

DRAGOONS AND SABRES

The Savage Recessional,
1850-1942

MAP
OF THE
MILITARY DEPARTMENT
OF
NEW MEXICO

THERE IS AN OLD SAYING to the effect that for the cavalryman, "paradise lies in the shadow of the sabre." If this be true then the heavenly gates were forever barred against Captain William J. Hardee of the 2nd Dragoons. In November of 1850 the captain had written a critical report to his superiors on the nature of the dragoons' issue weapons. He was loud in his praise of the .44 caliber Colt revolver that had been recently supplied to the troops, noting that to a small number of men it "gives the strength and confidence of numbers and inspires the savage with dread." He had less appreciative remarks to make about the hallowed sabre. Indeed, he felt that it was an unnecessary item of equipment, for "in marching it makes a noise which may be heard at some distance, perhaps preventing a surprise, and in a charge, when not drawn, is positively an encumbrance."¹

Hardee was twisting the tail of a most sacred cow when he disparaged the sabre. For as long as they had existed, American cavalymen had proudly borne the edged weapon. In 1798 an old dragoon of the Continental army, Epaphras Holt, had published his definitive *Treatise on the Military Art*. In it he declared that the sabre was "indisputably the most formidable and essentially useful weapon of cavalry: Nothing decides an engagement sooner than charging briskly with this weapon in hand. By this mode of attack, a body of cavalry will generally rout one that receives it with pistols ready to fire."² Many

by
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of Hardee's fellow officers would still have agreed with Holt fifty-two years later, although the Colt revolvers and breechloading Hall carbines that the dragoons had used in recent years already foreshadowed the changes in weapons that would eventually overtake the cavalry.

Still, that decade of the 1850's would see the dragoons of the western frontier enjoy frequent opportunities to resort to the sabre. Their experiences suggest that under certain conditions this increasingly maligned weapon could still render useful service.

In April, 1850, only seven months before Hardee's criticism was registered, Captain William Grier of the 1st Dragoons was proud to inform his superiors of a "very handsome affair" in which members of his unit had taken part. During the previous month a ten-man detachment from Company I had been posted at Rayado, approximately 100 miles northeast of Santa Fe, was the site of a ranch owned by none other than Kit Carson. On the night of April 5 an Apache raiding party ran off a herd of grazing stock near the dragoon camp. The soldiers, Carson, and three other civilians, saddled up and went in pursuit of the warriors.

The whites trailed the Indians for thirty miles before overhauling them and the remuda of stolen horses. Carson and Holbrook led the ensuing charge in which five of the nine Apaches were slain, "two of the Indians were killed with the sabre — the contest having become so close," reported Captain Grier proudly.³ Holbrook noted that his men "fought with the gallantry characteristic of the American soldier." He also reported that the scalps of five dead Apaches were taken as "vouchers."⁴ Captain Grier was a little more circumspect in recording the details. Perhaps in fear of outraging the sensitivities of the Eastern press, he stated that the Indian hair was lifted by "two or three Mexican herders who came up after the fight was over."⁵ His superior, Colonel John Munroe, concurred in calling it "a gallant and successful affair," and forwarded Grier's account to the Secretary of War along with the more candid version rendered by Sergeant Holbrook.⁶

Dabney H. Maury, a junior officer and future Confederate general who served on the antebellum Southwestern frontier, recalled still another example of the sabre's employment in that bloody territory. He places the date in 1856, but in reality it must have been 1851-52, as the officer involved had already left the service by October, 1853.⁷

Lieutenant Ambrose E. Burnside of the 3rd Artillery was stationed at Tecolote, "a Mexican village some twenty miles west of Fort Union." A truculent band of Apaches had approached the settlement for a parley, and became even more belligerent when they saw the size and equipment of the white force. Burnside's battery mustered only forty men. They had not been issued muskets or revolvers, and their only side arms were light

artillery sabres. The lieutenant mounted his men on horseback and rode out to meet the Apaches as they prepared to attack. The warriors loosed a shower of arrows at the redlegs, and Burnside responded with a sabre charge. "His horses enabled his party to overtake the flying Indians," related Maury, "but the blows of the dull sabres glanced from their shining skulls almost harmlessly. He then gave the point with fine effect, so that some twenty of the hostiles were killed before they reached the shelter of the timber."⁸

On January 13, 1855, a Mescalero Apache raiding party destroyed a ranch near Santa Fe and headed for the mountains to the south. Lieutenant Samuel D. Sturgis of the 1st Dragoons led eighteen troopers and three civilians in pursuit of the band. After tracking them for three days through freezing cold and barren country, Sturgis caught up with them 175 miles southeast of Santa Fe. When the dragoons closed to within 100 yards the suddenly repentant Mescaleros began to shout professions of friendship. Sturgis' men gave them a volley from their pistols and musketoon. The Indians scattered for cover.

It was so bitterly cold that the troopers' numbed fingers would not permit them to handle percussion caps and paper cartridges in reloading their weapons. Sturgis led them in a charge with naked sabres. A dismounted brave lunged at one dragoon with his lance, who parried it with his blade. The lance wounded the soldier's horse instead, and the Apache tried to duck under the animal to shield himself from the dragoon's counterstroke. "But Katon was too quick for him," recalled the company's bugler, "and took off nearly all one side of his head, just as he was in the act of stooping, and that finished his mutton."⁹ Sturgis' charge killed three Apaches and wounded four others. The New Mexico warriors seemed to have a morbid attraction to the cold steel, and the dragoons were happy to oblige them.

