the 26<sup>th</sup> ID to the south in the Saarlautern bridgehead. The entire period was characterized by active patrolling and artillery exchanges, but little movement. At the end of the month, the cavalry were returned to XX Corps control.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> "Ibid., 1-26. *"Patton's Ghost Troops" – After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 80-83.

<sup>170</sup> "XX Corps After Action Report, 1 January 1945 – 31 January 1945," record 220, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II; *"Patton's Ghost Troops" – After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 84-92.

The month of February started much the same as the rest of the winter had for the Brave Rifles, as they continued their mission of holding the center of the XX Corps line between the twin efforts of the Saar bridgehead and the fighting in the Saar-Moselle triangle. On 21 February XX Corps attached the 5<sup>th</sup> Ranger Battalion to assist the cavalymen in maintaining their link with the 94<sup>th</sup> ID as it attacked to the north.<sup>171</sup> Task Force Polk used the rangers to clear some enemy pillboxes along their northern flank. Despite the benefits offered to the cavalry by the rangers, XX Corps withdrew them from the task force on 24 February. The group continued to maintain their positions until 27 February, when the corps readjusted its boundaries and organization in preparation for follow-on operations after the clearance of the Saar-Moselle triangle by the 10<sup>th</sup> AD and 94<sup>th</sup> ID. XX Corps assigned the 26<sup>th</sup> ID to assume most of TF Polk's and the 94<sup>th</sup> ID's battlespace along the Saar River, allowing the 94<sup>th</sup> ID to concentrate on its bridgehead at Saarburg. TF Polk was attached to the 94<sup>th</sup> ID in order to allow it to concentrate its infantry regiments at the main point of attack to the north east towards Trier. Thus, the cavalymen assumed a seven mile long squadron screen along the Saar from a point two miles south of Saarburg to just south of the town of Orscholz.<sup>172</sup> This action, although in a slightly different area, was much the same as what the Brave Rifles had been conducting for over two months by this point, though the quality of the German forces facing them had begun to deteriorate, being comprised primarily of fortress divisions and other hastily formed units.

On 2 March, the 94<sup>th</sup> ID ordered TF Polk across the Saar to assume defensive positions to the east and southeast of Trier as part of the effort to expand the overall Saar bridgehead. The group occupied approximately a seven mile defensive line along the Ruwer River relieving CCR,

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<sup>171</sup> "XX Corps After Action Report, 1 February 1945 – 28 February 1945," record 220, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 26-27.

<sup>172</sup> "Patton's Ghost Troops" – *After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 99-100.

10<sup>th</sup> AD.<sup>173</sup> This move allowed the corps to ‘lighten the load’ of the 10<sup>th</sup> AD, which was simultaneously sustaining a drive to the northeast along the north bank of the Moselle towards Koblenz, while maintaining forces in readiness to exploit bridgeheads over the Kyll or Ruwer rivers.<sup>174</sup> Additionally, the presence of the Brave Rifles holding the northern flank of the division allowed the 94<sup>th</sup> ID to concentrate its infantry regiments for a series of battles over the extremely brutal terrain south of Trier. This type of fighting required large amounts of infantry and was not conducive to rapid vehicular movement. Therefore the cavalry held their ground, allowing the infantry to ‘earn their pay’ to the south.

The period 3 to 16 March witnessed a war of raids and small battles for hilltops, much like what would be seen in Korea six years later (though without the extensive trench and bunker systems). As the terrain did not allow for much heavy vehicular maneuver, assault guns, tank destroyers and light tanks (by now the heavier and better armed 75mm M24 Chaffee) assumed static firing positions, or were held in reserve to counterattack enemy penetrations. Though the cavalry were perhaps undermanned for such a fight, their heavy allocation of machine guns allowed them to maintain their positions in the face of most attacks. Furthermore, as the German forces in the area did not possess large mechanized formations (which the restrictive terrain prohibited regardless) the task force was relatively secure in their, by now, accustomed role on the front line in a defensive posture.

On 8 March, XX Corps relieved TF Polk from the 94<sup>th</sup> ID, placing the cavalry under corps control. The following day, the newly arrived 16<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group was placed under the command of TF Polk, creating the 316<sup>th</sup> “Provisional” Cavalry Brigade, comprised of the TF

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<sup>173</sup> “XX Corps After Action Report, 1 March 1945 – 31 March 1945,” record 220, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 14-15.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

Polk with all prior TD, engineer, and artillery supports, the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG, and the 16<sup>th</sup> MCG.<sup>175</sup> The corps plan involved the cavalry making a diversionary attack on the north flank of the corps' line to draw German forces out of position prior to a general offensive set to begin on 13 March (see Map 6).<sup>176</sup> On 12 March, the 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadron attacked to seize high ground to the east of the Ruwer river as part of the larger brigade push to expand its positions across the Saar. Although the Germans stoutly held their positions with 88mm fire as well as intense artillery support, the cavalry managed to seize their limited objectives. The defender's artillery support was unusually high, noted by both the group and the corps, and was explained by the fact that the cavalry were the only force in the corps attacking at that time, thus attracting the attention of every German battery within range. The attacks had been conducted dismounted but supported by the light tanks of the squadron's tank company as well as attached tank destroyers. Casualties for the squadron (all three reconnaissance troops, the tank company, attached tank destroyer company) amounted to four dead, 23 wounded, and four missing. Four tank destroyers were also destroyed by 88s as they attempted to suppress those weapons.<sup>177</sup> This attack demonstrates the ability of the cavalry to fight in direct combat to seize limited objectives. Moreover, their opponents seemed to be of at least average quality, though perhaps outmatched in terms of total firepower available when compared with the 316<sup>th</sup> Brigade.

The next day, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron, holding positions to the south of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadron's newly gained ground, repulsed a small German counterattack of fifty soldiers supported by three tanks and artillery support. Despite being forced from their initial positions, the cavalrymen defeated the attack, destroying one tank and inflicting a number of casualties on the German

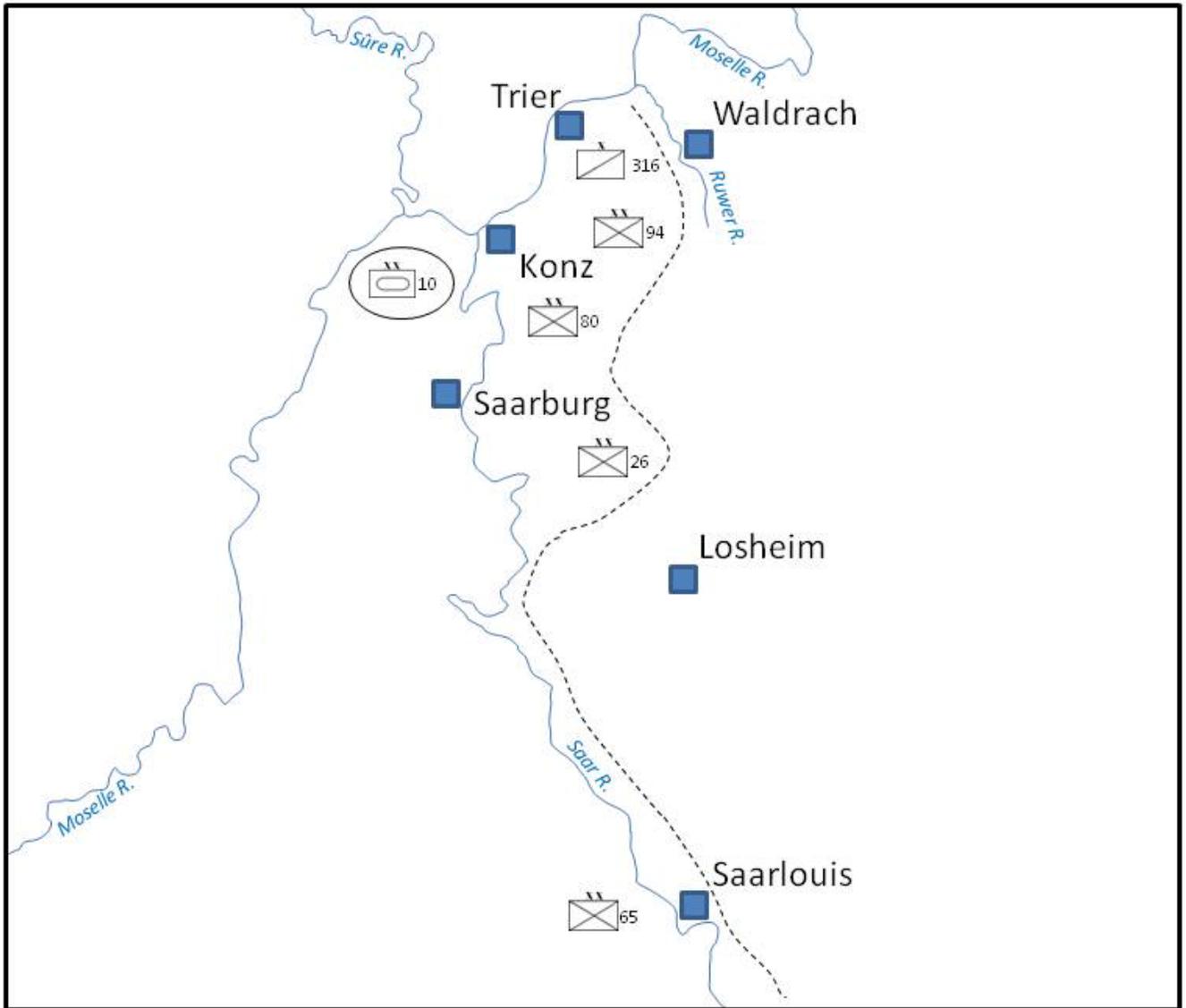
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<sup>175</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, the 16<sup>th</sup> MCG will be only briefly mentioned. For a more detailed appraisal of this group's time with the Third Army, please read chapter 5.

<sup>176</sup> Charles B. MacDonald, *United States Army in World War II: European Theater of Operations: The Last Offensive* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Division of the Army, 1950), 244.

<sup>177</sup> "Patton's Ghost Troops" – *After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 114.

infantry at the cost of three dead and thirteen wounded. The Germans also managed to destroy one armored car and damage two light tanks.<sup>178</sup> Although not a large battle, this action is indicative of the fighting that occupied the Brave Rifles throughout the first half of March, and also demonstrates the ability of the cavalry to hold their positions in open battle, given the right circumstances, attachments, and terrain.



MAP 6. XX Corps Prior to Initiating the Offensive to the Rhine River. 9 March 1945. Map courtesy of Mariann K. Nance

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 115.

The 316<sup>th</sup> Brigade's attacks to the east and south east continued, with all four squadrons participating. The advance was slow due to heavy German resistance, but steady. The terrain in this region was particularly difficult, consisting of the foothills of the Hunnsbrück Mountains, with a series of wooded ridges running from the south to the Moselle River, directly across the corps' line of attack. The Brave Rifles discovered that they could use their mobility to quickly move their troops to the fight, but that most of their actual combat was conducted on foot, much like any other formation.<sup>179</sup> On 16 March, B Troop of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadron and a platoon of F Company (the tank company) were ambushed as they attempted to seize the highway intersection three miles to the east of Fell. German forces opened up at close range with 88mm cannon fire, destroying the entire platoon of tanks and forcing the patrol back with twenty men wounded or captured.<sup>180</sup> Additional subsequent attempts to reconnoiter the enemy position revealed no further information, but cost four additional troopers missing in action. The German position was eventually outflanked by elements of XII Corps, and assessment of the enemy positions revealed that it had been held by at least a battalion with four 88mm guns and four 105mm guns.<sup>181</sup> This fight demonstrates the inherent weakness of the cavalry as organized, leading to an overall lack of survivability. Although such a position would have been an immense obstacle to any formation, a platoon of light tanks operating well in front of heavy combat forces was simply easy meat for four 88mm guns and a battalion of infantry. Cavalry can only do its job of finding and fixing the enemy if it survives to report. A line of last positions reported does very little to aid the higher commander.

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<sup>179</sup> Incidentally, this realization had long been an assumption of American horse cavalry doctrine, a point that is often forgotten in the denigration of the horse cavalry advocates of the 1930s.

<sup>180</sup> Though the numbers are left out of the AAR, a typical tank platoon of the time possessed five tanks, in this particular case, M24 Chaffees.

<sup>181</sup> *"Patton's Ghost Troops" – After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 116.

On the afternoon of 16 March, XX Corps halted the 316<sup>th</sup> Brigade's attack. The rest of the corps' attacks had met success (though still facing determined if disjointed defenses) and the efforts of the cavalry brigade were no longer necessary on that front. Consequently, the 16<sup>th</sup> MCG, as well as all remaining TD and engineer attachments, were removed from the control of the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG was ordered to the rear to become a part of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) Reserve. Though the direct impact of the cavalry's actions in this offensive may be hard to assess, a force of two cavalry groups, the size of one infantry Regimental Combat Team (RCT) (the cavalry group was long on firepower, but short on personnel), had attacked on a divisional frontage, allowing the corps to mass its efforts where it willed, while also steadily pressuring the enemy in its zone, preventing the Germans from conducting an economy of force mission there as well. In its short existence, the 316<sup>th</sup> Provisional Cavalry Brigade had advanced approximately 15 miles.<sup>182</sup>

No sooner had the last elements of the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG closed on the group's assembly area in Trier on 19 March, than XX Corps ordered the Brave Rifles back into the fight, this time to support the 65<sup>th</sup> ID. This division had held the line of the Saar river on the southern edge of the corps while the rest had continued the attack to the east-southeast. The result was a pocket of German forces stuck in a wedge on the east bank of the Saar river near Saabrücken with the 65<sup>th</sup> ID to their front, other XX Corps elements (26<sup>th</sup> ID and 10<sup>th</sup> AD) to their rear, and 7<sup>th</sup> Army formations (70<sup>th</sup> ID of XXI Corps) closing from the south. XX Corps had ordered the 65<sup>th</sup> ID to clear this pocket before assuming duty as the corps reserve. On 20 March, the 65<sup>th</sup> ID sent the 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadron to the south, where it protected the division's southern flank along a frontage of ten miles and maintained contact with XXI Corps to the south. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron moved in front of the division's main body, protecting it against enemy delaying efforts. A single company of

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<sup>182</sup> *The XX Corps: Its History and Service in World War II*, 296.

the 245<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineer Battalion was attached to the cavalry in support of their efforts. German defenses in the area had crumbled after the 65<sup>th</sup> ID had forced a crossing of the Saar River, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG's advance was swift and virtually unopposed. The mission took approximately two days to accomplish, at the end of which the cavalry were again moved to rest areas in the corps rear.<sup>183</sup> During this period the troopers assisted in guarding temporary POW camps in Kaiserslautern. On 26 March XX Corps ordered the Brave Rifles forward to protect bridges over the Main and Rhine rivers in the Mainz region following the assault crossing of that river a few days earlier.<sup>184</sup>

On 29 March, XX Corps ordered the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG to the front of the corps to lead the exploitation from the Rhine Bridgehead. With the 6<sup>th</sup> AD to the north and the 4<sup>th</sup> AD to the south, and the 65<sup>th</sup> ID trailing, the Brave Rifles moved out at top speed against light resistance. By the end of the day, the group had covered 25 miles, and was now in the northern suburbs of Frankfurt. The next several days witnessed a rapid advance as the cavalry led the corps deeper into Germany towards the Fulda River with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron on the north and the 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadron to the south (see Map 7). However on 31 March, the cavalymen met stiff German resistance to the west of the Fulda River, south of Kassel. The Wehrmacht had assembled a large force comprised of elements of the 5<sup>th</sup> Fallschirmjäger Division, the 6<sup>th</sup> SS Mountain Division, and other hastily assembled formations backed by tanks, anti-tank guns, protected by minefields and field fortifications.<sup>185</sup> These defenses had also stopped the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> ADs to the flanks as well. Thus, the cavalry moved to a defensive posture to protect the 65<sup>th</sup> ID as it moved up to prepare to assault through this new defensive belt. This advance demonstrates the true potential of cavalry

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<sup>183</sup> "Patton's Ghost Troops" – *After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 118-119.

<sup>184</sup> *The XX Corps: Its History and Service in World War II*, 330-331; "Patton's Ghost Troops" – *After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 120.

<sup>185</sup> "Patton's Ghost Troops" – *After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 123.

in a fluid situation. If the Brave Rifles had been equipped with more combat power, the group could have conducted probing attacks to ascertain weak points in the enemy positions prior to the attack of the 65<sup>th</sup> ID, perhaps even achieving a small penetration. However, the organization of the cavalry did not allow for such a move, though pre-war doctrine would have advised just such a course of action. Still, the cavalry had advanced over ninety miles in three days, a substantial achievement even with the near collapse of German resistance, and allowed the 65<sup>th</sup> ID to move from the Rhine to the Fulda River in trucks, without having to dismount and fight.<sup>186</sup>

The group spent the first couple days of April conducting reconnaissance of the German positions to their front in preparation for the 65<sup>th</sup> ID's attack. On 2 April, XX Corps launched a coordinated attack with the 65<sup>th</sup> ID, the 4<sup>th</sup> AD, and the 6<sup>th</sup> AD, completely rupturing the German positions along the Fulda River. That same day, the group was relieved by the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG as the VIII Corps assumed responsibility for XX Corps' sector. While waiting for the larger corps reorganization to shake out, XX Corps ordered the Brave Rifles to clear the forests and roads leading into Kassel while the 80<sup>th</sup> ID cleared the city. The majority of this mission posed no difficulty for the cavalrymen except for a determined defense of the towns of Obervellmar and Heckerhausen, three miles to the north of Kassel, on the west bank of the Fulda River, by a company of German infantry supported by twelve 88mm guns.<sup>187</sup> The group did not close with and engage this garrison, but instead chose to stand off and blast them with concentrated artillery fire.

