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Cavalry

By Douglas Kennedy

By the beginning of the 20th century, field armies had integrated the combat arm of cavalry with the infantry and artillery branches for over a century. However, its involvement in battle continued to experience changes driven by the increasing intensity of firepower on the modern battlefield. World War I was the final crucible that demonstrated the limited relevance of horse-mounted cavalry on the industrialized battlefield.

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Pre-War Cavalry Tactics

The closing of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century witnessed the sluggish reaction of European armies to the increasing effect of firepower on the battlefield and the consequences that these technological advancements had on, among other things, the traditional role of horse-mounted cavalry. As nations stumbled into the First World War, the third element of the "rock, paper, scissors" tripartite of warfare that Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) had so notably integrated a century earlier, the cavalry, remained steadfast in its worth, along with the artillery and infantry – or so many of the architects of warfare believed. As British doctrine from 1907 stated, "The rifle, effective as it is, cannot replace the effect produced by the speed of the horse, the magnetism of the charge and the terror of the cold steel.” Similarly, the 1913 German doctrine noted, “In Cavalry action a vigorous attack, ridden stirrup to stirrup, is the sure road to victory.”[1] Certainly the events from the Crimean War (1854) through to the Russo-Japanese War (1905) made armies reflect on technology’s impact on this combat arm, but not enough to sway their belief in the importance of the speed and shock that cavalry, the *arme blanche*, delivered, nor the traditional role it preserved in military culture. Nevertheless, some European countries, especially Britain after its experience during the Boer War, realized that firepower for cavalry units could be more essential than the formerly-dominant shock charges, and European countries began to integrate some doctrinal and technological changes. The British equipped some units with long rifles rather than the traditional carbine, and emphasized dismounted open order tactics and firepower, becoming more like mounted infantry, though some cavalry units continued using the sabre or lance. The future British Expeditionary Force (BEF) commander, Douglas Haig (1861-1928), maintained a belief in the utility of the cavalry charge, though even he recognized the need for innovation. As he discussed in 1907, the use of cavalry in reconnaissance and in screening missions was where the value of the cavalry endured, since shock attack was giving way to mounted infantry. Some officers saw the new potential of the cavalry to execute its firepower with pistols in each hand to “shock [the infantry] formations” and to create a “gap,” that could facilitate the traditional charge.[2] Most military professionals still clung to the belief of cavalry charges as a practical tactic, and so, like the British, ensured some of their units were ready to engage in this form of warfare. Nevertheless, the mounted cavalry was entering its twilight in World War I; as one historian notes, “the Great War was apocalyptic for cavalry.”[3]

Cavalry on the Western Front

Although prepared during the entire conflict to exploit the expected but unachieved breakthroughs in the line, cavalry from the main three participants on the Western Front – the British, Germans, and French – had only two months of operational experience at the beginning of the war before having to wait until the final months of 1918 to have some effect. The British army’s five cavalry divisions and French army’s eight cavalry divisions closely matched the ten German cavalry divisions on that front. The initial expectation was that the cavalry’s mobility could achieve the necessary flanking maneuvers sought by both sides, or, at a minimum, find the enemy, but air power proved its worth in this reconnaissance role. At the Battle of the Frontiers in 1914, German cavalry divisions, likely the largest assembly of cavalry ever organized in western Europe, first engaged the Belgians at the Battle of Halen (12 August 1914). It also known as the Battle of the Silver Helmets, as the devastated German troops from the II cavalry corps under General Georg von der Marwitz (1856-1929) left many of their helmets behind. The German cavalry later collided with the French fifth army, which also had a cavalry corps under General Jean-Françios André Sordet (1852-1923). The German first and second armies, comprising a strong right flank, boasted the largest cavalry forces, over a corps in each, whereas the other armies contained elements of a division or more. Sordet’s corps traveled the length of the line of contact, often covering more than thirty miles a day, and ended up protecting the arriving BEF's left flank – demonstrating the role of its mobility. The result of these engagements was the exhaustion of thousands of horses, making the unit relatively ineffective. Of the BEF's five divisions, only General Edmund Allenby's (1861-1936) first cavalry division was involved during the opening weeks of the war on the Western Front, participating in the Battle of Mons (23 August 1914), where the British held the left flank of the entente forces and delayed the German advance for almost two days. This action precipitated the great retreat from Mons. All attempts by both sides to flank and encircle the enemy forces failed, showing the weakness of cavalry's supposed mobility against the firepower of the modern army. Not until 1918, however, did the role of the cavalry regain a level of significance, best demonstrated by the first Canadian cavalry brigade's assault to blunt a portion of the *Kaiserschlacht* at the Battle of Moreuil Wood, on 30 March 1918. After the failure of the Ludendorff Offensives, the entente readied its own counteroffensives. Douglas Haig had a regiment of cavalry prepared for action on 10 August 1918 during the Battle of Amiens, as he anticipated the resumption of a war of movement.