The dragoons were not the only group of horse soldiers on the western frontier during the 1850's. The Regiment of Mounted Rifles also saw extensive action against the tribesmen. This unit had seen arduous service during the Mexican War, winning the accolade of "Brave Rifles" from General Winfield Scott. A shortage of mounts had forced all but two companies of the regiment to serve as infantry, but the troopers who kept their horses used the sabre extensively in their clashes with Mexican guerrillas. "The rifle being clumsy to handle mounted," noted the unit's historian, "necessitated firing one round and then riding the enemy down with the sabre — a custom that soon infused the officers and men with the conviction that they were irresistible."¹⁰

The Rifles soon changed their opinion of the sabre when they moved to the Indian frontier. The weapon became an item of only limited issue. In June, 1853, Colonel William G. Freeman inspected Companies E, G, and I of the regiment at Fort Ewell, Texas. He found that

while officers normally carried the sabre as a traditional badge of rank, only the sergeants and buglers carried the blades among the enlisted men. Company E was alone in being issued the sole regulation edged weapon for the Mounted Rifles. This was the Model 1849 Rifleman's Knife. In 1848 the U.S. Ordnance Department had purchased 1,000 of these weapons from the Ames Manufacturing Company of Cabotville, Massachusetts. The double-edged spear-point blade was just under a foot in length and was carried in a handsome brass-tipped black leather scabbard.¹¹ There are no authenticated accounts of the Ames knife being used in combat, but it doubtless made a handy camp tool.

There was a marked prejudice against the sabre among the Mounted Rifles by the early 1850's. Lieutenant Dabney H. Maury remarked that "sabres have long been laid aside except by holiday soldiers, not one in fifty of whom is a swordsman. It was usual for our men in the Rifles to put away their swords whenever they went upon a hostile expedition."¹²

This antipathy toward the weapon may well have been rooted in the tragic experience of Captain Michael E. Van Buren. Early in July, 1854, he led a mixed detachment from Companies A and H of the Rifles out in pursuit of some Comanche raiders and caught up with them somewhere between Fort Ewell and Lake Trinidad. "At first he charged with six-shooters," related the *Texas State Gazette*, "but finding the Indians were getting the best of the fight, he ordered the men to their rifles." Van Buren remained on horseback, presenting a conspicuous target, while his men dismounted to use their Mississippi rifles.

During the melee with pistols that had opened the affair, Van Buren was wounded in the arm, but continued to press forward. His men's first volley dropped four of the braves. One of them was the band's chief. Confident of victory, Van Buren spurred his horse onward and closed with a Comanche. He was in the act of delivering a downstroke with his sabre when he was struck again, "the arrow entered three inches above the navel and came out behind about four inches lower down, going entirely through the sabre belt." The stunned captain wrenched the shaft from his body with both hands and then collapsed.

Van Buren took nine painful days to die of his wound, and apparently left his fellow officers with the firm belief that it was much better tactics to keep the hostiles at an arm's length with pistol and rifle fire than to attempt to close with them in personal combat with the sabre.¹³

Despite Van Buren's sad example a few subalterns in the regiment continued to carry and use the sabre, although the most spectacular example of its efficiency was not demonstrated against a human enemy. In 1859 Lieutenant William H. "Red" Jackson led his company out from Fort Union, New Mexico, on a scout against the

Comanches. "Of course on a scout of this sort," related Maury, "all hunting and shooting was strictly forbidden. One day a grizzly came down from the mountains and crossed the route of the column." The result was a contest between *ursus horribilis* and American steel. "Jackson coolly rode out to encounter the animal, armed only with his sabre. His horse was blind in one eye, and, by keeping that side turned to the bear, Jackson was able to get close to him. At his approach, the grizzly, nothing loath, rose on his hind legs ready for a fight, and Jackson cleft his skull with his sword." Maury closed his account of the incident by remarking with some understatement that, "it is doubtful if such an exploit was elsewhere attempted or accomplished."¹⁴

The weapon that Jackson used in his exploit was the Model 1840 Dragoon Sabre. Dubbed "Old Wrist-breaker" by the troops, its curved, single-edged blade was nearly a yard long and topped with a massive brass basket-type guard around its thick, leather-wrapped grips. Like the rifleman's knife, it was manufactured by the Ames Company of Massachusetts. The length and heft of the blade made it a weapon well suited for splitting skulls.¹⁵

The Model 1840 had seen able service during the first decade and a half of its use, but by late 1856 voices were being raised in favor of reform in the selection of cavalry weapons. Captain George B. McClellan had recently returned to the United States from a tour of the Crimean battlefields and European arsenals. His report to Secretary of War Jefferson Davis stressed that "the sabres furnished to our Cavalry . . . are not what they ought to be, and I have never seen any make in this country that compare in weight and balance with the French model. I have a sabre, purchased in Paris, which is an entirely different weapon from our own — tho' of the same model." McClellan went on to report that "ours are too heavy and are badly balanced; so bad are they that many of our Cavalry officers are disposed to regard the sabre as a useless weapon. As this is without doubt the true weapon of Cavalry, too much pains cannot be bestowed upon its manufacture; it ought, if anything to be lighter than the French model." He closed his letter to Davis by urging that a new scabbard also be adopted to replace the old steel one that dulled the blade, thus "allowing the sabre to be kept sharp (and if dull it is of but little more service than a broom handle), and preventing, to a very great degree, the noise attendant upon the movement of cavalry."¹⁶

Captain McClellan's grievance was obviously not over the sabre's continued use as a weapon, but rather with the pattern of blade issued to the American cavalymen. In a continuation of his report he recommended that "regiments serving in localities where they were liable to be called upon to dismount, to follow the Indians on foot, be armed with the sabre (of recently submitted light



A young Cavalry trumpeter peers at the camera in this 1858-1872 period illustration. The image is reversed so that the sabre and hat insignia appear backwards. (Scott Harmon Collection.)

pattern.), the revolver, and the pistol-carbine, or else a rifled weapon, longer and more effective than the present carbine; that those serving on the plains be armed only with the sabre and revolver, giving to about 10 men in each platoon the pistol-carbine, or a long rifled carbine in addition."¹⁷

The proposed reforms further stressed that "the accoutrements should be so arranged that when the men dismounted to fight on foot, they can hang the sabre to the saddle; the pistol should always be carried on the person; the pistol-carbine or carbine slung over the shoulder."¹⁸ McClellan stressed, however, that all should remember that "the strength of cavalry is in the spurs and sabre."¹⁹

Only seven months later a cavalry action in Texas gave dramatic support to McClellan's championship of the sabre. On July 5, 1857, Lieutenant John Bell Hood led twenty-five men of Company G, 2nd Cavalry out of Fort Mason on a long-range scout against the Comanches. By the 20th they were nearing the headwaters of the Devil's River when they encountered what appeared to be a band of friendly Indians. The column moved forward through the rocky, brush-choked terrain, and rode straight into a Comanche ambush.