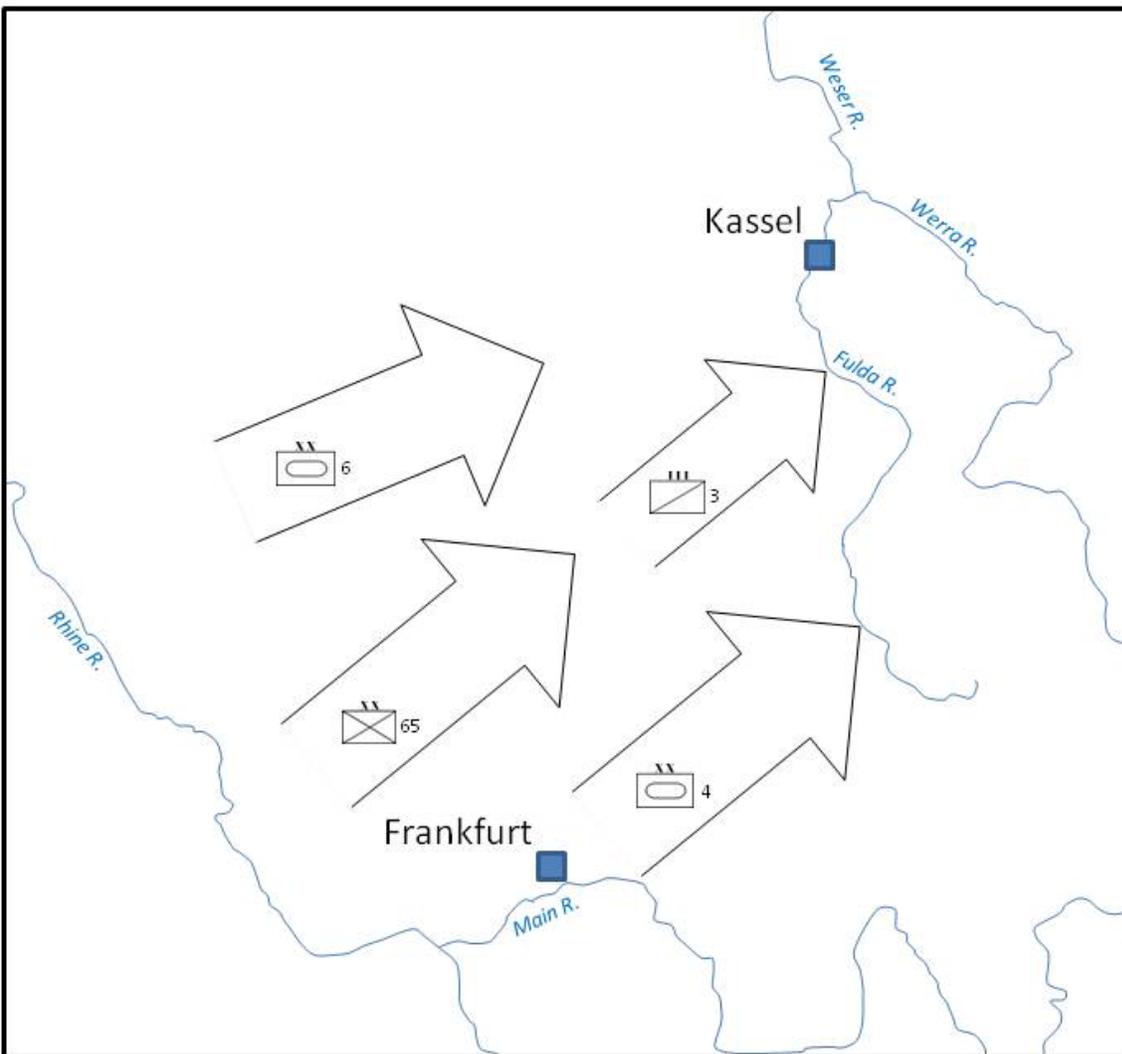
On 6 April, the group, now reinforced with engineers, and tank destroyers, moved into assembly areas to await further orders. The next three days saw the cavalry move from one position to the other along the Kassel pocket as the XX Corps slowly reduced the German forces

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<sup>186</sup> Utterback, 230.

<sup>187</sup> "Patton's Ghost Troops" – *After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 128.

inside. On 9 April, the group prepared for further operations as the 80<sup>th</sup> ID cleared the Erfurt-Weimar area. On 10 April, the 80<sup>th</sup> and 76<sup>th</sup> IDs penetrated the German defensive positions, and the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Armored Divisions passed through them to exploit the breakthrough. The Brave Rifles' orders to protect both flanks of the corps while also maintaining continuous contact between the fast moving armored divisions leading the corps and the slower infantry divisions behind them.



MAP 7. XX Corps' Assault to the Fulda River in Late March 1945. Map courtesy of Mariann K. Nance

By 13 April, the corps was approaching the Czechoslovakian border, with the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG scattered throughout the corps zone, weaving its elements together with communications, as well as maintaining contact with V and VIII Corps on the flanks. On 15 April, Third Army halted XX Corps' drive to the east and reoriented it to the south. On 17 April, the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG and the 80<sup>th</sup> ID remained with the corps and began a 120 mile move to the south to assembly areas around Bamberg.<sup>188</sup> Upon arrival at the staging areas, the group's new task organization included the 5<sup>th</sup> Ranger Battalion, two companies of the 811<sup>th</sup> TD Battalion (M18), and a company of engineers from the 245 Combat Engineer Battalion.<sup>189</sup>

On 22 April the cavalry moved to the front of the corps to begin the attack, with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron leading the 71<sup>st</sup> ID and the 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadron leading the 65<sup>th</sup> ID. Based upon past experience, the group commander task organized his formation specially for this mission: "Using the six reconnaissance troops of the Group as the basic unit, each of the reconnaissance troop[s] had a light tank platoon (M24) attached, a TD Platoon (M18), a company of [r]angers and a squad of [e]ngineers."<sup>190</sup> These small battle-groups possessed enough combat power to deal with most of the remaining German resistance in Bavaria, and proved highly successful in protecting the infantry divisions of the corps as they attacked towards Regensburg and the Danube River. Once the 65<sup>th</sup> and 71<sup>st</sup> IDs reached the Danube, the Brave Rifles moved to protect the corps' northern flank. On 28 April, the group crossed the Danube River in a continuation of the attack to the south. The following day, the cavalry captured a depot containing "95,000 large gas bombs with the capacity to kill every person in Bavaria."<sup>191</sup> By the end of the month the cavalry had led the corps nearly to the Austrian border along the Isar River. Additionally, as the

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<sup>188</sup> *The XX Corps: Its History and Service in World War II*, 374.

<sup>189</sup> "Patton's Ghost Troops" – *After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 140.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 140. Of particular note, with the exception of the ranger company, this task organization bears a striking resemblance to a modern heavy cavalry troop.

<sup>191</sup> "Patton's Ghost Troops" – *After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945*, 142.

threat against the group diminished, XX Corps removed most of its attachments, leaving it with only a company of the 260<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineer Battalion.

On 4 May the group crossed the Inn River and continued to move east protecting the corps' move to the east as it attempted to link up with the advancing Soviet forces. On 6 May, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron liberated the concentration camp at Ebensee in Austria. The next day, the group received orders to cease all offensive operations in preparation for VE day on 8 May. At this point the cavalry were over 50 miles deep into Austria. Eleven days later, on 19 May, General George Patton, the 28th Colonel of the Regiment, celebrated the 99<sup>th</sup> birthday of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Regiment with the troopers, lauding them for their achievements.<sup>192</sup> The "Brave Rifles" had led XX Corps across France, Germany, and Austria, fighting for information, protecting the main body divisions, and fighting as infantry in economy of force missions, all in direct contravention to established army doctrine. During the group's nine months in combat, it inflicted over 43,000 casualties (dead, wounded, captured) on the German forces, a huge number for a group that was authorized fewer than 1500 men and officers.<sup>193</sup>

Although hostilities were in Europe had come to a close, the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadrons were alerted for rapid movement back to the United States in preparation for operations in the China-Burma-India theater against Japan. The group headquarters was to remain in Europe taking charge of a displaced persons camp, primarily occupied by concentration camp survivors.<sup>194</sup> The end of the war in the Pacific would find the members of the group training in the United States for combat against the Japanese.

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<sup>192</sup> Utterback, 227.

<sup>193</sup> "History of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Regiment," 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment Website, accessed 10 January 2011; available from [http://www.hood.army.mil/3d\\_acr/Unit%20Lineage/Regimental%20History.aspx](http://www.hood.army.mil/3d_acr/Unit%20Lineage/Regimental%20History.aspx).

<sup>194</sup> *World War II Letters of James H. Polk, 1944 – 1945*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment Museum collection, 187.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE 6<sup>TH</sup> CAVALRY GROUP

Throughout the day on 9 and 10 July 1944, the 6<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Cavalry Group (MCG), including the 6<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> Squadrons, debarked from landing craft in Normandy to join the “great crusade” to liberate Europe. The 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry stood as one of the proudest and most unique regiments of the old army, having been the last regular cavalry regiment raised before the outbreak of hostilities in the Civil War. Additionally, the “Unicorn” was the only American cavalry regiment to have served in the China Relief Expedition in 1900. The regiment had served with General John Pershing in the Mexican Punitive Expedition, though their service in the First World War had been exclusively behind the lines in a rear security role. Now the 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry stood poised to once again enter the field of battle in a role that would make them the most widely deployed regimental-size formation in the U.S. Army.

Prior to the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG departing England, Third Army had decided to detach the group from its parent corps, XV Corps, and assign the Unicorn a demanding Army-level mission. As a result of General George Patton’s previous combat experiences in North Africa and Italy, he desired a direct form of intelligence from the battlefield straight to his headquarters, bypassing the traditional reporting channels, thereby enabling more rapid decision-making at the field army level. The 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry had been chosen for this task, a mission that would be labeled the Army Information Service (AIS).<sup>195</sup> One squadron would fulfill the duties of the AIS, while the other in conjunction with the associated parts of the AIS squadron not needed for that role (the tank

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<sup>195</sup> *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad* (Sixth Cavalry Association, 1951), 41.

company and assault gun troop) would serve as a security force for the Army headquarters and “hip pocket” reserve for the Army Commander.<sup>196</sup>

While the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG awaited the activation of Third Army, it spent the month of July providing security for that headquarters and preparing for its role, a task involving the issue of several sets of non-standard radio trucks to assist in extra long-range communications. Additionally, plans were finalized for the execution of the AIS. The two squadrons (the 6<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>) would rotate on a 21 day cycle.<sup>197</sup> Generally, a reconnaissance troop was assigned to every corps headquarters (with a troop from the off-cycle squadron assisting as necessary), with platoons (detachments) to every division. At times of increased fluidity, sections (typically two jeeps and an M8 greyhound with radio support) could be further assigned to the regimental level.<sup>198</sup> All these detachments then reported directly to the squadron operations center, co-located with the Third Army headquarters. This procedure dramatically sped up information flow to the Army Headquarters, as well as improved the accuracy, as raw data flowed straight to the Army operations center, without being filtered through so many layers as to be unrecognizable from the original report.

On 1 August 1944, Third Army became operational and assumed command of VIII, XII, XV, and XX Corps, then involved in conducting and exploiting the success of Operation COBRA.<sup>199</sup> The 28<sup>th</sup> Squadron (supplemented by B Troop, 6<sup>th</sup> Squadron) provided an initial set of fifteen detachments, spread across the four corps and eleven divisions of the Third Army. An additional detachment (for a total of sixteen) provided command and control for all AIS troopers

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<sup>196</sup> *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad*, 63. The term ‘hip pocket reserve’ is an informal military term that implies a formation that a senior commander retains for use in missions he deems important. It is different from an operational or tactical reserve in that it is generally smaller and figures less into subordinate unit planning. It also not normally designated as a reserve in operations order.

<sup>197</sup> *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad*, 65.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>199</sup> “Third Army Operations Diary, August” record 103, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 1 August.

in the Brittany Peninsula. The standard time for an AIS message to go from battlefield to Army headquarters averaged two hours, twenty minutes, while the conventional channels took eight to nine hours.<sup>200</sup>

The AIS detachments moved across Brittany and central France with their assigned headquarters, providing such accurate and up-to-date intelligence that the official history of the northern France campaign states that “on occasion... the army staff was better informed on a particular situation than the corps directing the operation.”<sup>201</sup> As the distances between the corps of the army grew, problems became apparent in the communications equipment that had not been fully tested prior to the operation due to the need for the army to maintain radio silence prior to COBRA.<sup>202</sup> The AIS detachments improvised by acquiring motorcycles, which were used for couriers. The cavalry’s bantams (jeeps) were also pressed into service as retransmission vehicles, enabling the widely scattered formations of the Third Army to communicate.<sup>203</sup>

During the early days of the Brittany campaign, the 6<sup>th</sup> Armored Division (AD) experienced tremendous difficulties in communicating with VIII Corps headquarters as the division rapidly advanced towards the city of Brest. The corps frequency was overloaded, requiring the division to fight for space and time to communicate with the corps. Moreover, as the 6<sup>th</sup> AD was the most distant formation, its radio calls were the most faint, and could be ‘stepped on’ with greater frequency.<sup>204</sup> The AIS helped alleviate this division’s communications

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<sup>200</sup> *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad*, 64.

<sup>201</sup> Martin Blumenson, *United States Army in World War II: European Theater of Operations: Breakout and Pursuit* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Division of the Army, 1961), 350.

<sup>202</sup> *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad*, 63; Blumenson, 352.

<sup>203</sup> *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad*, 63-64.

<sup>204</sup> Blumenson, 352. The phrase ‘stepped on’ refers to a condition wherein two stations on a radio frequency are broadcasting simultaneously. The stronger signal will override the weaker, so that the intended recipient will only hear that message. Although divisions had similar radio equipment, closer stations to the corps headquarters would have had a stronger signal at the corps command post. When large distances are involved, this

problems by providing an additional channel of communications that was not jammed with corps level traffic. Moreover, the cavalry were more heavily armed than the ad hoc couriers the division had been relying upon, and thus could fight their way through minor resistance to deliver messages as well.<sup>205</sup> Although communications difficulties continued to plague the 6<sup>th</sup> AD and VIII Corps throughout their operations in Brittany, it is doubtful whether any form of meaningful communications could have occurred without the participation of the AIS.

As the month of August wore on, the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG continued in its dual role as AIS and security for Third Army headquarters. On 27 August, Third Army ordered the cavalry to send reconnaissance forces south to reconnoiter the Loire River from Orleans to Saumur, a stunning distance of 100 miles. A single reinforced troop from the 28<sup>th</sup> Squadron (Troop A) departed and spent two days covering that distance, ensuring the destruction of all bridges in the area and that no strong German forces were attempting to drive north into the Army's wide open flank.<sup>206</sup> The 4<sup>th</sup> AD had also screened this flank in its move to the east, but that had been more than a week prior, and the area had since only been covered by the XIX Tactical Air Force and the very thinly spread 83<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division (ID).<sup>207</sup> The cavalymen met little opposition, but their presence provided the army headquarters with at least a measure of peace of mind until the 83<sup>rd</sup> ID could muster enough combat power in the region.

This screen mission attests to the mobility and flexibility of the cavalry. No other unit could have traversed this distance in such a short period of time. Moreover, although the cavalry were too lightly armed to have stopped a determined assault, their radio assets and prior

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problem is exacerbated as neither the station being 'stepped on' or the other station might not even realize what is going on, as they may not hear the other party, but only the higher powered corps signal.

<sup>205</sup> Blumenson, 353.

<sup>206</sup> "6<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Cavalry Group AAR August 1944," record CAVG6, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 27 August.

<sup>207</sup> Don M. Fox, *Patton's Vanguard: The United States Army Fourth Armored Division* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003), 83; *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad*, 66.

communications experience allowed them to remain in communications with higher headquarters much easier than any other company sized formation in the army. Additionally, the combined arms nature of the cavalry allowed a tank-motorized team to be quickly assembled within a single day with almost no issues with interoperability of the units, as they all came from the same battalion level headquarters.