Cavalry on the Eastern Front

The Eastern Front, with its much greater distances, saw more vigorous attempts to exploit the potential of the cavalry. The Russians began the war with 117 cavalry regiments (thirty-seven divisions), each numbering a substantial 1,200 men. In 1917, the Germans still had over twenty cavalry divisions on this front, but often used these forces as infantry. They dismounted fifty-three of their 157 cavalry regiments during 1916, forming each into an infantry battalion with four rifle companies and a machine gun company. Even though the units retained their traditional regimental titles, a number of cavalrymen volunteered for the air corps due to their loss of status. In the opening month of the war, on 21 August 1914, the Austrians met the Russians in the largest cavalry engagement of the war at the Battle of Jaroslavic. Each deployed a cavalry division against the other. Russian cavalry was instrumental in the defeat of the Austro-Hungarian seventh army at the Battle of Gorodenko, from 27 to 28 April 1915.[4] But like its Austrian opponent, Russia had converted many of its cavalry units into frontline infantry units by 1917. Similar to other nations, the combination of cavalry's ineffectiveness, the need for more infantrymen, and the need for horses to haul artillery, ammunition, and other supplies, led to the conversions.

Cavalry on the Peripheries

The main theater that remained relevant for cavalry operations was in the Middle East, where commanders found a place for its greater mobility, though the units here too were used more as mounted infantry. The cavalry's greatest effect on the campaign occurred upon the arrival of General Allenby in the summer of 1917. The desert mounted corps, one of three corps comprising the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, contained three cavalry divisions – the Australian light horse (Australian mounted division), the ANZAC mounted, and the yeomanry mounted. This unit significantly influenced Allenby's Palestine Campaign, especially the assault on Beersheeba on 27

October 1917. In this engagement, the Australian fourth light horse brigade followed the infantry and artillery attack with a mounted charge. As noted historian Hew Strachan relates,

> This was a campaign in which cavalry still had a role to play… “Men are remarking,” noted one exultant trooper of the Australian Light Horse, “how the Turk fights till the very last charge, until the pounding hooves are upon him, then he drops his rifle and runs screaming.”[5]

The assault reignited the discussion of cavalry and the *arme blanche*.[6]

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Notes

1. ↑ Jarymowycz, Roman: Cavalry from Hoof to Track, Westport 2008, p. 123.
2. ↑ Denison, George T.: A History of Cavalry. From the Earliest Times With Lessons for the Future, London 1913, p. 427.
3. ↑ Jarymowycz, Hoof to Track 2008, p. 151.
4. ↑ Wrangel, Alexis: The End of Chivalry. The Last Great Cavalry Battles, 1914-1918, New York 1982, p. xviii.
5. ↑ Strachan, Hew: The First World War, New York 2013, p. 284.
6. ↑ Bou, Jean: Cavalry, Firepower, and Swords. The Australian Light Horse and the Tactical Lessons of Cavalry Operations in Palestine, 1916-1918, in: The Journal of Military History 71 (2007), pp. 114-115.

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