The cavalrymen were armed with a Colt revolver and a Springfield carbine apiece. The non-commissioned officers also carried their sabres. Lieutenant Hood

boasted a sabre, two revolvers, and a double-barreled shotgun.²⁰ All this armament was sorely needed in the savage fight that ensued, for the Comanches ignited a blazing brush fire in front of the startled column, "and, with a furious yell, the warriors instantly rose up around us," recalled Hood, "whilst others charged down the slope in our midst, even seizing some of our horses by the bridle reins. At the same moment a mounted party attacked the left of our line with lances. Thus began a most desperate struggle."²¹

The fighting soon merged into a confused close-quarter melee. "The Indians swarmed around us, grappling with men and beating our horses over the head with their shields," reported trooper H.G. Rust, "and we fought hand to hand."²² At least one soldier had his carbine jerked from its saddle loop by a warrior. The firearms were soon emptied and Hood and his sergeants began slashing with their sabres in a desperate attempt to cut a way out of the ambush. Sergeant Shannon blocked a lance thrust and shattered a brave's head with a sabre stroke. Others inflicted similar wounds on their opponents.²³

Hood and his command finally fought their way clear and fell back about fifty yards to reload their weapons. As they struggled with caps and cartridges a frenzied wailing sounded from the Indians' ranks. They had lost heavily in what had promised to be a profitable ambush, and were breaking off the action. Hood held his position and let them depart. Two of his men were dead. He was wounded along with four other soldiers. Many of their horses bore lance cuts and arrow wounds as well. They were severe casualties for so small a force, but had the patrol been caught without the saving grace of their sabres none of them might have survived. It was later learned that approximately 100 Comanches had been involved in the skirmish. They had lost nineteen dead in addition to numerous wounded. Disaster had been averted and a minor triumph won by what Hood's superior, Captain Earl Van Dorn, would call "the clank, clash, and glitter of steel." The lesson was not lost on young Hood. Thereafter he took pains to insure that at least half of his command always carried sabres in addition to their firearms.²⁴

It should be noted that the sabre did not see use against only Indian foemen. The frontier dragoons were a hardbitten lot, and in garrison they never shrank from a fight with each other or the infantrymen who shared their posts, and were regarded as a distinctly lesser breed by the proud horse soldiers. At times they even exchanged blows with their officers.

Firs Sergeant Percival G. Lowe of Company B, 1st Dragoons recalled the day in 1849 when, as a recruit, he was set upon by the company bully. "Then I sprang to my feet, drew my sabre and went for him with all the venom and fury of which I was possessed — cut and thrust. The

fact that the sabre had a dull edge, as all sabres had at that time, accounts for his not being killed," noted Lowe. "His companions tried to save him, and two of them received scars on account of it. My two friends drew their sabres and vowed to kill anyone who interfered, and I pounded the howling wretch until he lay prostrate, begging for his life, and I was exhausted."²⁵

Henry W. Fischer of Company A, 2nd Dragoons kept a diary of his service with the regiment in Utah Territory. One night in November, 1858, there was a disturbance in the dragoons' lines at Camp Floyd. Fischer had just gone to sleep when his company was roused by the cry, "Get your sabres and fall out!" He dressed hastily and rushed out of the adobe barracks with blade in hand. "In a moment, half a hundred men in their shirts and drawers, with naked sabres in their hands, were upon the Company parade. 'Follow!' shouted the first Sergeant, and off we went on a run. A sentinel tried to stop us, but he was knocked down and run over; the guard, twenty-eight strong, ranged on the bridge to oppose us, but they soon gave way before the fierce onset." Fischer began to have misgivings, and asked his comrades what had happened. "'Oh,' said one, 'the dough-boys (Infantry) are beating one of our men.'" ²⁶ When the troops arrived on the scene they found that it was really a row between three unpopular junior officers of their own regiment. "As the boys did not care which whipped, we went home to bed, wishing the combatants were all in a place not to be mentioned in the presence of delicate individuals."²⁷

One of Fischer's fellow troopers, Private Patrick Callaghan, got drunk on a march one day and attacked his lieutenant with a sabre, inflicting at least three wounds. The pugnacious dragoon was court-martialed and sentenced to hard labor for eight months while wearing a twenty-five pound iron attached to his left leg. A seventy-two dollar fine capped the punishment.²⁸

The officers were not immune to flashes of temper and abusive swordplay either. Sergeant James A. Bennett of the 1st Dragoons was serving at Fort Fillmore, New Mexico in 1856 when he recorded in his diary for May 6 that "Company was out at drill. An awkward move was made by a number of men. A Captain became enraged, ran his sabre into a man's back, injuring him for life. The Captain says it was accidental. I don't know."²⁹

If the impromptu brawls engaged in by the sabre-swinging troopers were not typical of the weapon's use on the frontier, neither was Lieutenant Hood's desperate encounter on the Devil's River. A more representative action was that fought by Colonel Edwin V. "Old Bull" Sumner and the 1st Cavalry during the summer of 1857. On July 29 Sumner led 300 of his men against a large Cheyenne force on the banks of the Solomon River in northern Kansas. The Cheyennes were confident, having washed their hands in the waters of a magic lake which, according to their shamans, made them impervious to the

enemy's bullets.