By the beginning of September, the Third Army stretched a tremendous 475 miles from Brest to the Moselle River.<sup>208</sup> Throughout this huge zone, the 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry's AIS squadron aided the Army commander in maintaining a timely information flow in what would have otherwise been a communications disaster. As the members of the AIS all came from the same squadron, they were able to utilize their much less crowded battalion, company and platoon radio nets to relay information from one detachment to another, much like a radio pony express. This ability to move information so quickly allowed Patton a degree of flexibility and battlefield awareness not often possible in combat, and nearly unheard of for such a large fight. Although the assault across France involved huge command and control difficulties, the mere fact that the Army Headquarters was able to manage such a large formation (at one point four corps) over a vast area speaks to the herculean efforts of the cavalry in support of the communications fight. Thus, the problems that existed would have been much worse without the presence of the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG operating in a behind the scenes role.

On 5 September, the commander of the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG, LTC James Polk, was relieved by the original commander, COL Fickett, who had missed the first month of combat due to injuries sustained in a traffic accident in June. Polk would move to command of the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG, then operating in Brittany, but General Patton immediately pulled him from that group after a mere three days with that unit so that he could replace the now-missing COL Drury, commander of the

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<sup>208</sup> Robert S. Allen. *Patton's Third U.S. Army - Lucky Forward* (New York: Manor Books Inc., 1947), 104.

3<sup>rd</sup> MCG.<sup>209</sup> The direct intervention of an Army commander on a regimental level assignment may seem somewhat odd, however, it must be remembered that Patton was at heart a cavalryman. He surely understood the need for the best people to be in command of the cavalry groups, and at the time, the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG was at the front of one of Patton's main efforts in the drive to the east. Polk had been in close proximity to Patton now for a month in his role as commander of the AIS and security for Third Army HQ, and thus the Army commander had ample opportunity to gain an appreciation for his skills. Additionally, as Patton had been the 28<sup>th</sup> Colonel of the 3<sup>d</sup> Cavalry, some personal feelings in making sure his prior command was in the best hands possible were surely present as well.

On 18 September, Third Army ordered a task force comprised of the assault gun troops (E/6<sup>th</sup> Squadron, E/28<sup>th</sup> Squadron) and the tank company of the 6<sup>th</sup> Squadron (F/6<sup>th</sup> Squadron) with minor support elements to support the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG (TF Polk) in its operations along the Moselle River. This task force would serve yeoman work with TF Polk, providing fire support for numerous operations until 30 September, when the tanker and gunners returned to the control of the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG. This action also allowed these portions of the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG to gain valuable combat experience rather than wasting away guarding army headquarters.<sup>210</sup>

As the Third Army's operations began to solidify during the month of September, AIS operations became less crucial due to the ability of headquarters being able to establish more

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<sup>209</sup> *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad*, 67. An interesting aside is that COL Polk had been the executive officer for the 106<sup>th</sup> Cavalry at Fort Hood as it mobilized, then deployed with them to England, and then onto Normandy, where he had been given temporary command of the 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry. Thus COL Polk would have been a key participant in four of the six cavalry groups assigned to the Third Army – in order: 106<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>. A confusing note is that COL Polk in both his wartime letters and oral history in 1988 describes taking command of the 14<sup>th</sup> MCG around Brest, and not the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG. Referral to the original letters also states that COL Polk went to the 14<sup>th</sup> MCG. There does not seem to be an explanation for this discrepancy. The history of the 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry group states that COL Polk went to the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG, so that is what is used in this chapter.

<sup>210</sup> *“Patton's Ghost Troops” – After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945* (Phoenix: 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Veteran's Association, 1974), 53-56.

permanent (and efficient) communications methods. Additionally, when General Omar Bradley, commander of the U.S. 12<sup>th</sup> Army Group, relieved the army of responsibility for Brittany and the VIII Corps, the distance from the farthest army element to the headquarters dramatically dropped. Additionally, at the end of the month, XV Corps departed Third Army for Seventh Army.<sup>211</sup> This now left Third Army with two corps concentrated in the Metz-Nancy region, as opposed to four corps spread the length of France.

Weather also began to hamper AIS operations, as the rain and mud of October seriously hindered the motorcycle couriers that had been so crucial earlier in the fighting. However, the static nature of the fighting in September and October allowed for the use of carrier pigeons, with the first birds deployed at the corps level on 8 October. Although the loss rate for birds was rather small (3.6% for October), the unit records report that this method “proved to be not as rapid as radio communication.”<sup>212</sup> However, the pigeons provided a useful alternative when radios failed.

At the beginning of November, Patton ordered the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG to ensure AIS duties only involved one squadron in order for the other squadron to be used for offensive operations at the direct discretion of the Army commander. As part of this plan, Third Army attached the 5<sup>th</sup> Ranger Battalion, C/602<sup>nd</sup> Tank Destroyer (TD) Battalion, and B/293<sup>rd</sup> Combat Engineer Battalion to what became known as Task Force (TF) Fickett.<sup>213</sup> The TF then spent the remainder of the month of November training as a unit in preparation for general combat operations.

On 1 December, Third Army committed TF Fickett to XX Corps as that formation attacked to the Saar River. A German salient with elements of the German 36<sup>th</sup> ID had

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<sup>211</sup> “XV Corps After Action Report 1 September 1944 – 30 September 1944,” record 215, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, September, 17.

<sup>212</sup> “History of the AIS October 1944,” record CAVG6, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 3.

<sup>213</sup> *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad*, 71.

developed between XX Corps to the north and XII Corps to the south.<sup>214</sup> However, as the main efforts of either corps were well to the north or south of the region, committing major elements of line divisions would have diluted their efforts - thus TF Fickett's presence on the battlefield. They relieved elements of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Squadron, 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG at Saint Avold, 15 miles to the southwest of Saarbrücken and the Saar River, on 1 December and prepared to begin their attack the next day. The TF organized for combat with each of the three recon troops (the 28<sup>th</sup> Squadron was detached on AIS duty) reinforced by a company of rangers, a platoon of assault guns, and a squad of engineers.<sup>215</sup>

The TF attacked on 2 December on a two mile front against the towns of Carling and L'Hôpital, approximately three miles from Saint Avold without artillery support. The Germans put up fierce resistance, and even with the addition of a full battalion of rangers, the cavalry were unable to clear the two objectives until three days later on 5 December, when they received massive artillery support. The next two days saw the cavalry continue their attack against weakening resistance to the Saar River, where they were stopped due to the inability of the XII Corps to reduce the fortified town of Forbach to the south which would have threatened any further penetration.<sup>216</sup> This attack destroyed a salient that had threatened the XX Corps Saar bridgehead at Saarlautern without the commitment of main corps forces.<sup>217</sup> Though this action was not a major effort, it was a regimental-sized battle that would have otherwise drawn off a precious RCT needed for the main effort.

The difficulties encountered by TF Fickett in clearing the small objective of L'Hôpital also highlight the limitations of the cavalry. The 6<sup>th</sup> MCG, especially when it only had one

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>217</sup> Saarlautern is now known as Saarlouis. The name changed around 1945.

squadron present, did not have enough combat power to seize two firmly held objectives without massive reinforcement. The addition of a ranger battalion, by itself, nearly doubled the amount of soldiers in the task force, and increased the number of soldiers available for infantry operations by another order of magnitude. The cavalry did possess the firepower in this particular case to punch their way through enemy defenses thanks to a lack of German armor, but without the rangers, their attack would have failed.

On 8 December, TF Fickett relieved a battalion of the 11<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment (5<sup>th</sup> ID) of its positions along the Saar River, and the next day, the cavalry relieved the 10<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment (5<sup>th</sup> ID) of their positions along the river as well. This left the cavalry manning a sector from Bous in the north, three miles to the southeast of Saarlautern, to the town of Emmersweiler in the south, a front of approximately seven miles. The presence of TF Fickett allowed the XX Corps to completely withdraw the 5<sup>th</sup> ID from the front. This division then took advantage of their time off the line to train for attacks against fortified positions and bunkers, clearly in preparation for an assault across the Saar River and into the teeth of the Siegfried Line.<sup>218</sup> Thus, the cavalry were able to assume a division frontage in an economy of force mission. As XX Corps had just completed a grueling offensive through the Lorraine region, any chance to rest a division was a golden opportunity.

On 16 December, the 28<sup>th</sup> Squadron returned to group control after completing the last rotation of the AIS. This same day, Third Army began a massive restructuring of its front line. III Corps, which had just finished reducing Metz received a place in the army line between XX and XII Corps. This meant that TF Fickett would move from XX Corps to III Corps.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> “XX Corps After Action Report, 1 December 1944 – 31 December 1944,” record 220, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 10 December.

<sup>219</sup> “III Corps After Action Report, 1 December 1944 – 31 December 1944,” record 203, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 4.

However, on 19 December, III Corps was alerted for movement north to participate in the developing counteroffensive as part of the Battle of the Bulge. As Third Army's initial plans left the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG in place along the Saar River, the cavalry moved to the command of XII Corps on that day. However, the next day, XII Corps was also pulled to the north as part of the army counter-offensive, leaving TF Fickett back with XX Corps.<sup>220</sup> In a period of five days, the cavalry had changed higher headquarters three times without moving an inch, a true demonstration of the modularity inherent in the Second World War American army.

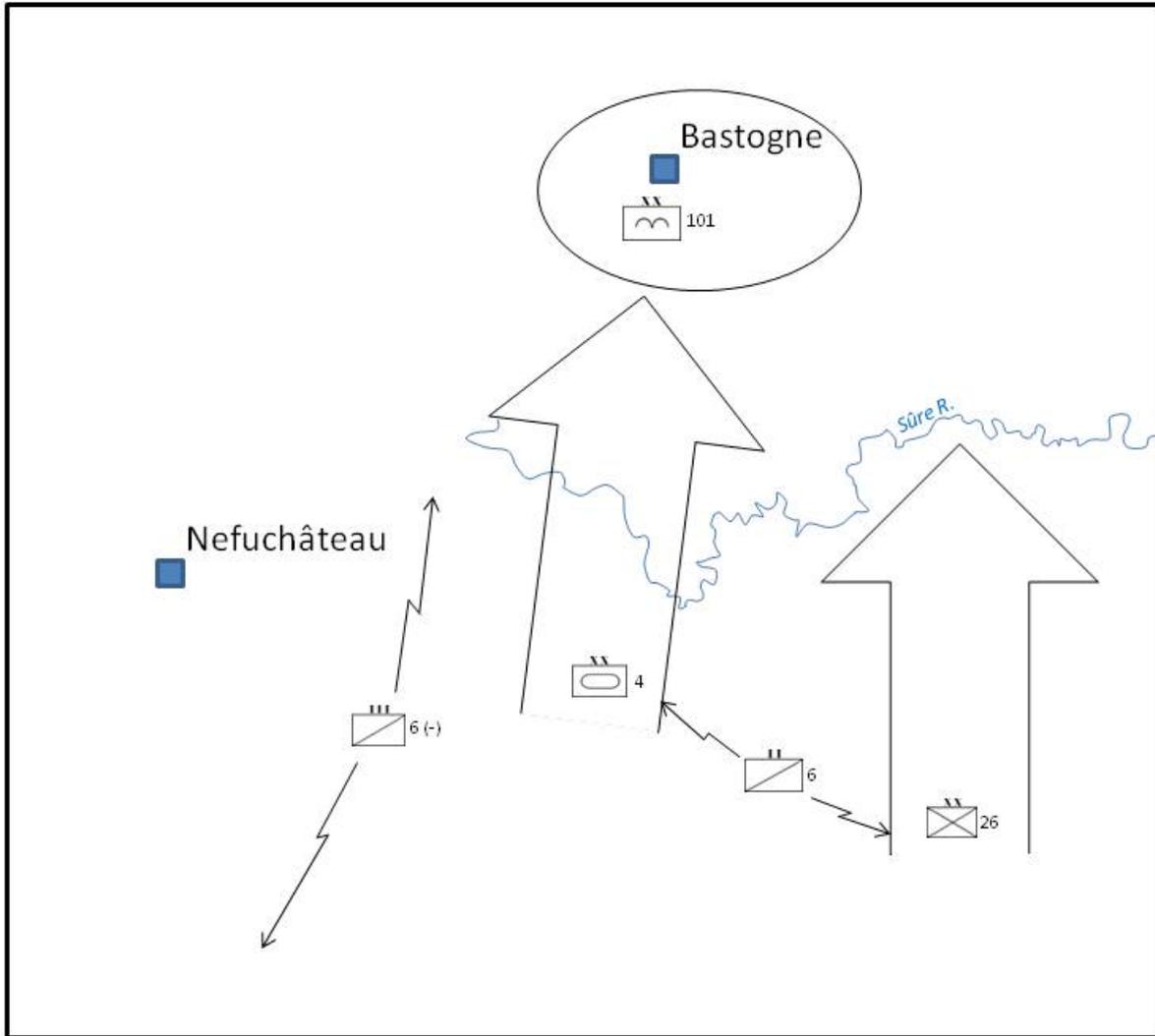
On Christmas Eve 1944, the 106<sup>th</sup> MCG of XV Corps, Seventh Army assumed responsibility for TF Fickett's zone as part of a general readjustment of boundaries in the Saar in order to better allow XX Corps to maintain its front. Third Army decided that XX Corps did not need two cavalry groups (the other being the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG) and that the need for cavalry was greater along the southern shoulder of the Bulge, although the 5<sup>th</sup> Ranger Battalion was to stay with XX Corps. Thus, the cavalrymen were once again attached to III Corps, which was in the process of beginning its attack into the German southern flank. The task force pulled into an assembly area in the vicinity of Arlon late in the day on the 24<sup>th</sup>. The cavalry were given two separate missions in support of the 4<sup>th</sup> AD. III Corps attached the 6<sup>th</sup> Squadron (reinforced) directly to the 4<sup>th</sup> AD with the mission of maintaining contact with the 26<sup>th</sup> ID to the division's east (right). The rest of the task force was ordered to screen the west flank (left) of the 4<sup>th</sup> AD in the Neufchateau region, which was essentially in the air, as there were only fragments of the wrecked American 28<sup>th</sup> ID in the area, but also elements of the German 130<sup>th</sup> *Panzer Lehr* Division at that time.<sup>221</sup>

On Christmas Day, the cavalry moved into the attack. The presence of the 6<sup>th</sup> Squadron on the 4<sup>th</sup> AD's right allowed the 26<sup>th</sup> ID to focus their efforts on a concentrated attack

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<sup>220</sup> *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad*, 79.

<sup>221</sup> “III Corps After Action Report, 1 December 1944 – 31 December 1944,” 12; “6<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Cavalry Group AAR December 1944,” record CAVG6, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II.



MAP 8. Protecting the 4th Armored Division's Drive to Relieve Bastogne on Christmas Day, 1944. Map courtesy of Mariann K. Nance

rather than attempting to keep pace with the rapidly moving armor. This relief of the 26<sup>th</sup> ID proved especially important as that division had a long hard fight as it attempted to force its way across the Sure River. Additionally, Combat Command (CC) R, 4<sup>th</sup> AD was relieved of that area as well, allowing it to lend weight on the division's left near Neufchateau, where the III Corps After Action Review (AAR) stated "the situation of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne was reported as

critical.”<sup>222</sup> Moreover, the protection offered by the remainder of the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG allowed the 4<sup>th</sup> AD to mass its efforts in an all out drive to relieve Bastogne, which it reached on 26 December (See Map 8). On 28 December, the 6<sup>th</sup> Squadron returned to group control as it continued to protect the western flank of the 4<sup>th</sup> AD and III Corps as well as reconnoitering the German dispositions in the area and attacking enemy outposts if possible. The cavalymen were relieved of their front on 30 December by the 87<sup>th</sup> ID and the 11<sup>th</sup> AD of VIII Corps as they attacked into the German positions. Some of these attacks made good initial headway thanks, in part, to the cavalry’s aggressive actions having stripped the Germans of much of their security zone.<sup>223</sup> Following the attack of the VIII Corps, the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG moved behind the corps line and into reserve.

The 6<sup>th</sup> MCG’s actions during III Corps’ relief of Bastogne are highly typical of traditional American cavalry operations, although they did not match the newer doctrine established post 1942 for mechanized cavalry. Protecting open flanks and maintaining communications between scattered units were long part of horse cavalry doctrine and practiced often. By their actions, the troopers of the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG contributed immeasurably to the success of the 4<sup>th</sup> AD in relieving the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. Furthermore, they had additionally conducted a true reconnaissance mission along the flank of the corps, and their efforts aided a subsequent attack by two full divisions.

On 2 January, III Corps attached the 28<sup>th</sup> Squadron to the 35<sup>th</sup> ID to aid in holding a sector facing the developing Harlange pocket, allowing that division to concentrate a, by now precious, infantry battalion at the main effort to the north. The 6<sup>th</sup> Squadron remained in reserve, patrolling between the 26<sup>th</sup> and 35 IDs, providing rear area security for both divisions, allowing

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<sup>222</sup> “III Corps After Action Report, 1 December 1944 – 31 December 1944,” 12.

