

The Seventh U.S. Cavalry 1940

By William Richardson

I joined the Army in July 1940 and was assigned to a provisional platoon in the 7th Cavalry for training. In just a couple of days our platoon was riding bare back out on the parade ground—riding in a large circle around the platoon sergeant so that he could see how we were doing.

My first thoughts were: What a dodo bird, here I have ridden horses most of my life and now I am out in the hot sun learning to ride the Army way!

Each morning we had mounted drill—sometimes on the parade ground and sometimes riding out in the desert. Each afternoon was spent in dismounted drill and learning the many things we needed to know to be soldiers.

The mounted drill was particularly hard for personnel who were not familiar with horses. Some soldiers just couldn't get over being afraid of horses and had to be transferred out of the cavalry. The ten weeks went by quickly as we were always kept busy and we were happy to be assigned to our regular unit.

The 7th and 8th Cavalry regiments made up the 2nd Cavalry Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division. The 7th Cavalry had a mounted band assigned to the regiment and the band added so much to the *esprit de corps* of the regiment. We soon learned that the 1st Cavalry Division was the best in the Army and the 7th Cavalry was the best in the division.

Each regiment consisted of two regular squadrons (five troops each) and one provisional squadron that included the Headquarters Troop, a Service Troop and a Special Weapons Troop. The band was included as part of the Headquarters Troop. I was assigned to F Troop.

The Army in 1940 did not mind at all if soldiers were fat. Most of the band members were fat and I don't think that there were any two of them of the same nationality with the exception of probably some Indians out of the same tribe.

The band was a motley crew but they were excellent musicians and were certainly an asset to the regiment. The bass drummer, a large Indian, was probably the fattest in the band. When they were mounted, he had a big drum on each side of him and all you could see of the horse was his neck and head in front and his hind end and tail in the back.

Each regiment consisted of about 2000 assigned personnel (officers and enlisted men) and about 2200 horses. Each troop had extra horses to carry radio equipment, machine guns and mortars. There were some vehicles that were assigned to the Regimental Headquarters and Service Troops.

Each regiment had radio equipment that was much too heavy and bulky to be transported on horses. Most of the heavy radios were mounted in half-track vehicles.

The Service Troop had two large trucks with semi-trailers to haul hay and oats out to the desert when units were camping out. The Headquarters Troop had some motorcycles with sidecars attached for messengers.

Each troop had two trucks with trailers—one for the supply sergeant and armorer and one for the kitchen. These vehicles were only used when we were going to be away from the post overnight.

Each troop had its own mess (now called dining facility); and the mess sergeant and cooks took pride in how well they could cook, especially in the field. All of the mess sergeants were fat and most of the cooks, too, which was a sign for good cooking. And they were good too!

Our regular training continued to be mounted in the morning and dismounted drill in the afternoon. All of the horses, including the pack horses, were included in the mounted drill. I always hated to have a packhorse to lead as they were always holding back trying to jerk your arm off!

When we returned to the stables, all of the horses had to be groomed (curried and rubbed down). The officers and senior non-commissioned officers did not do any grooming so we had a saying: "Ride one, lead two and groom five." It was not too far from the truth.

For the most part Army training before the draft and World War II was very leisurely. Wednesday afternoons we were usually off duty and the officers played polo. We were off on weekends except for an occasional barracks inspection but if you stayed in the barracks you were called out to water the horses both morning and afternoon.

While we were on the post, the Service Troop had two teams with wagons to haul manure away from the stables and hay from the quartermaster warehouse to the stables. In the 7th Cavalry teamsters were old soldiers with over twenty years service.

The teamsters took great pride in their teams but they also did a lot of drinking. Whiskey could be bought in Juarez, Mexico for less than a dollar a quart—and you got a refund of twenty-five cents if you brought the bottle back.

About once a month one or both of these old soldiers would get really drunk on duty and let their team run away scattering hay or manure from one end of the post to the other, seldom missing the commanding general's lawn.