Sumner drew up his force in a line of three squadron columns and ordered his bugler to sound the advance. Trooper Robert Peck recalled what happened next.

He [Sumner] seemed to have determined to offset the disparity of numbers by a bold dash that would create a panic in the enemy's rank, and roared out 'Sling — Carbine!' Then immediately, 'Draw — Sabre!' and we knew the old man was going to try a sabre charge on them.

I noticed with some surprise that when the command 'Draw — Sabre' was given . . . and our three hundred bright blades flashed out of their scabbards, the Cheyennes, who were coming on at a lope, checked up. The sight of so much cold steel cooled their ardor . . . I then said to myself, 'I guess Old Bull [Sumner] knows what he's doing after all; he knows the Indians will not stand a sabre charge,' and so it proved. . . . We had kept a steady trot, but now came the command in the well known roar of Old Bull — 'Gallop — March!' and then immediately, 'Charge!' and with a wild yell we brought our sabres to a 'tierce point' and dashed at them.³⁰

Obviously the Cheyennes had not anticipated having to face a charge with sabres, and the surprised warriors broke in confusion and fled for the river. Sumner's exultant men were hard on their heels as they splashed through the shallows. A few braves became mired in the quicksand at the water's edge and were hacked down without mercy. The pursuit continued for seven miles with the thirsty blades licking out to claim a total of nine Indians in their headlong flight.³¹

One junior officer in Sumner's command may have had his enthusiasm for the edged weapon dampened somewhat as the result of an encounter with a cornered Cheyenne. Lieutenant J.E.B. Stuart came upon a dismounted warrior who was standing off three fellow officers with a pepperbox pistol. Stuart charged the Indian and slashed him in the thigh as he passed. The brave snapped off a shot at Stuart but missed. Stuart swung about and came at him again. This time he cut the brave across the head just as a bullet from the pistol tore into his chest. While Stuart was reeling in the saddle another officer rushed in and finished the Cheyenne with his revolver. Fortunately for Stuart the ball had glanced across his ribs and lodged harmlessly in his chest muscle. It was the first and last wound Stuart would suffer until Yellow Tavern.

Sumner's tactics reflected the professional thought of his day. As Captain McClellan had stressed in his report, "the strength of cavalry is in the spurs and sabre." Did this frequent reliance on an ancient weapon reflect a deep desire on the part of the officers and men to perpetuate cavalry traditions, or was it simply the result of a visceral urge for personal combat at close quarters?

The answer was rooted not so much in tradition or bloodlust as it was in the dictates of contemporary weapons and tactics. The mounted units on the Western frontier often operated in small detachments that were usually far beyond the reach of any supporting forces. Unlike in the Mexican War, the dragoons had no solid line of infantry to fall back upon if a charge miscarried, and no flying batteries to cover their withdrawal. Their only rallying points were their guidons and buglers.

Coupled with their isolation in the field was the fact that they were generally equipped with a very indifferent lot of firearms. In 1849 the dragoons had turned in their breechloading Hall carbines and received the smooth-bore muzzle-loading .69 caliber Springfield musketoon. The musketoon was universally reviled by those who used it. It was inaccurate and the heavy powder charge in the cartridge caused it to kick excessively in recoil. The swivel ramrod often broke loose from the barrel and was easily lost. The post commander at Fort Inge, Texas reported that every day for ten weeks he had the four men of the guard detail make practice shots at a target seventeen inches in diameter. Out of 280 rounds fired, only fifteen struck the target. Colonel William Freeman finished his 1853 inspection report with the remark that the musketoon was "not fit to be put into the hands of troops."³²

In 1855 the Ordnance Department began a modification program to have the musketoons rifled, and the two newly-organized regiments, the 1st and 2nd Cavalry, were authorized a new .54 caliber rifled muzzleloading carbine. There was also a limited issue of the Model 1855 Springfield pistol-carbine mentioned by McClellan in his report. The improvement in firepower and accuracy was negligible.³³ In 1856 Colonel Joseph K. Mansfield inspected Companies E and K of the 2nd Cavalry at Camp Cooper, Texas. Company E had the updated rifled musketoon, while Company K bore the new rifled carbine. In target firing at 100 yards the companies scored hits of one out of four and one out of three rounds respectively in a painfully mediocre performance.³⁴ Not until 1858 did appreciable quantities of the superior breechloading Sharps carbines reach the troops, and by then it was often a case of the proverbial "too little, too late."³⁵

The handguns issued the mounted units were a different matter. Although numbers of the old single-shot percussion pistols of the Model 1842 pattern remained in use into the early 1850s, the Model 1848 Colt Dragoon revolver and its successor, the Model 1851 Navy, met with warm approval from both officers and men. Unfortunately the revolvers were essentially short-range weapons and better suited to personal defense than for bringing effective fire to bear at any range beyond fifty yards. Only the Mounted Rifles boasted a truly accurate shoulder arm in their Model 1841 Harpers Ferry rifles,

but were handicapped by its poor handling qualities for use from the saddle.

The horse soldiers' job was to close with the enemy and destroy him before he could disperse into the wilds. If they dismounted to fight they often surrendered the tactical initiative. If they remained mounted to insure that they retained mobility, they had to come to grips with the enemy to do him any serious damage. Under such conditions the sabre became an indispensable adjunct to the pistol, for once the pistol was emptied, the slashing blade proved to be a far superior secondary weapon than a musketoon swung by its muzzle.

The truth of this situation was brought cruelly home in May, 1858, when the 1st Dragoons sent three companies to join an expedition against the Spokane Indians of eastern Washington Territory. Companies C, E, and H joined a company of the 9th Infantry to form a column that left Fort Walla Walla on May 6 under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. Steptoe. Companies C and E of the dragoons carried the musketoon. Ten men in Company H had been issued Sharps carbines. The rest carried the Model 1841 rifle slung across their backs. Only the officers and noncommissioned officers carried sabres. All of them had the Colt Dragoon revolver.³⁶

On May 17 the small column was attacked by nearly 1,000 Spokane, Palouse, and Coeur d'Alene braves. Lieutenant David M. Gregg's Company H shielded the point of the formation, while Captain Oliver H.P. Taylor and Lieutenant William Gaston's C and E Companies held the flanks in a series of desperate melees. "Lord, if we only had our sabres!" cried Gregg as they returned from one charge. Once the musketoons were fired all the dragoons had was their clubbed stocks and the shock action of their heavier mounts against the Indian ponies. The Colts were held as a last reserve.