<sup>223</sup> Hugh M. Cole, *United States Army in World War II: European Theater of Operations: The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Division of the Army, 1965), 621.

maximum combat power to be provided forward. On 9 January, the group (with the 28<sup>th</sup> Squadron back under its control) took a portion of front on the southwest corner of the Harlange Pocket between the 35<sup>th</sup> ID and 26<sup>th</sup> ID. Although not in their orders, the group attacked “when it became apparent.. that the Germans had so organized the ground that it was impossible for the infantry on both flanks to advance.”<sup>224</sup> The cavalry used their combined arms to neutralize numerous enemy positions, often substituting firepower for manpower. The next day, the group continued a deliberate assault against the German defenders of the pocket, seizing the towns of Harlange and Watrange, then continuing the assault north to Sonlez, where they made contact with the 90<sup>th</sup> ID, closing the Harlange Pocket.<sup>225</sup> The assault to Sonlez was entirely at the discretion of the group commander, but this action effectively destroyed the German defenses around Harlange. The enemy in this region, though somewhat battered from a month of heavy fighting, had held against the 26<sup>th</sup>, 35<sup>th</sup>, and 90<sup>th</sup> IDs for over eleven days. Moreover, the cavalry seized eight 88mm guns, 5 Nebelwerfer rocket launchers, and 300 German prisoners.<sup>226</sup> These numbers meant that the 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry attacked an undersized regimental formation that was well entrenched and supported.<sup>227</sup> Thus, the cavalymen almost certainly did not have the generally accepted ratio of 3:1 superiority in numbers prior to their attack, though their firepower helped somewhat. Additionally, the attack was conducted on a limited front, only a couple miles wide. However, this frontage was standard for much larger infantry RCTs and armor combat commands. For their actions in this battle, the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG was awarded a Presidential Unit

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<sup>224</sup> “Presidential Unit Citation, 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group” found in *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad*.

<sup>225</sup> “III Corps After Action Report, 1 January 1945 – 31 January 1945,” record 203, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 10.

<sup>226</sup> *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad*, 87-88.

<sup>227</sup> German strengths are an assumption of the author based upon the following – 300 Germans captured indicates approximately a battalion strength (300 is more than one company, and could be as many as two to three full strength companies). Assuming that there were more Germans who were killed or escaped, puts the number over one battalion, possibly a second. Then, the inclusion of as much artillery present indicates support assets more commonly seen at the regimental level.

Citation, the highest honor that can be given to any American unit.<sup>228</sup> The fighting in the Harlange pocket demonstrates the ability of the cavalry under the right conditions to succeed in direct combat. Note that the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG was only reinforced with an additional company of engineers and a company of tank destroyers for this action, and thus did not have the luxury of significant numbers of dismounted soldiers that an infantry RCT possessed.

The destruction of the Harlange Pocket allowed III Corps to shorten its line and consolidate in preparation for further offensive operations. The 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry were relieved by the 90<sup>th</sup> and 35<sup>th</sup> IDs as those divisions moved through and past the cavalry. From 13 to 18 January, the task force moved to Corps Reserve and refitted after their labors during the offensive. On 19 January the group received a battery of armored artillery and another company of tank destroyers from III Corps in preparation for reentering the line. On 20 January, the 28<sup>th</sup> Squadron (reinforced) relieved two regiments (the 101<sup>st</sup> and 104<sup>th</sup>) of the 26<sup>th</sup> ID, allowing them to be committed to the corps drive to the north and north east. Once again, the cavalry were operating on a division frontage of approximately 6 kilometers (or 3.7 miles). The following day saw the cavalry seize a bridgehead over the Wiltz river, seize the small town of Winseler, and then capture the larger town of Wiltz, two miles to the east, which was promptly taken over by the 80<sup>th</sup> ID of XII Corps as it advanced from the south.<sup>229</sup>

The cavalry continued to advance along III Corps flank, keeping pace with the 26<sup>th</sup> ID, then the newly arrived 17<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division, as well as maintaining contact with XII Corps to the east as the entire army attacked to the Our River. This contact became steadily more important as Third Army wheeled to the east after the reduction of the Ardennes Bulge.

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<sup>228</sup> A unit must have performed in such a manner that if an individual had done those actions, he would have received the Medal of Honor.

<sup>229</sup> “III Corps After Action Report, 1 January 1945 – 31 January 1945,” 18. Interestingly the group recounts the story with a little more passion, including how the “brass” from the 80<sup>th</sup> ID ‘ranked’ the cavalymen out of the warm houses they had procured for the night.

Attempting to keep entire corps on line during such a maneuver is extremely difficult, so the cavalymen earned their pay by preventing bypassed German formations from inflicting damage upon the corps' rear echelons.<sup>230</sup>

On 4 February, Third Army reorganized its front lines as it completed its turn to the east. III Corps zone was dramatically expanded from seven to eighteen miles. The corps ordered the 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry to assume the sector of the 5<sup>th</sup> ID of XII Corps, as that division moved south to be used in XII Corps' upcoming offensive. TF Fickett thus assumed a frontage of nearly five miles along the Our River, 15 miles west of Bitburg, from Gemund, Germany to Vianden, Luxembourg.<sup>231</sup> The Germans on the east side of the river were heavily entrenched in the Siegfried Line. The cavalry were especially important to the corps as part of the ongoing reorganizations of Third Army in late January had left it with only the 6<sup>th</sup> AD and 17<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division.<sup>232</sup> Thus, with only two full 'striking arms', the corps had to use its cavalry to cover everything else in order to allow those arms the best chance for success. The cavalry were given the 1255<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineer Battalion to aid in improving their positions. Task Force Fickett continued to hold their positions, while the 6<sup>th</sup> AD and 17<sup>th</sup> Airborne attacked across the Our River, establishing small bridgeheads on 7 February.<sup>233</sup> Five days later, 12<sup>th</sup> Army Group assigned III Corps headquarters to the First Army, leaving all the remaining divisions and the 6<sup>th</sup>MCG with Third Army. VIII Corps assumed command of the sector.<sup>234</sup> This reorganization kept the 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry on the extreme south end of the corps line.

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid., Maps labeled annex 1e-1h.

<sup>231</sup> *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad*, 93.

<sup>232</sup> "III Corps After Action Report, 1 February 1945 – 28 February 1945," record 203, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 2.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 10

On 12 February, TF Fickett ordered the 1255<sup>th</sup> Engineers to clear Viandan west of the Our River. This fight turned into a grueling seven hour slugfest despite the support of the cavalry's assault guns, tanks, and artillery.<sup>235</sup> Needless to say, a battle like this was no place for an engineer battalion to serve as the main effort, even a combat engineer battalion. Unfortunately, the task needed to be accomplished, and the only element in the Task Force with the dismounted strength to properly fight a intense urban battle was the engineers. If the cavalry had attempted the fight without them, the reconnaissance troops would surely have been decimated with little gain.

With the capture of Viandan, the stage was set for the cavalry to begin their own attack across the Our River. On 14 February, the 1255<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineer Battalion was removed from group control.<sup>236</sup> The group planned to begin the attack on 19 February as part of the larger VIII Corps assault to breach the Siegfried Line. The corps' main effort was to be in the north, with the 90<sup>th</sup> ID and 11<sup>th</sup> AD, with a subsequent supporting effort just to their south with the 6<sup>th</sup> AD.<sup>237</sup> The cavalry's task was to fix the German defenders to their front, preventing them from withdrawing and interfering with the attacks to the north. Furthermore, the added pressure of attacks all along their line would help dilute German artillery support and hopefully confuse them as to the location of the American main effort.

The initial attacks by both squadrons proved successful in getting across the river, with the 6<sup>th</sup> Squadron getting its entire strength across at Keppeshausen, and the 28<sup>th</sup> Squadron establishing a bridgehead at Viandan. However, German resistance was fierce, with the defenders fighting for every yard. At Viandan, one troop of the 28<sup>th</sup> (B Troop) lost 27 men just

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<sup>235</sup> *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad*, 98.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>237</sup> “VIII Corps After Action Report, 1 February 1945 – 28 February 1945,” record 208, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 10.

in the fighting around the town.<sup>238</sup> This is an appalling 20% casualty rate for that troop, assuming that it was at full strength (doubtful) at the beginning of the attack. The heavy casualties stand as a testament not only to the fierce fighting, but also to the lack of dismounted troops for the cavalry, thereby necessitating greater risk taking for those soldiers on the ground. However, despite the vicious fighting, both squadrons got across the Our River, beating back German counterattacks. The next several days saw slow, bitter progress for the TF, as it fought its way forward. On 22 February, the group managed to gain two kilometers (1.2 miles) with assistance from the 80<sup>th</sup> ID to its south.<sup>239</sup> German resistance finally cracked on 24 February, and the group attacked to the north east to Waxweiler, eleven miles from the cavalry's bridgeheads and ten miles northwest of Bitburg. The task force then took over a short line along the Prüm River from Waxweiler to the town of Mael, two miles to the south. The group also retained the responsibility of protecting the corps' southern flank for the next couple of days as the 80<sup>th</sup> ID of XII Corps came on line with the VIII Corps.<sup>240</sup>

On 28 February the group crossed the Prüm River and engaged in a nasty fight for the control of the high ground east of Waxweiler, as well as the town itself. It took both squadrons the better part of two days to clear the objective. The group continued their attack to the east, fighting against steady German resistance. In the fight to clear the roads east of Waxweiler, one platoon of the 6<sup>th</sup> Squadron had every single NCO become a casualty in one day's fighting.<sup>241</sup> The cavalry continued their offensive, fighting their way forward across the Nims River at Lasel, in a bloody two-day fight. On 4 March, TF Fickett advanced four miles against weakening resistance, seizing a number of towns, culminating with the village of Neuheilenbach, less than

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<sup>238</sup> *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad*, 101.

<sup>239</sup> “VIII Corps After Action Report, 1 February 1945 – 28 February 1945,” 12.

<sup>240</sup> *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad*, 101.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

two miles west of the Kyll River and ten miles north of Bitburg.<sup>242</sup> During this entire attack, the cavalry not only had to make steady progress and keep pace with their flanking divisions, they also had to maintain contact with XII Corps to the south in order to prevent breaks in the army line.

On 5 March, VIII Corps ordered TF Fickett to move north to assist the 87<sup>th</sup> ID in maintaining contact with First Army and protecting the corps' northern flank. The group maintained this mission until 8 March, when their presence was no longer required thanks to advances by the 106<sup>th</sup> Division of the First Army.<sup>243</sup> On 8 March, the group again moved out to protect the north flank of the corps, following the 11<sup>th</sup> AD as it attacked to the Rhine River. As the 11<sup>th</sup> AD was more interested in gaining ground, it fell to the cavalry to destroy any remaining enemy resistance as well as maintain contact with the First Army to the north. On 12 March, the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG relieved both the 6<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> ADs from their positions along the Rhine River in the Andernach-Koblenz region.<sup>244</sup> The cavalry were generally unchallenged in this area, but their presence allowed for two full armored divisions to be withdrawn from the line and prepared for further exploitation after the crossing of the Rhine. A week later, the 28<sup>th</sup> ID relieved the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG which was sent to a rest area in the rear.<sup>245</sup>

On 23 March, the cavalry were again sent forward to relieve the 87<sup>th</sup> ID so that it could concentrate for its assault crossing of the Rhine two days later. The 6<sup>th</sup> MCG held a nine mile long front (nearly a corps level length of line), aided by a single battalion of the 87<sup>th</sup> ID who were left in place so that the division would have its own forces at the actual point of attack.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> "VIII Corps After Action Report, 1 March 1945 – 31 March 1945," record 208, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 6.

<sup>243</sup> *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad*, 104.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>245</sup> "VIII Corps After Action Report, 1 March 1945 – 31 March 1945," 18.

<sup>246</sup> *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad*, 105-107.

Despite the 87<sup>th</sup> ID leaving that one battalion in place, the presence of the 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry contributed directly to the success of the VIII Corps' first crossing of the Rhine by allowing the assault division to pull completely off the line, reorganize, and mass at the decisive point (see Map 9).

As the 87<sup>th</sup> and 89<sup>th</sup> IDs widened the VIII Corps Rhine bridgehead, TF Fickett received new orders on 26 March to pass through the two divisions and attack across the breadth of the corps zone as an advance guard. To accomplish this mission, VIII Corps configured TF Fickett with its two squadrons, a battalion of artillery, two tank destroyer companies, two infantry companies (from the 76<sup>th</sup> ID) and a company of engineers.<sup>247</sup> The cavalry further task organized into five task forces, generally centered around the reconnaissance troops. The following day, 27 March, the newly reformed TF Fickett crossed the Rhine River and began its assault. The first day, all elements made substantial progress attacking to the east, averaging fifteen miles from the river.<sup>248</sup> The following day, the attack resumed. The group advanced nineteen miles, with leading elements in the town of Erbach, a mere fifteen miles north of Wiesbaden and XII Corps' bridgehead. By 29 March, the cavalry had advanced fifty miles and seized the towns of Butzbach (18 miles north of Frankfurt) and Großenlinden (3 miles south of Gießen).<sup>249</sup> German resistance proved sporadic, but still deadly in places. On 28 March, the 28<sup>th</sup> Squadron ran into serious resistance from the 6<sup>th</sup> SS Mountain Division at the town of Schmitten, twelve miles northwest of Frankfurt. There, the Germans ambushed a platoon from C Troop, severely mauling it, as well as a platoon sent in to rescue the beleaguered cavalymen. By the end of the day, the cavalry sustained 36 casualties, one light tank, one tank destroyer, and every jeep that

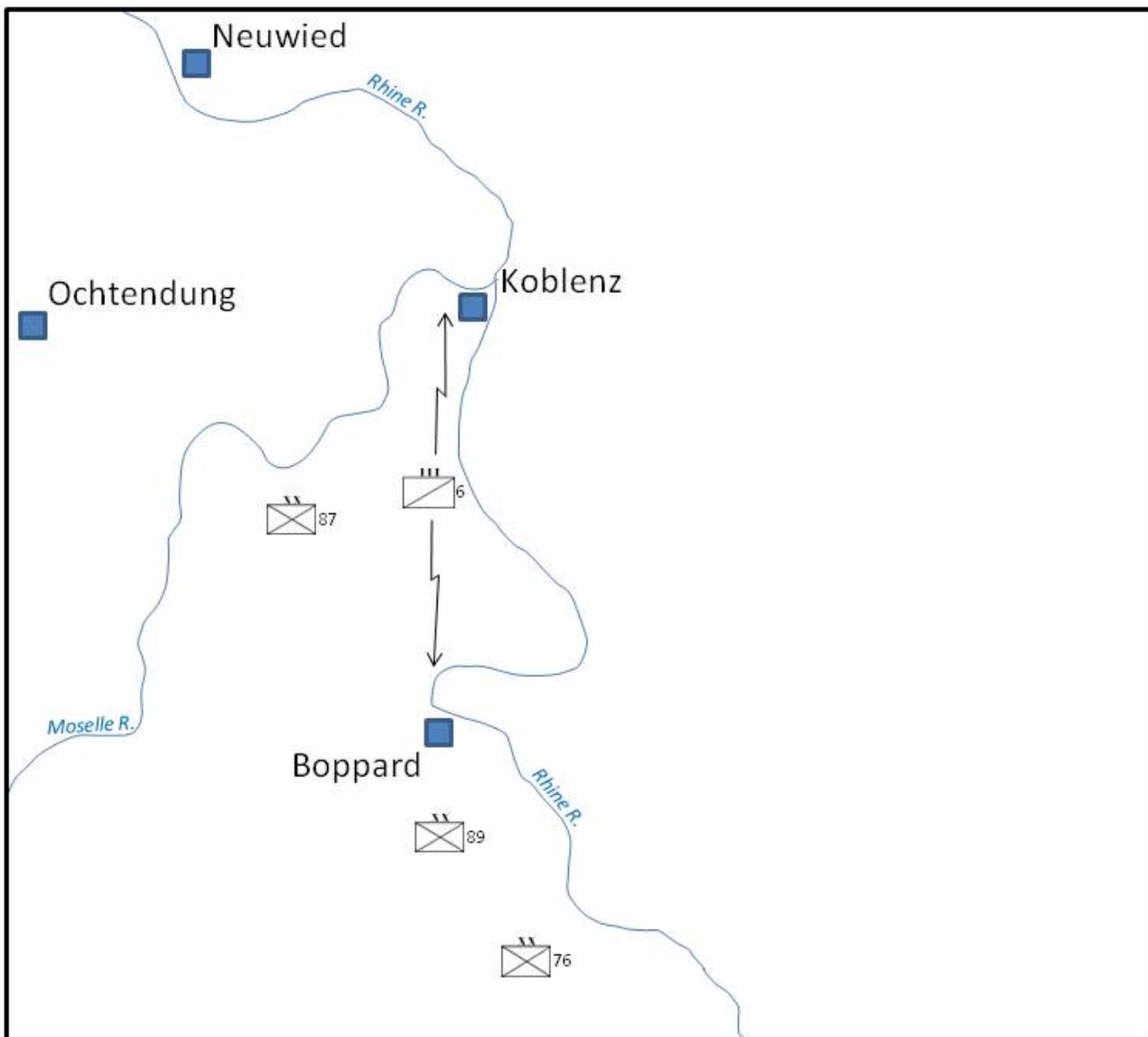
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<sup>247</sup> "VIII Corps After Action Report, 1 March 1945 – 31 March 1945," 25.