They would be reduced in rank to privates but the commanding general had apparently known them for years and always within a month he would direct that the soldiers be promoted to private first class. They would then have money enough to go to Mexico for more whiskey and the whole scene would start over again.

We had a dismounted regimental parade about once a week, usually for Retreat; and they were always colorful and attended by family members and other spectators. The 7th Cavalry band added to the precision marching that was expected of every trooper.

Boots and spurs were always highly polished and spurs gleamed in the evening sun. *Garry Owen* had been the regimental song since the days when Gen. Custer commanded the 7th Cavalry. When the band played it, you could just feel the pride that everyone had for serving in a regiment with such long and famous history.

The mounted parades were usually by regiments but sometimes included all of the division units stationed at Fort Bliss. If the parade included only a squadron or the regiment, we marched in a column of fours. If the parade was a division parade, we rode by the reviewing stand with thirty-two horses abreast.

When we had a mounted parade, you could always count on one or two horses running away as we had troopers who still could not control their horses as they should. The horse would run right around the parade route knocking other horses out of the way before running out into the desert or back to the stables.

I wondered if the run-away horse thought that it had to run around the parade route first so he would get credit for the parade. All you could hear was: "Stop that horse! Stop that G— D— horse!"

Usually the rider had fallen off and the horse was seldom stopped. Their habit was to run back to the stables but sometimes we had to ride out in the desert to find them.

There were lots of places to ride from Fort Bliss and camp out. The controlling factor was sufficient water for the horses. We often rode to the Hueco Tanks located in the Hueco Mountains about thirty miles east of El Paso and would camp out. Water was supplied to the tanks by windmills. Another regular overnight destination was Dona Ana located about thirty miles north of El Paso.

I enjoyed the trips away from Fort Bliss. In the summer, even on the hottest days, it would cool off pretty quickly after sundown and we didn't have trouble sleeping. The weather was almost always good and the desert sky was filled with stars. We could see the lights of El Paso, too.

In the wintertime we could have some cold weather. We usually rode from the fort in a column of twos and if the entire regiment or a larger group was riding out, the line could stretch for miles with only a small break between units.

When we camped out, each troop put up a picket line to tie the horses. The line was a long heavy rope held up by pickets driven into the ground and secured with wooden pegs.

When we were going overnight, or longer, we always carried one feed of oats in a nosebag. As soon as the horses were unsaddled and tied to the picket line, we would put the nosebag on to feed them.

We had a real strict first sergeant and he always wanted us to feed the horses on his command. Invariably we would be tying the nosebags on when you would hear the first sergeant shout: "Don't feed until I say feed!"

We would hastily begin removing the nosebags with the horse probably wondering what he had done wrong; and before we could get the nosebags off, we would hear the first sergeant holler: "Feed!" The hay trucks usually didn't arrive until after dark and then we had to put hay on the picket line in the dark.

Service in the 7th Cavalry was a memorable time. That all changed with the beginning of the draft, an accelerated urgency for training, our entry into World War II and finally turning our horses loose in the corral (to be sold later to ranchers) as we prepared for shipment to Australia where we joined Gen. MacArthur's command in the Southwest Pacific.

The Dispatch would like to thank Associate Bill Richardson for generously sharing his experiences in the 7th U.S. Cavalry.

Of these experiences, Bill adds: "When I enlisted in the cavalry, I had a high school education (something that the average soldier at that time did not have) and I could also type. I got promoted fairly quickly. When the war started, I was a sergeant and a short time after that I was promoted to Staff Sergeant. I became the assistant regimental supply officer.

"When the war was over, I was out [of the Army] less than a year when I reenlisted to serve with the cavalry in the occupation of Japan. The general had me apply for a commission and I was commissioned a second lieutenant of cavalry in Dec. 1946."

A career soldier, Bill Richardson retired as a major in 1961. Ed.

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