The pressure soon became too great. When Gaston fell leading a charge his company fell back on the infantry. Two small howitzers were with the column, but the continual intermingling of troops and Indians had prevented their use. Gregg's harried company stormed into the gap as Gaston's shaken troopers reloaded their pieces.

Captain Taylor was shot from his saddle, mortally wounded. His men rallied around his body to keep the Indians from dragging it away to be scalped and mutilated. Several dragoons dismounted and fought off the Spokanes with clubbed musketoons. Private Victor DeMoy was seen swinging his empty weapon like a broadsword as he yelled mingled curses and prayers at his lack of a sabre. DeMoy caught a fatal lance thrust and fell by his captain.³⁷

Steptoe finally extricated his command from this hornets' nest by abandoning his dead and burying his artillery before making a night retreat from the hilltop

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where he had been forced to make a stand. Lieutenant Gregg's company covered the withdrawal with their Sharps and "Yeagers." Steptoe rightly condemned the musketoon in his report of the affair, calling it "utterly worthless."³⁸ This was true enough, but the dragoons' lack of sabres had only made a bad situation that much worse.

On September 1, 1858, the dragoons got their revenge. Colonel George Wright led a mixed force of the 1st Dragoons, 9th Infantry, and 3rd Artillery against the Spokanes on their home ground. Captain William Grier, Sergeant Holbrook's old commander, led four companies of dragoons in a classic pistol and sabre charge. Lieutenant Gregg rode in the front rank and had the grisly satisfaction of splitting a brave's skull with his blade. The stunned Indians crumpled under the charge and fled with Grier's men pursuing them over a mile with their Colts barking and the sabres falling in merciless unison.³⁹

Not every commander on the frontier shared Grier's regard for the sabre. On May 25, 1860, Colonel C.F. Smith issued an order at Camp Floyd, Utah Territory, in response to local Indian raids. Company B of the 4th Artillery was directed to proceed at once against the hostiles. The force was to be "armed and equipped as cavalry — Colt's revolvers and Harpers Ferry rifles, caliber .58, without sabres."⁴⁰ Captain Grier would have been incensed. To employ artillerymen as cavalry was sacrilege enough, but to abandon the sabre was unforgivable.

Secretary of War John B. Floyd was apparently in agreement with Colonel Smith, for in his *Annual Report* for that year he declared that "as certainly as the percussion cap has superceded the flint and steel, so surely will the breech-loading gun drive out of use those that load at the muzzle. For cavalry, the revolver and breech-loaded will supercede the sabre."⁴¹

The Civil War seemed to put the capstone on Floyd's prophecy. While the sabre continued to see use in such rare massed cavalry actions as Brandy Station, breechloading and repeating carbines like the Sharps and Spencer made the steel-tipped charge an increasingly rare and dangerous proposition. If attempted against veteran infantrymen armed with rifled-muskets, it was sheer suicide. One Southern general remarked that when his men were confronted by Union cavalry

they jeered and called to one another, "Boys, here are those fools coming again with their sabres; give it to them."⁴²

It seems fitting that the sabre continued to see use and enjoy official sanction in those quarters of the old Indian frontier that also hosted clashes between Union and Confederate troops, who had to take time out from fighting each other on occasion to deal with the still-restive tribesmen.

The most notable example of the sabre's use in this theater of the war was fraught with irony. On the same day that Fort Sumter was fired upon, Colonel Earl Van Dorn, newly commissioned as commander of the 1st Confederate Cavalry Regiment, was ordered to recruit men for his infant unit from among the recently surrendered Federal garrisons in Texas. The men he enlisted were destined to ride in one of the most unique organizations ever to serve the South. They would not belong to one of the Texas state regiments of the Provisional Army of the Confederacy. The 1st Confederate Cavalry was a regular army unit carried on the rolls of the permanent military establishment of the new nation.⁴³

By June, 1861, Van Dorn had organized and recruited Company A of the regiment. By the end of the month the company listed a strength of one officer, four sergeants, four corporals, two buglers, and fifty-five privates. A sprinkling of the men were Texans, but most were former United States regulars. The company was commanded by Lieutenant Edward Ingraham, lately of the 1st United States Cavalry.⁴⁴

Early in September the company was posted to Fort Inge, where it was charged with securing the road to El Paso and the surrounding settlements from Indian depredations. Less than a month after its arrival the Lipan Apaches stages a series of raids in the area and a detachment was sent in pursuit of them.

Sergeant William Barrett, formerly of the 1st U.S. Infantry, led the seventeen man patrol out of Fort Inge on October 11 and headed for the Rio Frio along the Lipans' trail. The Confederate regulars were riding into their first combat action clad in the regulation blue uniforms of the pre-war army. They were armed with Sharps carbines and dragoon sabres. For some strange reason they had not been issued revolvers prior to their departure from San Antonio for service on the

frontier.⁴⁵ Sergeant Barrett trailed the Lipans in the direction of Fort Ewell until the morning of October 14. The Indians had swung about to head for the Rio Grande and Barrett pressed on after them. His pursuit was slowed by a torrential rainstorm that swelled the creeks and turned the trails into slimy quagmires. Carbines and cartridge boxes were soon soaked.