<sup>248</sup> "6<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Cavalry Group AAR March 1945," record CAVG6, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 8.

<sup>249</sup> "VIII Corps After Action Report, 1 March 1945 – 31 March 1945," 26-28.

entered the town. The resistance proved so great that the squadron was forced to bypass the town, leaving it to the following infantry to reduce.<sup>250</sup>



MAP 9. VIII Corps Preparing to Cross the Rhine River, 24 March 1945. Map courtesy of Mariann K. Nance

This action showed the hazards of pushing light cavalry forward into an uncertain battlefield. However, despite suffering heavy casualties, the cavalry were still able to achieve

<sup>250</sup> *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad*, 111.

their objectives as well as protect the main force of the infantry from such an ambush. A heavier cavalry force might have achieved the same results with fewer casualties, but the end state for the corps would have been same.

At the end of March, VIII Corps withdrew most of the supporting elements of TF Fickett, leaving the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG with its two squadrons, an artillery battalion, and a company of combat engineers.<sup>251</sup> The VIII Corps had been pinched out of the Third Army line by the closure of the First Army from the north and the movement of XII Corps to the south. On 3 April, the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG relieved the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG along the Fulda River from Rotenburg to Bad Hersfeld in preparation for the transfer of the Kassel region from XX Corps to VIII Corps. During the next week, VIII Corps attacked in column over 50 miles towards the town of Gotha, with its armor to the front, followed by the infantry, followed by the cavalry.<sup>252</sup> The 6<sup>th</sup> MCG's task was to round up German stragglers left behind by the main corps advance. Although not particularly a desirable task, the corps needed a highly mobile formation that could maintain order in its rear areas as it moved with all possible speed to the east. The cavalry were well suited to the role, even if they were not particularly fond of it. Additionally, as the corps moved deeper into eastern Germany, small groups of German army forces aggressively sought out rear echelon forces. Thus, the cavalry were tasked by the corps to maintain a screen to the north of the corps between the widely separated echelons of divisions in order to protect against these attacks.<sup>253</sup>

On 11 April the Third Army resumed its advance, this time heading towards Czechoslovakia. The 6<sup>th</sup> MCG split into two elements for this mission. The 28<sup>th</sup> Squadron committed a troop to operate as a liaison between XX Corps to the north and VIII Corps to the

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<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 112-113.

<sup>253</sup> "6<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Cavalry Group AAR April 1945," record CAVG6, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 4.

south, acting in much the same manner as the AIS of the previous fall.<sup>254</sup> This activity meant that the two corps could advance on a broad, widely separated front without the flank units of either corps being confused about the whereabouts of their counterparts. This information prevented gaps from appearing in the army line as well as the potential for fratricide or simple traffic jams as units moved through the same region. The 6<sup>th</sup> Squadron operated in a security role between the lead and trailing edges of VIII Corps, preventing any Wehrmacht stragglers from impacting the corps logistics or communications.

On 15 April, VIII Corps ordered the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG to cross the Saale River and attack to the corps' limit of advance near the Czechoslovakian border in order to identify any remaining German formations in the axis of advance. The group moved out rapidly, making good progress, fighting their way through scattered German resistance. By this point in the war, the cavalrymen generally did not have to bypass any strong-points, but simply had to apply enough patience and firepower until the Germans surrendered. However, on at least one occasion, in the forest of Greiz where remnants of the 11<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division were found, the cavalry were unable to force a surrender and had to leave a serious pocket of resistance behind for the rest of the corps.<sup>255</sup> The group also seized key bridges, allowing the follow-on infantry to advance at a rapid pace.<sup>256</sup> On 20 April, the group entered the 1938 borders of Czechoslovakia.

On 22 April, 12<sup>th</sup> Army Group ordered Third Army to assault south into Bavaria and Austria to prevent German occupation of the 'National Redoubt'. This redoubt was supposed to consist of a series of fortifications and bunkers in the Bavarian Alps that would allow the Germans to prolong the war nearly indefinitely due to the extremely rugged nature of the terrain.

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>255</sup> *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad*, 114.

<sup>256</sup> "VIII Corps After Action Report, 1 April 1945 – 30 April 1945," record 208, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 14.

Although events would show that such a concept was primarily a work of German propaganda and Allied imagination, American commanders took the threat of it very seriously.<sup>257</sup>

As The Third Army moved south, VIII Corps was ordered to remain behind on the Czechoslovakian border under the control of First Army. The 6<sup>th</sup> MCG spent the rest of the month along defensive positions on the Weiße Elster River from Gornitz to Rossbach. The cavalymen conducted their last attack on 6 May, when the group assaulted across the river as part of limited corps offensive. However, they were stopped on 7 May due to the impending cease fire.<sup>258</sup>

The Unicorn remained behind in Germany as part of the constabulary of occupied Germany, participating in the western allies' occupation of West Berlin. In nine months of combat the 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group served as one of the most well travelled cavalry groups, having served under direct Third Army control, XX Corps, XII Corps, III Corps, and VIII Corps. Furthermore, the 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry had representatives serve with every division and corps assigned to Third Army from August to November in their guise as the AIS. In both their roles as the AIS and as a combat formation, the 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry greatly contributed to the success of the Third Army.

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<sup>257</sup> *Unicorn Rampant – History of the Sixth Cavalry Regiment / Group at Home and Abroad*, 115.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-119.

## CHAPTER 6

### SHORT DURATION UNITS

The U.S. Army in the Second World War retained an extremely modular organization. As per the plans of General Leslie McNair, the War Department streamlined division tables of equipment, placing most of the “enabling” formations (artillery, tank battalions, tank destroyers, etc.) under corps or army level control. Furthermore, the entire army became one interchangeable formation, where regiments (or groups), divisions, or even entire corps could be seamlessly moved from one headquarters to the next based upon the exigencies of combat. The cavalry were not immune to the rapid changes that often dramatically reorganized the shape of the American army in Europe. Thus, the following groups either did not serve their entire combat tenure with the Third Army, or arrived extremely late in the war, and thus only participated in a couple of campaigns with the army. They all stand as examples of formations being asked to remain flexible in order to support the larger mission.

#### 15<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group

The 15<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Cavalry Group (MCG) and its two subordinate elements, the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Squadrons, arrived in the ETO on 6 July 1944 off of UTAH Beach. The group headquarters and the 15<sup>th</sup> Squadron disembarked that day, with the 17<sup>th</sup> Squadron following on 16 July.<sup>259</sup> The 15<sup>th</sup> Cavalry had a fairly short history, having only been raised in 1901 for service in the Philippine Insurrection. Its service in the First World War had consisted of rear area duty with no substantial combat. This time, the squadron expected a much more important role in the upcoming fighting.

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<sup>259</sup> “Lion Rampant,” record CAVG15, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 5.

Although SHAEF had designated the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG to join the U.S. Third Army upon its activation, that date was still almost a month away by the time the group arrived in Normandy. Therefore, SHAEF directed the group to join Advance Section, Communication Zone (ADSEC) for use in a rear security role in conjunction with the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG. The cavalymen saw little action during this time, as they prepared for the upcoming offensive that would lead to the breakout from Normandy. However, there were some notable occasions. On 14 July, members of the group participated in the Bastille Day parade and celebrations in the town of Cherbourg. Additionally, on 20 July, elements of the group escorted the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, as he toured the Cherbourg area.<sup>260</sup>

On 1 August 1944, Third Army became operational. The army's initial task as part of the COBRA plan called for the seizure of the Brittany Peninsula and its valuable ports. The U.S. VIII Corps, the lead corps through the penetration, was given this mission. In order to assist the corps as it attacked south towards Nantes (4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division) and west towards Brest (6<sup>th</sup> Armored Division), Third Army created an *ad hoc* brigade-sized combined arms task force to seize a series of bridges to secure a rail line from Brest to Normandy that could then be used for supply of the allied armies after the seizure of Brest (See Map 10).<sup>261</sup> Task Force (TF) "A" consisted of: Headquarters, 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Destroyer (TD) Brigade, the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG, the 705<sup>th</sup> TD Battalion (SP), Headquarters, 6<sup>th</sup> TD Destroyer Group, the 509<sup>th</sup> Engineer Light Pontoon Company, and the 159<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineer Battalion.<sup>262</sup>

The VIII Corps' original intent had been for the 6<sup>th</sup> Armored Division (AD) to clear Saint Malo, thirty miles to the west of the key city of Avranches, prior to continuing to their primary

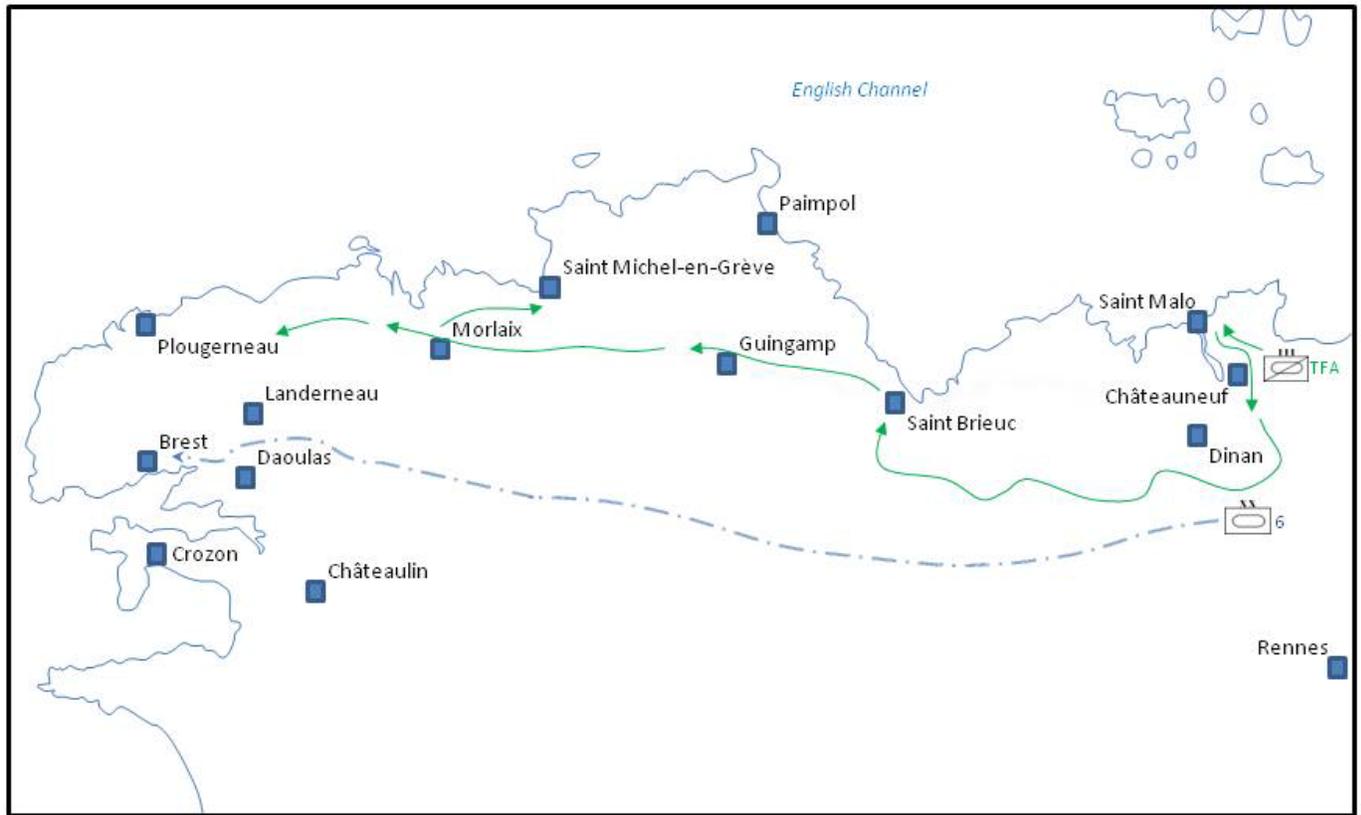
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<sup>260</sup> "15<sup>th</sup> MCG Unit Diary 1944," record CAVG15, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 2.

<sup>261</sup> Martin Blumenson, *United States Army in World War II: European Theater of Operations: Breakout and Pursuit* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Division of the Army, 1961), 389

<sup>262</sup> "VIII Corps After Action Report, 1 August 1944 – 31 August 1944," record 208, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 4.

objective of the port of Brest. However, as this task would slow the division considerably, General Patton, bypassing



MAP 10. Task Force A's Assault Across Northern Brittany, 1-12 August 1944. Map courtesy of Mariann K. Nance

the VIII Corps commander, directed the 6<sup>th</sup> AD to “take Brest.”<sup>263</sup> Therefore TF A received the additional mission of assisting in the clearance of St. Malo in addition to its primary role of the seizure of vital bridges in the Brittany peninsula.<sup>264</sup>

At 0100 hours on 3 August, the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG led TF A out of its assembly areas around Coutances as they sped towards Saint Malo, approximately 30 miles west of Avranches. The Task Force crossed the line of departure around Avranches at 0500, having covered 25 miles in

<sup>263</sup> Blumenson, 370.

<sup>264</sup> “VIII Corps After Action Report, 1 August 1944 – 31 August 1944,” 4.

two hours.<sup>265</sup> Although elements of the 6<sup>th</sup> AD were to the front of the task force, the situation was so fluid that the concepts of a ‘front’ or ‘rear’ were entirely inappropriate. By 0700, the cavalry were a few miles east of the town of Dol-de-Bretagne (13 miles southeast of Saint Malo), when the lead platoon of the 15<sup>th</sup> Squadron hit a German ambush. Surprise was complete as the element was moving at over forty miles an hour. The entire platoon, minus three men who escaped, were captured or killed. The most serious effect of this ambush was that the group commander, COL Reybold, had been travelling with this platoon, leading them in the attack, and he was now missing in action.<sup>266</sup> Although this incident highlights the fragile nature of the cavalry’s survivability in combat, it also stands as the perfect example of how to not conduct a movement to contact.

Despite the loss of the group commander, the cavalrymen continued their advance to assembly areas eight miles south of Chateauneuf-d’ille-et-Vilaine (which is five miles southeast of Saint Malo) around 1800 on 3 August. The new group commander, COL Logan Berry, ordered an immediate reconnaissance by both squadrons north to Saint Malo in order to determine the strength of the city’s defenses. However, heavy German artillery and small arms fire, combined with darkness forced the lightly armored cavalrymen to halt four miles south of Chateauneuf. The next day, 4 August, the cavalrymen, supported by the tank destroyers and engineers of the task force, conducted a deliberate attack to Chateauneuf, seizing a foothold in the town by the end of the day.<sup>267</sup> The group resumed their attack, now in conjunction with the 330<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 83<sup>rd</sup> ID, on 5 August. Although this attack made some headway,

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<sup>265</sup> “15<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron After Action Report August 1944,” record CAVS15, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, August 3.

<sup>266</sup> Matthew Morton, *Men on Iron Ponies* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009), 153; “15<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron After Action Report August 1944,” 3 August. COL Reybold would resurface at the conclusion of the war in a German POW camp on the Channel Island of Jersey.

<sup>267</sup> “15<sup>th</sup> MCG Unit Diary 1944,” 3.

it quickly became apparent to the commander of VIII Corps that Saint Malo would be a protracted battle. Therefore, he relieved TF A of its responsibility for the city, turning the fight entirely over to the 83<sup>rd</sup> ID.<sup>268</sup>

This decision demonstrated that the VIII Corps commander understood that the cavalry's strength lay in their mobility, and that they did not have the dismounted combat power for extended positional warfare. However, the cavalrymen of the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG had succeeded in penetrating the German security screen south of Saint Malo, and identified the strengths of the enemy defenses. That the cavalry did not have the combat power to penetrate such defenses speaks to their light armament and lack of dismounts. Despite these failings, the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG performed a traditional cavalry mission of making contact with the enemy, removing his security belt, developing the situation, then passing the fight on to main body formations.

On 6 August, TF A resumed its attack to the west accompanied by a battalion of infantry from the 83<sup>rd</sup> ID, with its primary objective being the rail bridges in the town of Saint Brieuc, a port on the North Brittany coast, 38 miles to the west of Chateauneuf. The cavalry made the move in a single day, bypassing strong German defenses around the city of Dinant. Free French forces met the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG in the outskirts of Saint Brieuc and reported that they had seized the town.<sup>269</sup>

The cavalry continued the task force's advance on 7 August, clearing the 17 miles from Saint Brieuc to the major crossroads town of Guincamp to the west. This day saw serious action as the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG, supported by the rest of TF A, fought against a force of over 1,000 Germans who were in blocking positions to the west of Saint Brieuc.<sup>270</sup> The cavalrymen quickly established a technique that would stand them in good stead throughout the rest of the Brittany

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<sup>268</sup> Blumenson, 391.