The patrol had just entered a clearing about sundown when the Lipans sprang their ambush. Three of the soldiers were caught dismounted, and the others barely had time to pull their carbines free of the saddle sockets when the Indians were upon them. Only one in six of the carbines would fire, and the detachment had to draw sabres in a desperate fight for their lives. Evidently the Lipans had no firearms, and thus the contest was as equal as it could be under the circumstances. The fighting lasted for nearly half an hour before Barrett retired in the face of arriving Indian reinforcements. He left three men dead in the clearing. The Apaches did not pursue, for Barrett's troops had killed ten of their brothers and wounded several more.⁴⁶

While Barrett had demonstrated once again that the sabre still had certain merits in a tight situation, the Southern cavalrymen in the rag-tag army that invaded Unionist New Mexico and Arizona seemed to have little regard for it, although one regiment of romantics in that doomed legion carried lances into battle.⁴⁷

The Union general they confronted, James H. Carleton, was a veteran of service in the region with the old 1st Dragoons. He still valued the edged weapon, and instructed his subordinates to "have your sabres very sharp, that they may readily cut through clothing. Cavalry recently mounted on California horses cannot use any kind of firearms with success . . . It is my opinion that a judicious use of the sabre on foot or horseback will tell very much in your favor."⁴⁸ Old habits died hard among the alumni of the dragoon regiments.

Despite the tactical lessons of fire and maneuver learned in the Civil War and the revolutionary changes wrought in small arms, when the regular army returned to the plains in 1866 the blades remained with it as before, just as prominent in display if not in use.

One of the veterans who retained a firm belief in its continued utility was Captain

Albert Barnitz of the newly-organized 7th Cavalry. He had served a war-time apprenticeship with the 2nd Ohio Cavalry, and his prowess as a field officer had won him a commission in the regulars. Late in March, 1867, he wrote to his wife from Fort Harker, Kansas to describe his company's preparations for taking the field against the Indians. The captain "had all the sabres ground as sharp as butcher's knives, carbines and revolvers put in the best possible order."⁴⁹ Obviously he saw them as more than just ceremonial ornaments, although he was still pragmatic enough to requisition 28,000 rounds of ammunition for his Spencer carbines.

The captain soon had an opportunity to exercise his men and arms in deadly earnest. On June 26 the company was posted at Fort Wallace when word was received of an attack on a nearby stage station. Barnitz was en route to the scene when his company was hit by a mass of hostiles. The soldiers deployed in a skirmish line and held firm until a sergeant panicked and broke for the rear, triggering a collapse of the line. Barnitz frantically tried to get his men to re-form, "inducing each to turn and fire one or two shots, or beat back the diabolical fiends with the sabre."⁵⁰ After some desperate moments the company was held in check and the Indians repulsed.

In his official report of the incident Barnitz stressed the closequarter nature of the combat "with carbine and sabre." One incident he related suggests that the sabre may have been the preferred weapon in this action, with the carbine seeing use only by necessity. Barnitz told of how "a chief mounted on a white horst . . . was killed by Corporal Harris, who first engaged him with a sabre, as he was attempting to plunge a lance through Private (Patrick) Hardiman (Hardyman), (whose carbine was empty, and whose sabre had unfortunately become disengaged from the scabbard in the pursuit and had been lost,) and indeed by placing his carbine against the stomach of the 'Big Chief,' and shooting him through."⁵¹ No matter how garbled his syntax, it was obvious that the captain believed in the old weapon.

Barnitz's enthusiasm aside, the sabre's decline continued in the post-war army. "It was heavy, cumbersome, and noisy," notes Robert M. Utley, "and its owner rarely got close enough to an Indian to use it. Few officers required their men to carry it in the field."⁵² Yet the weapon was retained,

perhaps more out of sentiment than anything else. As long as the blades swung at their sides the horse soldiers had visible proof that they remained cavalrymen and not just mounted infantry.

Shortly before the war the army had adopted a new pattern of sabre, the Model 1860. A lighter weapon with a blade of reduced width, it was primarily distinguished from the old dragoon model by a slightly shorter blade with its rounded back, and by the grips, which had a swell in the center.⁵³ Its negligible loss in length was offset by its better balance.

The sabre continued to receive a degree of official sanction despite its eclipse by firearms. In 1872 a board of officers met to revise the army regulations to bring them into line with the reforms advocated in Captain Matthew J. O'Rourke's book, *A New System of Sword Exercises for Use in Instructing Officers of the U.S. Army*. O'Rourke called for the procurement of wooden swords for the use of troops in learning the rudiments of attack and defense. The irony of using wooden models to expedite instruction in the use of an already outmoded weapon seems to have been lost on both O'Rourke and the board.⁵⁴

Throughout the 1870's debate flared back and forth among cavalry officers in the pages of the *Army & Navy Journal*. In April, 1874, one correspondent complained that the current sabre exercise was useless, and "the regiments will be put into the field to charge an enemy with the sabre, when, if they have followed the tactics, not a single man has ever crossed swords with an antagonist."⁵⁵

This letter was written with sincere indignation at a time when a parsimonious government barred the expenditure of ammunition for target practice with the pistol and carbine, yet at least one officer was still lamenting the decline of the *arme blanche*. His letter was answered the following month by a dissenter who approvingly noted that "when a cavalry command is about to start on a scout their sabres are carefully packed away and left behind, and in some cases are never unpacked again." The reason for this lay simply in the fact that "Indians are our only foe, and that in a fight with them, sabres are utterly worthless."⁵⁶

This attack on the sacred talisman of the cavalry was answered in the next issue of the *Journal* when an indignant officer replied that "the inferiority of our sabre

exercise is the real cause for our disuse of the sabre Teach our horse to use the sabre properly . . . more shame for the Government to persist in issuing a weapon which they do not teach the men to use."⁵⁷

Within a little more than two years of this acrimonious exchange the defeat of Custer at the Little Big Horn sent a shock-wave rippling through the ranks of the cavalry fraternity and renewed the debate over firearms versus edged weapons.

The 7th Cavalry had taken its sabres along when it departed Fort Abraham Lincoln, Dakota Territory, for the Sioux country on May 17, 1876. Upon arrival at the supply depot at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Powder rivers in mid-June, however, Custer ordered the blades put into storage. Only two officers, Lieutenants Charles DeRudio and Edward G. Mathey, retained their sabres. Mathey received so much kidding from his fellow officers that he wrapped his sabre in a bedroll and sent it back to the packtrain before any hostiles were encountered.⁵⁸

Both Mathey and DeRudio survived the battle, and neither made any reference to feeling either advantaged or handicapped by the lack or possession of a sabre. DeRudio apparently never unsheathed his. There was some irony revolving around the fact that DeRudio kept his sabre with him as the 7th rode on to the "Place of the Greasy Grass." Six years before the admiring men of his company had presented him with a gold-mounted sabre. The jealous Custer had upbraided the lieutenant severely for committing what he termed to be an act "in disobedience of regulations and prejudicial to good discipline." A coolness persisted between the two officers after this incident. On the morning of his death Custer had arrogantly commandeered DeRudio's personal set of field glasses, since they were known to be the most powerful in the command. They were still with him when he went down under the Sioux lances.⁵⁹

Less than four months after Custer's death the sabre debate was in full flower again. Reports of jamming among the Springfield carbines of the 7th gave encouragement to the partisans of the cold steel. An officer who romantically identified himself as "Sabre of the Regulars" was strident in his criticism. "Give our troopers the sabre. Sharpen it and teach them to use it. It never misses fire, and who does not believe that the gallant Custer would not have given

millions for an hundred sabres when he made his last stand."⁶⁰ The "gallant Custer" probably would have given even more for one of the Gatling guns he had been offered and refused before he began the campaign, but in the shock and indignation engendered by the defeat this was immaterial. The dead general had become a symbol to be used by all factions in the debate.

The edged weapon continued its slide into disfavor until it became primarily a symbolic badge of the service. Guard mount and dress parade were virtually the only occasions when the blue steel was heard to hiss from its scabbard. By the early 1890's, the Indian frontier was pacified and the cavalry lacked an enemy to combat with any of its weapons. The closure of the frontier and the decline of the sabre were best exemplified by an article written for *Harper's Weekly* by Lieutenant S.C. Robertson of the 1st Cavalry.

Robertson related how, in September, 1891, he had been authorized to form a special unit of Crow Indian scouts that was later adopted into the regiment as Troop L. The 6th Cavalry formed a similar unit from former Sioux warriors at about the same time. The Indian troopers were clothed and equipped in the same manner as their white counterparts. Robertson noted that "as scouts, these men had simply the carbine and revolver, the sabre being deemed a superfluous adjunct."⁶¹

Yet the blades were retained for mounted drills and parades. The Indians learned both the ceremonial and combat exercises for the sabre. Lieutenant Robertson related that they enjoyed the drills and went through the mounted exercises with great zeal. A series of illustrations by Frederic Remington accompanied the article. The sketches were done in the unmistakable style of that great artist, yet there remains something wildly incongruous about the sight of those blue-clad, copper-skinned braves eviscerating a sandbag with their sabres while at a full gallop. The one enemy whose existence offered some justification for the retention of the sabre had become a loyal ally.⁶²

When the nation went to war with Spain in 1898 both the regular and volunteer cavalry regiments fought dismounted and relied on their Krag and Springfields. The bitter and costly lessons learned in the Cuban campaign raised new questions about the need for reform across the board

in the army. The bloody defeats inflicted on British cavalry by Mauser-armed Boer farmers a few years later led England to discard both the sabre and the lance.⁶³ In 1905 the United States War Department proposed abandoning the sabre, but the Cavalry Board pressed for its retention.⁶⁴

Eight years later the *Army & Navy Journal* carried an article entitled "U.S. Army to Have Old French Swords." The army was considering the adoption of a new straight sword for the cavalry, and it was to be styled after the sabres of Napoleon's dragoons. Lieutenant George S. Patton had returned from Paris with a sword used at Waterloo in 1815, and it was under study by the army.⁶⁵

On February 24, 1913, Chief of Staff General Leonard Wood ordered the manufacture of 20,000 new cavalry sabres of the design put forth by Lieutenant Patton. The Model 1913, or "Patton Sabre," had a slender, double-edged blade with deep bloodlets along its flanks. Patton was understandably proud of his creation, but when he went to Mexico with Pershing the sabre stayed in its scabbard. All of his exploits in Mexico and during the later war in France were performed with the Colt Single Action Army Revolver. There is no record that Patton ever swung a sabre from the turrets of the primitive Renault tanks he commanded in Europe. He did stubbornly insist, however, "that anyone who thinks that the cavalry is a thing of the past is mistaken."⁶⁶ He was only echoing official doctrine, for as late as 1916 the *United States Cavalry Regulations* maintained that "the sabre is intended for mounted combat."⁶⁷

The postwar years saw little deviation from this doctrine. The troopers may have carried Model 1903 Springfields and .45 caliber Colt automatics, but they still strapped the sabres to their saddles and practiced in deadly earnest with all three weapons.

Colonel Fitzhugh Lee, commander of the 7th Cavalry, made sure that his regiment was proficient in every aspect of both mounted and dismounted tactics. During the months of March and April, 1926, at Fort Bliss, Texas, "the entire regiment held intensive mounted and dismounted drill with the pistol, instructed in the prescribed course in the saber, and conducted rifle practice and record firing." During the previous year the 7th had boasted the highest qualification percentage in the sabre course of any regiment in

the 8th Corps area.⁶⁸ In May, 1927, Troop B of the 7th won the coveted Aronson Sabre Trophy, an award created by an El Paso businessman to honor the troop making the highest average score in the sabre proficiency test during the training period.⁶⁹ Obviously the 7th had no intention of being caught without its sabres again.