<sup>269</sup> "15<sup>th</sup> MCG Unit Diary 1944," 3.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

campaign. The reconnaissance troops would make contact with German forces, then withdraw out of direct fire range. Next, they would call for air support to devastate the defenders, then advance in conjunction with the attached infantry under cover of artillery and tank destroyer fire.<sup>271</sup> This methodology proved successful in almost all of the cavalry's actions. The combined arms nature of these tactics had been standard cavalry practice for decades, although the cavalry proved highly dependent upon outside formations for support due to its dismount-weak, lightly armored organization.

After two days of rest, on 9 August, the 17<sup>th</sup> Squadron led the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG and TF A in the seizure of the town of Morlaix and its important rail and road bridges, thirty miles to the west of Guincamp. This success completed the Task Force's initial mission of seizing the important rail bridges from Brest to the base of the Cotentin Peninsula. The following day, VIII Corps ordered TF A to protect the north and north west flanks of the 6<sup>th</sup> AD as it invested the port of Brest. The two squadrons then moved out to conduct reconnaissance and clear the portions of the northwestern Brittany coast that the 6<sup>th</sup> AD had bypassed. The 15<sup>th</sup> Squadron encountered strong resistance around the town of Plouguerneau, 30 miles to the west of Morlaix and thirteen miles north of Brest. With assistance from the task force's tank destroyers and artillery support (most likely from the 6<sup>th</sup> AD), the squadron captured 227 Germans in the reduction of that pocket.

Later in the evening of 10 August, VIII Corps directed TF A to secure a beachhead near the town of Saint Michel-en-Greve, thirteen miles to the northwest of Morlaix. This beachhead would be used to offload supplies for the 6<sup>th</sup> AD, thereby shortening the logistics chain that now ran nearly 200 miles from Brest to the Normandy landing sites.<sup>272</sup> The 15<sup>th</sup> Squadron, followed by the rest of the group, departed the Plouguerneau area at 0100 hours, arriving at their objective

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 5; Blumenson, 393.

at 1200, having made the nearly fifty mile journey in 11 hours, a fine time for a tactical road march under combat conditions, and an accomplishment which could not have been replicated by a slower and less mounted infantry RCT.

The next week saw the cavalry serve as the main effort for TF A's drive to clear the northern Brittany coast of any remaining enemy forces. A German stronghold at Paimpol, 22 miles north-northwest of Briec, was preventing the use of that town's port for logistical support of the fighting in Brittany. VIII Corps ordered TF A to remove this garrison. On 15 August, after a fierce fight, the cavalry took 500 prisoners and seized the town of Treguier, 16 miles to the northeast of Saint Michel-en-Greve and seven miles west of Paimpol. The following day witnessed a tough fight for the town of Lezardrieux, five miles to the east of Treguier, involving all elements of TF A, with the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG as the main effort alongside the Free French.<sup>273</sup> Paimpol, along with 600 prisoners, fell to TF A on 17 August, thereby opening the port of Briec for use in supplying operations in western Brittany.<sup>274</sup> The cavalry's actions in both the seizure of the bridgehead at Saint Michel-en-Greve and the capture of Paimpol contributed directly to the success of the logistical effort that would be needed to reduce the fortress of Brest.<sup>275</sup>

Following the fall of Paimpol, TF A, with its cavalry, moved to an assembly area near Landerneau, approximately ten miles to the west, north-west of Brest. VIII Corps needed the TF to screen the assembly areas of the divisions of the corps, the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 29<sup>th</sup> IDs as they moved to relieve the 6<sup>th</sup> AD around Brest. One squadron, the 17<sup>th</sup>, screened to the east along a front of approximately 14 miles, from Sizun (16 miles east of Brest) in the north, to Chateaulin in the south. The 15<sup>th</sup> Squadron screened the Daoulas Peninsula to the west. This peninsula, located immediately to the southeast of Brest was a key position for control of the city. By 20 August

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<sup>273</sup> "15<sup>th</sup> MCG Unit Diary 1944," 5.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>275</sup> Blumenson, 393.

the 15<sup>th</sup> Squadron had managed to advance approximately halfway down to the peninsula till it was stopped by strong German resistance centered around the town of Plougastel. The next day, 3/330<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment moved into the line alongside the 15<sup>th</sup> Squadron. On 22 August, another infantry battalion, this time the 50<sup>th</sup> Armored Infantry Battalion of the 6<sup>th</sup> AD assumed responsibility for the northern shoulder of the peninsula. With two infantry battalions in the line, the 15<sup>th</sup> Squadron reverted to maintaining contact between the two rather than conducting offensive operations of their own. The squadron maintained this role until it was relieved on 28 August.<sup>276</sup>

While the 15<sup>th</sup> Squadron fought in the Daoulas Peninsula, the 17<sup>th</sup> Squadron, with attached tank destroyers, engineers, and armored artillery, moved to reconnoiter the Crozon Peninsula (the peninsula just south of the Daoulas Peninsula) on 26 August. This peninsula dominated the naval approaches to Brest as well as the entire southern flank of the city. Its seizure would greatly complicate the German defense of the city. However, an estimated German battalion prevented the cavalry from entering the peninsula along the five mile long line from Saint Nic to Brigneun. A single squadron of cavalry, however reinforced, simply did not have the combat power to force this position. On 28 August, the 15<sup>th</sup> Squadron rejoined the 17<sup>th</sup>, and the group began preparations for an attack into the Crozon Peninsula.<sup>277</sup>

On 31 August, a patrol of the 15<sup>th</sup> Squadron penetrated the German line, captured a company command post, and convinced the commander to surrender his entire company. This action dislocated the entire German position, forcing the defenders to withdraw in the early

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<sup>276</sup> "15<sup>th</sup> MCG Unit Diary 1944," 5-6.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

morning of 1 September, with another company surrendering *en masse* in the process.<sup>278</sup> By 2 September, the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG had advanced to the line Tal-ar-Groas in the south to Saint Efflez in the North. This approximately three-mile front, a little over halfway down the peninsula and eight miles from the original German defensive line, compressed the advancing cavalry and allowed the remaining Wehrmacht forces to hold their positions.<sup>279</sup>

While stymied in front of this line, the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG suffered grievous losses, not so much from the enemy, but from friendly air power. On 3 September, an air mission had a hung bomb that dropped on a 17<sup>th</sup> squadron observation post. Another flight witnessed the drop, and, thinking that there were enemy troops present, bombed and strafed the command post of A/17<sup>th</sup> Squadron. Less than half an hour later, as a platoon from A/17<sup>th</sup> Squadron made its way through the town of Selgruc-sur-Mer, a squadron of B17s dropped their entire load upon the town, nearly wiping out the platoon. Then, to add insult to injury, the ambulances and medical personnel attending to the wounded were then strafed and bombed. The total cost to the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG from the ‘American Luftwaffe’ came to 33 troopers killed or wounded.<sup>280</sup>

On 5 September, while the group still remained static in the Crozon Peninsula, the VIII Corps, including the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG, transferred to the command of the newly activated Ninth U.S. Army. The rest of the war would see the 15<sup>th</sup> complete operations in Brittany, spend the winter guarding U.S. interests in that region, then in the spring participate in the Rhineland and Central Europe campaigns with the Ninth Army. The troopers of the group would end the war as occupation troops as part of the American constabulary.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> This particular story is fascinating, as a soldier who spoke German had been captured by this company. He convinced the German company commander that to continue fighting was pointless, and the entire company then surrendered *en masse* to the advancing 17<sup>th</sup> Squadron. *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>279</sup> “15<sup>th</sup> MCG Unit Diary 1944,” 6.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>281</sup> “Lion Rampant,” 14-17.

The 15<sup>th</sup> MCG proved to be one of the most important elements in the liberation of the Brittany Peninsula. Although it did not conduct operations along the manner of the daring armored drives of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> ADs, the cavalry enabled those drives to happen. The seizure of towns through the Brittany heartland and the reduction of German forces along the north shore allowed the 6<sup>th</sup> AD to concentrate combat power on its primary objective. Additionally, the group contributed greatly to the capture of Brest by participating in what the modern U.S. Army calls “shaping operations”. These actions, though not the main effort, formed the battlefield that would set the conditions for later success. Although the German forces faced by the cavalrymen may not have always been of the highest quality, they still presented a threat that could have seriously disrupted and slowed the operations of the 6<sup>th</sup> AD.<sup>282</sup> Thus, despite serious resistance, the loss of its group commander, and being required to perform a mission well outside what the army doctrinally expected, the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG succeeded in what old troopers would have considered to be a classic cavalry operation.

#### 106<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group

The 106<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Cavalry Group arrived in Normandy on 2 July 1944. The only National Guard cavalry formation to serve with the Third Army, the 106<sup>th</sup> MCG possessed little history of its own, but had inherited a proud tradition of Illinois and Michigan National Guardsmen that stretched back at least to the Spanish-American War.<sup>283</sup> However, despite their lack of official lineage, the Guardsmen of the 106<sup>th</sup> MCG and its two squadrons, the 106<sup>th</sup> and 121<sup>st</sup> Squadrons, would soon set an enviable combat record.

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<sup>282</sup> Many of these “German” formations actually were composed of Russians, Eastern Europeans, and others. This explains the relatively high number of POWs taken by the group, as many of these forces would quickly give in when tactical circumstances turned against them.

<sup>283</sup> “History of the 106<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group,” record CAVG106, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 1.

The group spent the month of July attached to the VIII Corps, then operating on the western flank of the U.S. First Army. Here the cavalymen received their baptism of fire, serving in economy of force roles for the corps as well as providing rear area security. Although the group did not participate in extensive offensive operations during this period, it saw its share of combat working with the 83<sup>rd</sup> ID and others.<sup>284</sup>

On 1 August, VIII Corps, along with the 106<sup>th</sup> MCG, joined the newly activated U.S. Third Army as it began the exploitation of Operation COBRA. VIII Corps led the Third Army through the gap created by its own actions and by those of the VII Corps to the east. On 2 August, VIII Corps ordered the 106<sup>th</sup> MCG to protect the corps' eastern flank. The Group moved with alacrity, seizing the town of Fougères, 24 miles south of Avranches, ahead of the 79<sup>th</sup> ID, a XV Corps division (See Map 11).<sup>285</sup> This town controlled access to the main road network running south to the city of Rennes, one of the primary objectives of the VIII Corps in the first stages of the breakout. Additionally, Fougères was to be in the vicinity of the pivot point for XV Corps' attack to the southeast. Thus, the 106<sup>th</sup> MCG's rapid seizure of this key road intersection allowed the Third Army to 'set the corner' for XV Corps to run around as well as protect the key roads needed for VIII Corps' drive to the south, without requiring the 79<sup>th</sup> ID to fight for this location. The following day, Third Army transferred the 106<sup>th</sup> MCG to XV Corps to provide it with cavalry support as the VIII Corps had, at the time, both the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> MCGs working for it.<sup>286</sup>

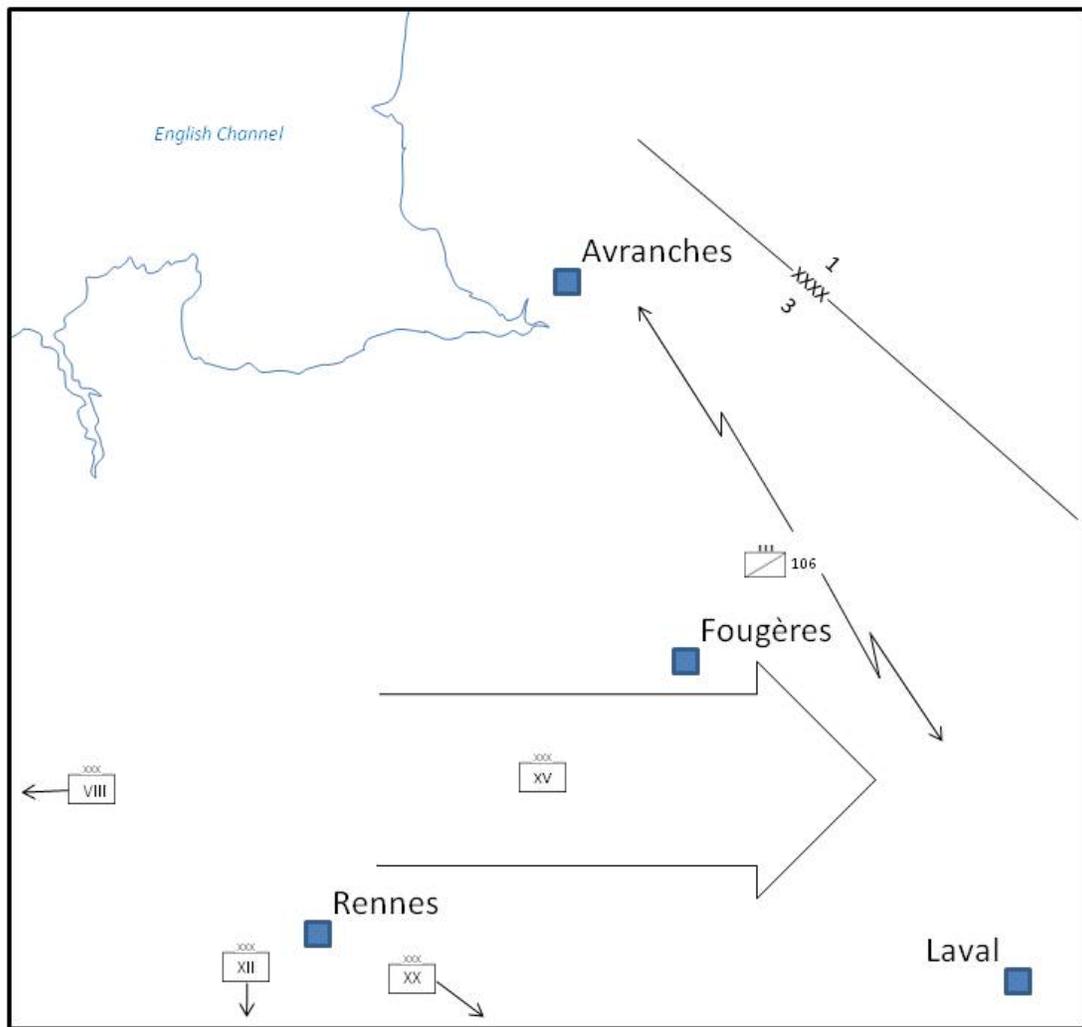
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<sup>284</sup> "VIII Corps After Action Report, 1 July 1944 – 31 July 1944," record 208, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II; 106<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Cavalry Group, *The 106<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Cavalry Group in Europe, 1944-1945* (Augsburg, Germany: J.P. Himmer KG, 1945), 9-20.

<sup>285</sup> "VIII Corps After Action Report, 1 August 1944 – 31 August 1944," record 208, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 4.

<sup>286</sup> "XV Corps After Action Report, 1 August 1944-31 August 1944," 2.

On 5 August, XV Corps ordered the 106<sup>th</sup> MCG to conduct a zone reconnaissance in front of both the 79<sup>th</sup> and 90<sup>th</sup> IDs as they attacked to the Mayenne River, 25 miles to the east of Fougères.<sup>287</sup> The group successfully reached the river, crossing it at Mayenne and at Changé on the night of 5-6 August. The crossing at Changé was conducted by engineers attached to the group creating a hasty bridge out of local materials.<sup>288</sup>



MAP 11. 106th MCG "Setting the Inside Corner" for Third Army, 2 August 1944. Map courtesy of Mariann K. Nance

<sup>287</sup> Zone Reconnaissance – reconnaissance in a given zone, defined by a higher headquarters.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., 3.

After the crossing of the Mayenne River, the group moved to the north flank of the corps and continued to drive towards Le Mans, 45 miles past the Mayenne River. The group reached the city on 8 August and participated in its capture by screening the northern suburbs and roads as the 79<sup>th</sup> and 90<sup>th</sup> IDs took the bulk of the city.<sup>289</sup> This action by the 106<sup>th</sup> MCG allowed the infantry divisions to concentrate their strength without having to devote forces to protecting their northern flanks.

Following the capture of Le Mans, on 9 August Third Army directed XV Corps to attack 25 miles north to seize the city of Alençon, as part of what would become the drive to close the Falaise Pocket. Alençon is 20 miles south of the key city of Argentan, one of the key road junctions needed for a successful German withdrawal from the developing pocket. The 106<sup>th</sup> MCG's role in this action was to shield the eastern flank of the corps as it attacked north. The corps began its attack on 10 August, with the 106<sup>th</sup> MCG in their assigned role, as well as providing intelligence on the locations (or lack thereof) of German forces to the north in their former area of operations. This intelligence allowed the XV Corps to bypass a region that 12<sup>th</sup> Army Group believed to be a German stronghold, but reconnaissance by the 106<sup>th</sup> MCG proved that area to be empty of enemy activity.<sup>290</sup> This information allowed the corps to not spend valuable time and effort clearing non-essential locations and concentrate on their drive to the north.