Again, in 1931, the War Department felt a pressing need for an improved cavalry arm and commissioned the Rock Island Arsenal staff to produce what was officially designated as the "Sabre, M-2." Much serious research and extensive field testing went into this effort to provide the American cavalryman with the best military sabre in the world. Finally, on August 12, 1932, the Secretary of War ordered that the M-2 "be adopted to replace the sabre, cavalry, Model 1913, when the present supply of sabres, M 1913 is exhausted."⁷⁰

George S. Patton was not entirely pleased with the new weapon. He particularly disliked its grip, saying that "I am very much opposed to the fancy grip suggested. For several thousand years men have been killing each other without finding thumb grooves or finger bumpers necessary. A simple hard rubber grip is cheaper, better and lighter."⁷¹ Still, any sabre was better than none at all, for "the sabre and the bayonet are . . . the symbols of implacable determination."⁷²

Patton was doomed to disappointment, for the lean budgets of the Depression years finally accomplished what the repeating rifle, barbed wire, and the machine gun had been unable to do. There were still nearly 39,000 serviceable Model 1913 sabres on hand when the M-2 was adopted. As a result, only five of the new model were ever produced, and the War Department initiated a review of the whole sabre question. On April 18, 1934, it issued a general order with the stark title of "AG 474.71 (2-15-34), SUBJECT: Saber." It stated simply that "the saber is hereby discontinued as an item of issue to the Cavalry. The Saber is completely discarded as a cavalry weapon."⁷³

This measure was merely the initial step in the abolition of the old horse cavalry that had been following the guidons since Washington's time. The sabre had been part of a unique, if archaic, weapons system combining blade, horse, and man. The technological clock had run out on the first two elements of this venerable triad,

and in March, 1942, the last of the horse regiments was dismounted and mechanized.

Ever since Hardee had thrown down the gauntlet in 1850 the partisans of the cold steel had waged a protracted campaign in its defense, seeking to at least delay the inevitable if they could no longer perpetuate the traditional. From the Black Hills to the Rio Grande, both ink and blood had been spilled in the composition of this savage recession. Then, in the space of eight years, both the sabre and the horse had been taken from them. The holy trinity had been torn asunder to placate the new gods of steel and gasoline. "Old Bull" Sumner and Sergeant Holbrook must have been cursing over their tankards at Fiddler's Green.



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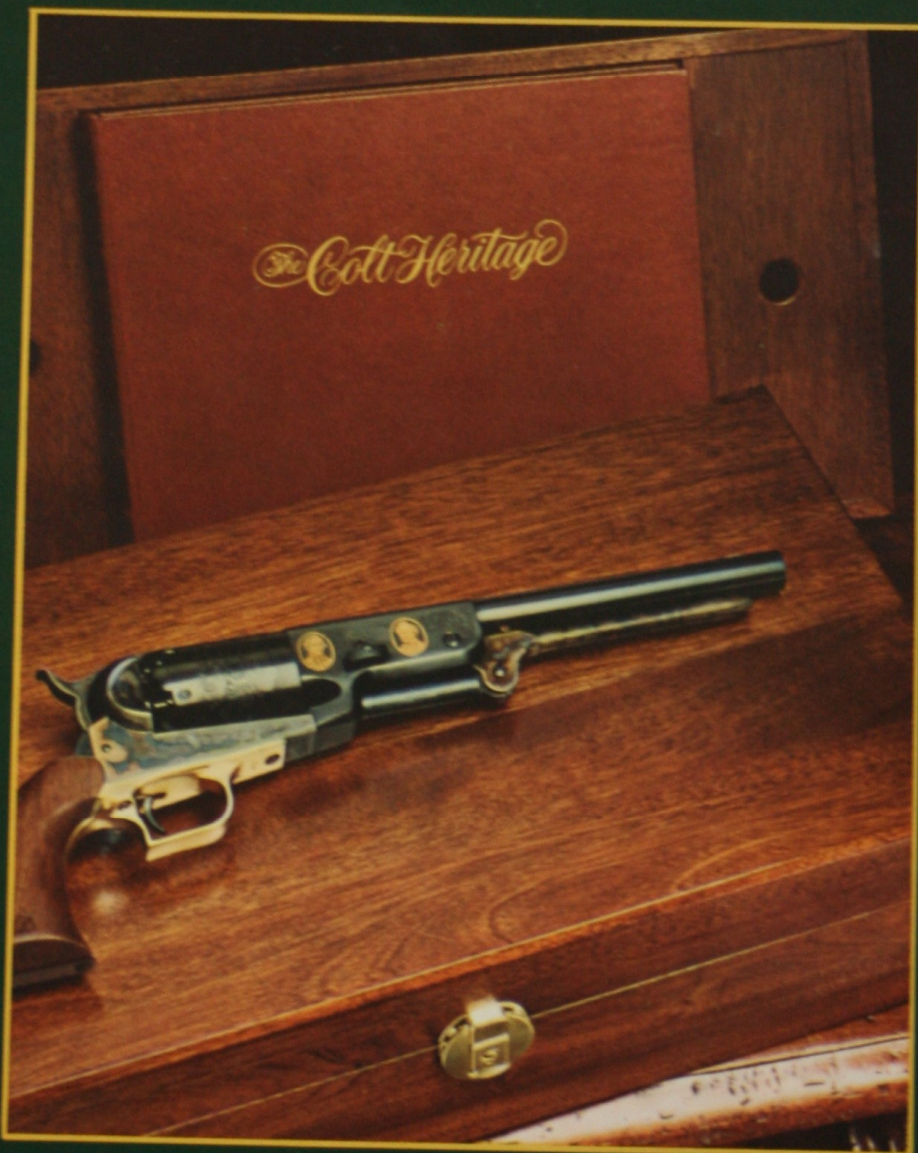
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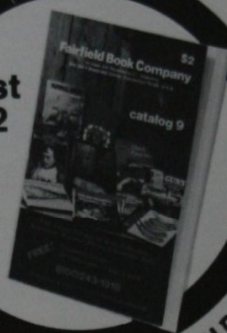
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