On 15 August, Third Army ordered XV Corps to shift its attack to the east towards the city of Dreux, 60 miles to the east of the corps' front line trace around Argentan, and only 36 miles to the west of Paris. The corps tasked the 106<sup>th</sup> MCG to lead the corps in this drive. The group began their mission early on 15 August, and despite reported heavy resistance had seized

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>290</sup> The location in question was the Foret de Perseigne. Ibid., 5-6.

the town of Nogent-le-Roi along the Eure River, nine miles to the southeast of Dreux, and an astonishing 48 miles from their starting positions around Moulins-la-Marche.<sup>291</sup> This advance allowed the 79<sup>th</sup> ID to move rapidly to the Eure River to prepare for an assault crossing the following day.

Following the crossing of the Eure River, the 106<sup>th</sup> MCG led the corps to the northeast as it attacked to the Seine River to the northwest of Paris. The cavalymen not only provided reconnaissance and security for the corps during this move, they also assisted in preventing German forces from escaping across the Seine River. On 26 August, XV Corps withdrew the group from the line for refit.<sup>292</sup> The accomplishments of the group for the month of August earned them a note in the Corps AAR that stated, “The part played by this unit throughout the campaign is particularly noteworthy. The group accomplished every mission assigned it in a superior manner.”<sup>293</sup>

On 28 August, Third Army attached the 106<sup>th</sup> MCG to XII Corps as it conducted its assault across the Seine south of Paris, towards the Marne. The 106<sup>th</sup> MCG would relieve elements of the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG and the 35<sup>th</sup> ID that at the time were screening the southern flank of the corps. The group’s screen would eventually reach a length of ninety miles from Auxerre to Gondrecourt.<sup>294</sup> This action would allow the XII Corps to mass its elements, including its own cavalry on the decisive push to the east. The XV Corps was in the process of being pinched out between the First Army and the edge of XX Corps of Third Army, and thus did not need its cavalry during this period.

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<sup>291</sup> “121<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron After Action Review, August,” record CAVS121, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 3.

<sup>292</sup> “XV Corps After Action Report, 1 August 1944-31 August 1944,” 8.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>294</sup> “History of the 106<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group,” 2.

On 10 September, the XV Corps regained control of the 106<sup>th</sup> MCG as it assumed responsibility for the southern flank of the Third Army, but left them in their positions assigned by XII Corps. However, XV Corps cut the group's responsibility considerably, shortening their screen to only 40 miles, from Bricon in the west to Gondrecourt in the east.<sup>295</sup> This shortening of the line was possible as Ninth U.S. Army assumed more responsibility for the rear areas of 12<sup>th</sup> Army Group.

The following day, XV Corps attacked to the Moselle River between Charmes and Epinal. This move would bring it alongside the XII Corps then currently fighting along the Moselle. The 106<sup>th</sup> MCG led the XV Corps in its attack, providing a security screen across the front of the 79<sup>th</sup> ID and the French 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division. The 106<sup>th</sup> Squadron reached the town of Charmes on the evening of 11 September, another remarkable drive of thirty-seven miles under combat conditions from their starting positions around Gondrecourt. Despite the speed of the cavalry's advance, the group was unable to prevent the destruction of the bridges over the Moselle by the Germans.<sup>296</sup> To the south, the 121<sup>st</sup> Squadron encountered fierce resistance from the German 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division centered around the town of Mirecourt, 10 miles west of the Moselle River. However, the rapid success of the 106<sup>th</sup> Squadron to the north allowed XV Corps elements to engage the Germans from not only the west but from the north as well.<sup>297</sup> Additionally, the 121<sup>st</sup> Squadron succeeded in identifying the main German defensive positions prior to being stopped, allowing for a rapid battle-handover with the follow-on regiments of the 79<sup>th</sup> ID and the French 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division. Finally, the cavalry, specifically the 121<sup>st</sup> Squadron, maintained economy of force positions between the main combat elements of the

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<sup>295</sup> "XV Corps After Action Report, 1 September 1944-30 September 1944," record 215, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 2.

<sup>296</sup> "XV Corps After Action Report, 1 September 1944-30 September 1944," 3.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

corps, allowing them to concentrate combat power. The squadron's positions were tested by German armor and infantry attacks on 13 September, but were driven off.<sup>298</sup>

By 15 September, XV Corps had essentially destroyed the German 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division west of the Moselle River.<sup>299</sup> The corps had estimated the division's original strength at 7000 soldiers. It had killed 1,000 and captured 4,000, and destroyed the bulk of its equipment.<sup>300</sup> This action is a textbook example of a corps battle in a movement to contact. The cavalry identified the enemy's positions, as well as gaps in his defenses, and fought through his security zone. The battle was then handed off to the follow-on corps elements that used the information gathered by the cavalry to attack the enemy's most vulnerable points. Although this action was fought with complete air superiority against a somewhat disorganized foe, it is still a perfect example of the utility of corps cavalry on the modern battlefield.

From 15 to 18 September, the 106<sup>th</sup> Group participated in a war of patrolling and raids along the east bank of the Moselle River as the XV Corps awaited further orders. On 18 September, Third Army ordered the corps to attack across the Moselle to the northeast, into the southern flank of the German forces that had assaulted into the flank of the XII Corps. The 106<sup>th</sup> Group would again lead the advance of the corps, although due to the strength of the German forces in the region, the cavalry would quickly have to give way to the follow-on divisions. By 22 September, the 106<sup>th</sup> Group was concentrated around the town of Lunéville, maintaining contact with the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG to the north while protecting the XV Corps' northern flank. On 28 September, the group with attached tank destroyers attacked to the east along both banks of the Marne-Rhin Canal, 5 miles north of Lunéville as part of a larger move by the corps to continue to advance in order to protect the south flank of XII Corps. The group made steady progress,

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 7.

seizing the town of Bauzemont, north of the canal, while reaching the outskirts of Henamenil south of the canal. The next day, the entire corps transitioned to the command of the Seventh U.S. Army and the 6<sup>th</sup> Army Group.<sup>301</sup>

The troopers of the 106<sup>th</sup> MCG won an enviable reputation for boldness and decisive action during their time with the Third Army. The group's actions enabled the XV Corps to gain the upper hand in multiple actions, most notably, the destruction of the German 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. Despite an inadequate doctrine and light equipment, these soldiers adapted and fought, making their mark across northern France.

The 106<sup>th</sup> MCG would continue to fight with distinction for the remainder of the war as a part of the Seventh Army. Included in its accomplishments would be accepting the surrender of an entire Hungarian Division and the liberation of King Leopold of Belgium.<sup>302</sup> The group would leave Europe at the conclusion of the war, and deactivate in October 1945 at Camp Shanks, New York.<sup>303</sup>

### 16<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group

The 16<sup>th</sup> MCG was a latecomer to the European theater, becoming operational on the continent on 9 March 1945. Organized for service on the Mexican border during the First World War, the regiment had never seen combat prior to the Second World War. Despite their late introduction into the fighting, the 16<sup>th</sup> MCG with its subordinate elements, the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Squadrons, would prove to be the equal of its more distinguished brethren.

Immediately upon their arrival in the army area of operations, Third Army assigned the 16<sup>th</sup> MCG to XX Corps, then preparing to punch through German defensive positions in the

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>302</sup> 106<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Cavalry Group, 128-131.

<sup>303</sup> Sawicki, James A., *Cavalry Regiments of the U.S. Army* (Dumfries, VA: Wyvern Publications, 1985), 221.

Hunsbrück Mountains to the south of the Moselle River. The commander of XX Corps needed a diversionary attack in the north of his sector to fix German defenses there in order to allow his main effort attacks to the south a better chance of success. The 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG currently in position in this sector did not have enough combat power to accomplish the desired effect, so XX Corps attached the 16<sup>th</sup> MCG to the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG, creating the 316<sup>th</sup> Provisional Cavalry Brigade.<sup>304</sup>

Initially, the 16<sup>th</sup> MCG assumed positions alongside the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG, relieving elements of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadron in order to allow that squadron to mass combat power to conduct a shaping attack on high ground to the north of Waldrach, a key town in the German defenses, four miles southeast of Trier. Upon the success of that attack on 12 March, the 16<sup>th</sup> Squadron relieved the 43<sup>rd</sup> Squadron of their newly conquered ground, and supported the attack of the 19<sup>th</sup> Squadron on the ridgeline dominated by the towns of Sommerau and Morscheid immediately to the south of Waldrach.<sup>305</sup> Seizure of this position would drive the Germans back approximately two miles, deprive them of the best defensive positions in the area, and unhinge the defense of the town of Waldrach.

The 19<sup>th</sup> Squadron's attack went well, consuming the day of 13 March. This attack then set the conditions for the 16<sup>th</sup> Squadron to conduct an attack on the primary objective of Waldrach on 14 March. By now, the group possessed the high ground to the north and south of the town. Despite these disadvantages, the Germans defending the town stubbornly clung to their positions with heavy artillery support. The 16<sup>th</sup> Squadron attempted to seize Waldrach from the west, but the Germans stopped it outside the town with heavy fire. The attack resumed the next day, with the 16<sup>th</sup> Squadron attacking from the north and the 19<sup>th</sup> Squadron from the south. Although a blown bridge prevented the 19<sup>th</sup> Squadron from entering the town, the 16<sup>th</sup> Squadron

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<sup>304</sup> "16<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group History, 1 November 1944 – 31 January 1946," record CAVG16, entry 427, RG 407, National Archives II, 10-11 March.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 March.

succeeded in clearing the town in bitter house-to-house fighting.<sup>306</sup> This fight demonstrated the ability of the relatively green cavalry to fight as infantry and seize a stoutly held objective. However, although the terrain complicated maneuver, the entire area of operations for this four day battle involving three cavalry squadrons was only three miles from end to end. The town of Waldrach, the site of the fighting's climax, is less than a mile from north to south, and barely a half mile wide. Thus, the limitations of the cavalry are also readily apparent in that their lack of dismounted firepower limited them to extremely small frontages in high intensity combat.

On 16 March, XX Corps detached the 16<sup>th</sup> MCG from the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG, leaving the 16<sup>th</sup> MCG with responsibility for the entire frontage of the, now defunct, 316<sup>th</sup> Provisional Cavalry Brigade, although it would take until 18 March to relieve all elements of the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG.<sup>307</sup> On that same day, the 16<sup>th</sup> MCG overran the town of Osburg, three miles south of Waldrach. The next day, the group seized the towns of Thomm and Herl, three miles to the southeast of Waldrach.<sup>308</sup> The capture of these towns eliminated any remaining German resistance in the Waldrach region.

By 18 March, the XX Corps offensive had succeeded in penetrating German lines and all units were making good progress. The corps ordered the 16<sup>th</sup> MCG to continue its advance to the east along the south bank of the Moselle and maintain contact with XII Corps to the north. By 21 March the group had advanced to the vicinity of the mining town of Idar Oberstein, 30 miles to the east of their start positions. German resistance west of the Rhine had begun to

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid., 14-15 March.

<sup>307</sup> *Patton's Ghost Troops"- After Action Report 9 August 1944 – 9 May 1945* (Phoenix: 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Veteran's Association, 1974), 117.

<sup>308</sup> "16<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group History, 1 November 1944 – 31 January 1946," 16-17 March.

collapse, and the cavalrymen met little opposition in their drive.<sup>309</sup> On 23 March, the group seized the town of Eßweiler, 11 miles to the northwest of the city of Kaiserslautern.<sup>310</sup>

On 25 March, Third Army detached the 16<sup>th</sup> MCG from XX Corps and attached them to XII Corps. XII Corps needed a cavalry formation to relieve the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG, which had been protecting its north flank along the Rhine River so that the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG could participate in the exploitation of the Rhine bridgehead. The 16<sup>th</sup> MCG made the forty mile move in a single day, taking responsibility for the Rhine flank of XII Corps from Mainz to Bingen, a frontage of over fifteen miles.<sup>311</sup> Although this sector had become relatively quiet due to the success of the XII Corps assault crossing of the Rhine, a screen still needed to be maintained to provide security for XII Corps' vulnerable logistics elements scrambling to keep pace with the rapidly advancing armored columns.

Two days after their arrival in XII Corps, the cavalrymen received a more active mission. The corps attached the 16<sup>th</sup> MCG to the 80<sup>th</sup> ID as it continued the attack across the Rhine River. On 29 March, the group crossed the Rhine and assaulted to the west to protect the flank of the 80<sup>th</sup> ID as it attacked to the north and east. By night, the group had reached the town of Wiesbaden, six miles north of Mainz. Over the next two days the group continued to keep pace with the 80<sup>th</sup> ID as it protected the north flank of that division and XII Corps. German resistance was generally light or nonexistent. However on 31 March, B/19<sup>th</sup> Squadron engaged a group of SS in the town of Wehrheim, 12 miles north of Frankfurt. The cavalrymen could not dislodge the German defenders and were forced to pass of the reduction of the town to an element of the 5<sup>th</sup> ID.<sup>312</sup> Although the cavalrymen would have liked to have had the combat power to finish the

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 21 March.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 23 March.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 25 March.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 31 March.

Germans, such an action was entirely within the bounds of typical American cavalry action. The troop identified the enemy, developed the situation, and then passed the fight to follow-on forces. A heavier cavalry force might have been able to fight through more resistance without calling upon the main body, but the concept remains the same.

On 1 April, 12<sup>th</sup> Army Group relieved the 16<sup>th</sup> MCG from XII Corps, assigning them to the newly forming U.S. Fifteenth Army. This army would never see actual combat, but would instead administer the security of the newly liberated and conquered regions of Europe. The troopers of the group would spend the last month of the war conducting rear area security and dealing with displaced persons. At the conclusion of the war, the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Squadrons were relieved from the group headquarters and redeployed. The group headquarters took command of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> Squadrons (from the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG) and then participated in the Berlin Task Force, where it would remain ensuring the security of West Berlin and West Germany until 1950, when it left Europe.

The 15<sup>th</sup>, 106<sup>th</sup>, and 16<sup>th</sup> MCGs, though with the Third Army for only short periods, definitively contributed to the success of the army. Just like their brethren in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> MCGs, these troopers faced heavy fighting in light equipment while improvising tactical doctrine on the fly. Though these three groups did not serve long enough with the Third Army to become part of its legend, they nevertheless were major players in its creation.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSIONS

On 19 May 1945, the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG celebrated the 99<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the regiment. In a letter addressed to the officers and men of the group, LTG Walton Walker praised the cavalrymen.

“The ‘crossed sabers’ you wear bear a new luster due to your deeds in the present campaign. When the history of the present War in Europe is written, no narrative could be complete, no account could be either adequate or accurate unless it told, and told at some length, of your achievements.”<sup>313</sup>

Although Walker specifically addressed only the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG, the same could be said for all the cavalry groups that had served with the U.S. Third Army. These six groups had served with distinction in every theater of combat in which the army had fought, from Normandy to the Czechoslovakian border. Designed and trained for a purely reconnaissance role, these cavalrymen had conducted that mission in addition to offensive and defensive security operations, economy of force missions, coordination and liaison duties, and full scale offensive and defensive combat. Despite inadequate organization and equipment, the cavalry had succeeded in almost every mission assigned.

During Third Army’s baptism of fire in the Northern France and Brittany campaigns, the cavalry proved invaluable to enabling the army to move rapidly and decisively. The 15<sup>th</sup> MCG spearheaded Task Force “A” into Brittany, seizing key rail bridges, vital logistics nodes and protecting the rear of the 6<sup>th</sup> AD as it invested the port of Brest. Additionally, the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG participated in outright offensive operations on the periphery of Brest, assisting in the seizure of the Daoulas Peninsula and seizing the Crozon Peninsula. Without the efforts of the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG, VIII Corps would have had a much more difficult time in clearing the Brittany peninsula. The

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<sup>313</sup> Preston Utterback, *The 150 Year Saga of the 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S. Cavalry* (Phoenix: 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Veterans Association, 1996), 229.

corps would have been forced to commit combat elements needed for the clearance of the vital towns of Saint Malo and Brest to these shaping operations, thereby prolonging already difficult battles.

While the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG blitzed around Brittany, the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 106<sup>th</sup> MCGs conducted reconnaissance for and protected the flanks of VIII, XII, and XV Corps. The 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG operated almost exclusively in a flank security role for first the VIII Corps, then the XII Corps. Despite the lack of limelight for this group, it aided in the seizure of the key town of Nantes by conducting the initial reconnaissance of the town, as well as securing the 4<sup>th</sup> AD's supply lines. Additionally, the 2<sup>nd</sup> secured the vital hinge of the entire Third Army as it wheeled to the east at Nantes. This pivot point could have been extremely vulnerable as the army pushed its combat power forward into central France and Brittany simultaneously. Finally, the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG conducted a huge screening mission (70 miles) at the end of August, protecting the entire southern flank of XII Corps (and thus Third Army) as it assaulted to the east. This operation allowed Third Army to move with alacrity without worrying about its flanks. The mobility and firepower of the cavalry were uniquely suited to such a mission.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG conducted its share of flank security as well, but also participated in open combat in the drive to Paris. Although the group failed to cut off the retreat of German forces fighting the 7<sup>th</sup> AD to the west of Paris, its actions most certainly prevented those forces from being reinforced and further delaying the corps. The 3<sup>rd</sup> then led the XX Corps from the Seine to the Marne, and then to the Meuse. The group's actions during this period prevented any German delaying forces from significantly impacting the XX Corps and directly contributed to the speedy success of the overall corps mission.

The 106<sup>th</sup> MCG participated in a like manner to the 3<sup>rd</sup>, but also had the added distinction of setting the inside corner for Third Army's massive sweep to the east out of Normandy. The group's rapid seizure of the key crossroads of Fougères allowed the VIII corps to continue its assault to the south without worrying about its eastern flank, and the XV corps to rapidly move to the area without German interference and continue the assault to the east. The 106<sup>th</sup> also greatly aided the XV Corps in its drive towards Paris, conducting reconnaissance and acting in many ways like a full scale division rather than the smallest regimental sized formation on the battlefield. The actions of the 106<sup>th</sup> MCG were so important to the XV Corps, that it is specifically singled out in the XV Corps after action review for its meritorious conduct during this operation.

While the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, and 106<sup>th</sup> MCGs fought in battle, the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG provided a dramatic service by weaving the parts of the Third Army into a cohesive whole by providing communications detachments that reported directly to army headquarters to every division level or higher headquarters in the formation. These detachments often proved to be the most reliable form of communications throughout the army, allowing Patton to manage his formation, despite at one point being spread over nearly 500 miles. The cavalry provided more utility than simple signal troops as they had the combat power to protect small transmission detachments.

When operations slowed for the Third Army in September as it entered the Lorraine Campaign, the cavalry continued to play a vital role. The 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG led XII Corps to the Moselle River and identified strengthening German resistance. That the XII Corps commander chose to ignore this information is not necessarily the fault of the cavalry. Following the failure to vault the Moselle, the 2<sup>nd</sup> provided yeoman service to the XII Corps by protecting the corps southern flank from newly arriving German formations coming from southern France. At the same time,

the group proceeded to slowly fight its way through the German security zone on the east bank of the Moselle, setting the conditions for the success of the 35<sup>th</sup> ID and 4<sup>th</sup> AD's assault in mid-September. Once across the Moselle, the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG continued to provide valuable service by protecting the rear and flank of the 4<sup>th</sup> AD as it pocketed the key city of Nancy. The battle of Luneville on 18 September demonstrated the weaknesses of the cavalry, but also its utility in providing security to the rest of the corps. Although the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG could not defeat the German counterattack, it did contain it long enough for the corps to develop the situation on its terms.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG spent the majority of the Lorraine campaign in an economy of force role. The group held a sector larger than a division's in order to allow the XX Corps to mass its combat power for a decisive attack across the Moselle in November. Although the cavalry were heavily reinforced for this mission, it is doubtful that any other formation in XX Corps had the mobility, firepower, and flexibility to accomplish it without the same or more attachments.

The Battle of the Bulge saw the greatest test of the Third Army as it pulled out of its offensive into Germany, turned 90 degrees, and attacked north into the flank of the German penetration. However, the army could not have accomplished this feat of arms without its cavalry groups. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> MCGs held large stretches of front, the 3<sup>rd</sup> in the region of the Saar-Moselle Triangle, the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the immediate north, stretching along the Moselle River. These actions allowed Third Army to shift substantial combat power to the main effort against the southern shoulder of the Bulge, while maintaining security in its original zone. The 6<sup>th</sup> MCG saw much more direct combat in this campaign, as it aided the 4<sup>th</sup> AD in its assault north towards Bastogne. The 6<sup>th</sup> protected the flanks of the 4<sup>th</sup> AD, one of which was completely unsupported by friendly divisions, enabling that division to concentrate all combat power forward, relieving Bastogne on 26 December, despite heavy German resistance. The 6<sup>th</sup> MCG continued to aid the

III Corps in the Bulge, winning a Presidential Unit Citation for actions in reducing the Harlange Pocket. Thus, the Battle of the Bulge saw Third Army's cavalry perform missions across the gamut of old cavalry doctrine, from security to reconnaissance to economy of force, to outright offensive operations.

The Rhineland campaign would see the cavalry prove of even greater utility to the Third Army. The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> MCGs would fight as a brigade in a diversionary attack for XX Corps in its assault through the Hunsbrück Mountains. The cavalry fought for a week in incredibly tough hill and urban fighting with just a battalion of tank destroyers and some artillery and engineers in support. Despite the difficulty of the terrain and resistance, the cavalry achieved the XX Corps objective of drawing German attention away from the corps' main effort to the south, enabling a relatively quick breakthrough.

The 6<sup>th</sup> MCG would fight its way across the Our River as part of VIII Corps. Although the group was not the main effort of the corps, its attack fixed German forces in its sector, preventing the Wehrmacht from shifting forces to block the corps' primary assault. The 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG spent the Rhineland campaign screening the majority of the XII Corps sector, allowing the corps to concentrate its divisions in the brutal fighting through the Siegfried Line. Although this action was not particularly memorable, it served a vital function in the success of XII Corps, as many of its attacks required the commitment of every last available unit in some divisions.

The Central Germany campaign would again prove the usefulness of the cavalry groups to the Third Army. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> MCGs would screen the flank of XII Corps as it attacked to and then over the Rhine River. These screens allowed the corps to concentrate combat power forward and not have to dilute its efforts. Following the crossing of the Rhine, the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG would protect vast areas as it continued to screen the flank of the XII Corps against any last ditch

German attacks. The 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG led XX Corps' exploitation of the Rhine bridgehead, doing such an efficient job of protecting the follow-on divisions that the 65<sup>th</sup> ID was able to make the move from the Rhine River to the Fulda River in trucks without having to dismount and fight its way forward. The 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG then conducted reconnaissance of the German defenses of the Fulda River, allowing the 65<sup>th</sup> ID to easily penetrate the Wehrmacht's positions. The 6<sup>th</sup> MCG conducted security operations along the Rhine River, allowing the VIII Corps to completely pull its assault division off the line for several days in order to prepare the attack. This action greatly facilitated the VIII Corps crossing of the Rhine as well as the follow on exploitation of the bridgehead.

Without question, the mechanized cavalry groups of the Third Army contributed immeasurably to the success of the overall army. In fact, the mobility, firepower, and flexibility of the cavalry groups made them, arguably, the most efficient regimental sized formations in the American Army. Additionally, the cavalry formations that performed these missions were dramatically smaller than their main force brethren. A typical cavalry group weighed in at just over 1500 personnel. A typical infantry regiment possessed over 3000.<sup>314</sup> Although the cavalry would often be reinforced by tank destroyers, engineers, and artillery, so were the regimental combat teams and combat commands of the infantry and armor divisions.

However, success did not come without a price. All the cavalry formations in the Third Army left many dead and wounded littered on battlefields from Brittany to Czechoslovakia. Of the six groups that served with the army, two had their commanders captured (3<sup>rd</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> MCGs). Another (the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG) had its commander wounded in action leading the desperate defense of Lunéville. Thus, 50 percent of the cavalry colonels in the Third Army became

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<sup>314</sup> Robert A. Palmer, Kent Roberts Greenfield and Bell I. Wiley, *United States Army in World War II: The Army Ground Forces: The Organization of Ground Combat Troops* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Division of the Army, 1947), 341.

casualties. These men were ostensibly the most protected individuals in their respective formations. Casualties amongst other ranks proved just as high, with casualties in some battles reaching over 20 percent or greater in some troops. The light nature of the cavalry's equipment also led to heavy losses of materiel as well. In one notable action, German tanks destroyed over a quarter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> MCG's assault guns with no loss of their own. Despite the best efforts of the cavalry to use stealth, the trail of the cavalry could often be determined by following burnt out jeeps and armored cars. These losses, both in men and equipment, proved more notable than losses amongst the line formations of the Third Army. A corps of three infantry divisions might typically have up to nine infantry regimental combat teams of 3000 men each. However, the corps would generally have only one 1500-man cavalry group.

The actions of the cavalry were often not flashy or well publicized. A screen along the flank of a corps might seem unimportant, but even a relatively light German force could have caused dramatic harm by striking a completely exposed flank of one of the corps of the Third Army. As this army moved across the breadth of France, with substantial German forces to the south, this was no small threat. Moreover, even when the cavalry could not fully stop a German advance, as at Lunéville, it was able to provide warning to its protected units, as well as at least slowing down the enemy. The cavalry also provided forward security, in many cases preventing German ambushes against the main body of the corps. Although the troopers may have suffered as a result, the primary combat elements of the corps were protected, thereby achieving the cavalry's mission. In both cases, forward and flank, the cavalry allowed commanders to develop battles on their own terms rather than have the Wehrmacht dictate the pace of the action. Aerial reconnaissance aided this effort as well, but defensive positions could often be hidden from the air, and aerial reconnaissance could not always determine the strength of the German forces, or

where their security zone began. Only cavalymen operating across the ground could determine this information with consistent accuracy.

Additionally, the cavalry's actions in economy of force missions allowed corps commanders to focus the full power of their corps. Time and again, cavalry groups, often with only a single squadron of less than 800 troopers, would cover fronts more appropriate for divisions or even corps, in order to allow the divisions of the Third Army to mass at the decisive point. American doctrine is heavily focused upon the liberal application of firepower. However, with limited assets and battlefields often dozens of miles in length, commanders could not spread their units evenly across such a broad front. However, neither could they leave portions of front unguarded. By the late fall of 1944, the American Army was struggling to maintain line infantry at full strength. Peeling off whole infantry battalions to screen unproductive portions of the line, was not only wasteful, but would have almost guaranteed failure in some battles. Thus, the numerically weak, but mobile cavalry proved the perfect solution, despite doctrine dictating otherwise.

Making the cavalry's achievements even more impressive was the fact that their doctrine leading up to their commitment in 1944 proved generally inadequate. The 1944 FM 100-5 asserted that

“Mechanized cavalry units are organized, equipped, and trained to perform reconnaissance missions employing infiltration tactics, fire, and maneuver. They engage in combat only to the extent necessary to accomplish the assigned mission... When opposing main forces close, mechanized cavalry may be employed on reconnaissance missions toward an exposed flank, used to maintain liaison with adjacent units, or placed in reserve.”<sup>315</sup>

From the preceding chapters, it is quite evident that the above proved to be a completely unrealistic view of cavalry in combat. Cavalry had always possessed a combat role in the U.S.

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<sup>315</sup> War Department, *FM100-5: Field Service Regulations: Operations, 1944* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1944), paragraph 38.

Army prior to 1942, and the fighting in Europe in 1944 and 1945 once again demonstrated the need for a dedicated, robust, security and reconnaissance force. Unfortunately, the horse cavalry regiments that had previously filled this niche were either converted to other unit types or into mechanized cavalry groups. Therefore, despite being equipped for a bare minimum of fighting, the mechanized cavalry found themselves fulfilling roles intended for a much more robust force. In fact, the only thing that made the cavalry succeed in many instances was the modularity that was particular of the Second World War U.S. Army. Commanders understood that the cavalry did not have the means of fighting on anything approximating equal terms without additional attachments of tank destroyers, artillery, and even entire infantry battalions on occasion. However, what higher headquarters can give, it can also take away. Thus, despite the possibility of reinforcement, the cavalry had to always be prepared to fight with just their organic equipment.

Of even greater interest is the assertion by *FM 100-5, 1944* that a cavalry squadron could expect to cover a front of approximately 25 miles in the reconnaissance role.<sup>316</sup> While this goal was occasionally met, cavalry squadrons routinely conducted security operations (requiring a greater density of troops) over this limit. As this example demonstrates, the doctrine for mechanized cavalry proved almost completely inadequate, although older horse cavalry doctrine (as codified in *FM 2-15 (1941), Employment of Cavalry*) became almost universally accepted by both the cavalry and their senior headquarters.<sup>317</sup> In fact, the General Board report on cavalry at the end of the war stated that the doctrine of “reconnaissance with minimum fighting was unsound,” and that “the tactical doctrine of mechanized cavalry should be generally that

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid., paragraph 39.

<sup>317</sup> For an in-depth doctrinal analysis of the mechanized cavalry, read: Louis DiMarco “The U.S. Army’s Mechanized Cavalry Doctrine in WW II” (Master’s Thesis, Army Command and General Staff College, 1995).

prescribed in... *FM 2-15 (1941), Employment of Cavalry.*”<sup>318</sup> Thus, despite training with an incorrect doctrine that did not reflect battlefield reality, the cavalry not only rose to the challenge, but contributed massively to the success of their field army.

Unfortunately, despite their great contributions to the success of the Third Army, and contrary to Walton Walker’s hopes, the achievements of the mechanized cavalry have almost been completely overlooked in the historiography of the Second World War. The cavalry groups’ small size (approximately half an infantry regiment), meant that their victories and actions would be overshadowed by the more heralded infantry and armor divisions. However, without these small bands of pioneering cavalymen, the Third Army would not have achieved nearly the same level of success, and with much greater loss. These troopers proved that the mounts might change, technology might advance, but the need for dedicated robust reconnaissance and security formations will never go away. The sacrifices and achievements of these great soldiers deserve to be remembered, and the lessons they learned heeded by the modern army. Fighting through the indifference of their own military, inadequate doctrine, and poorly armed vehicles (the M5 Stuart as the prime example), the troopers of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, and 106<sup>th</sup> MCGs made the difference for the Third Army in the European Theater of Operations.

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<sup>318</sup> The General Board, “Mechanized Cavalry Units” (United States Forces, European Theater, Study Number 49, 1945), 20.

APPENDIX

A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF GENERAL JAMES H. POLK

General James H. Polk was born to a career army family in 1911 in the town of Batangas on the island of Luzon in the Philippines. His father had been roommates with George Patton at VMI, and had remained friends with him at the United States Military Academy.<sup>319</sup> This relationship with the Patton would continue throughout Polk's career. A 1933 graduate of the United States Military Academy, Polk followed in the footsteps of his father, as he was commissioned in the cavalry and assigned to the 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment (his father's old unit) at Fort Bliss, Texas. In 1935 he took command of the regiment's armored car platoon. In 1936 he attended the Cavalry School at Fort Riley, Kansas, where in addition to studying horse cavalry tactics, he studied armor operations under then Colonel George Patton.<sup>320</sup>

After the Cavalry School, Polk moved to Fort Myer, Virginia, and duty with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Regiment, under the command of Patton. After a tour with the "Brave Rifles" Polk moved to the United States Military Academy, where he served as a company tactical officer. He remained at West Point after the outbreak of war, finally winning a transfer to operational units in 1943.<sup>321</sup> After a brief tour at the general staff course at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Polk was assigned to the 106<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment, then undergoing training at Fort Hood, Texas, the home of the U.S. Army Tank Destroyer School. He first took command of one of the two squadrons of the group, then later moved to the position of Regimental Executive Officer.<sup>322</sup>

Polk deployed to England with the newly re-designated 106<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Cavalry Group (MCG), and entered combat in Normandy with them in mid-June 1944. In late July, Polk was chosen to temporarily command the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG in its role as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Headquarters special

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<sup>319</sup> Jody Schwarz and James Polk III, email interview by William S. Nance, 11-12 January 2011.

<sup>320</sup> James H. Polk, interview by Jesse Stiller and Rebecca Craver, November 1987-April 1988, 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment Museum Collection: 7.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>322</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army, *General Order No. 13 – General James Hilliard Polk* (Washington D.C.: GPO, 3 April, 1992).

Information Service, working directly for now General George Patton. After the return of the 6<sup>th</sup> MCG's original commander in late August 1944, Polk took command of the 15<sup>th</sup> MCG in Brittany, but was quickly pulled by General Patton to take command of the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG whose commander had been captured in the Lorraine Campaign. Polk would command the 3<sup>rd</sup> MCG, often designated as "Task Force Polk," for the duration of the war, earning three decorations for valor.<sup>323</sup>

After the Second World War, Polk would become Chief of Tactics at the Ground General School at Fort Riley Kansas.<sup>324</sup> In 1950, he was assigned as G2, X Corps in Korea, serving with that headquarters through three campaigns. In 1951, he attended the National War College, later serving as an instructor at the Army War College. Following that assignment, he served as Chief of Staff of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division as it made its move to West Germany during the Cold War build-up. In 1956, Polk was promoted to brigadier general, and was pinned with General Patton's own stars, generously given by Patton's widow, Beatrice Patton.<sup>325</sup>

Following a series of staff assignments in increasing levels of responsibility, Polk took command of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division and then, Commander, U.S. Forces Berlin in 1963. In 1964, he took command of V Corps. In 1967, in his penultimate army assignment, Polk assumed command of Seventh Army and then was promoted to four star rank, becoming Commander in Chief, U.S. Army Europe and Commander, NATO Central Army Group in 1968.

After leading a full retired life, active in many organizations including the National Security Council and the Horse Cavalry Association, General Polk died 18 February, 1992. He left behind his devoted wife of 55 years, Josephine ("Joey") Leavell Polk who had followed him through 26 moves and two wars. Polk is also survived by two children (Josephine Polk Schwartz

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<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>325</sup> Jody Schwarz and James Polk III, email interview by William S. Nance, 11-12 January 2011.

and James H. Polk, III), five grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. His life and career stand as tremendous examples to all future cavalrymen, who were fortunate enough to benefit from his impact on the modern American Army.

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