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Cavalrymen and their Horses during the American Indian Wars

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Cavalrymen and their Horses during the American Indian Wars

—EXCERPT—



AN ADVANCE OF THE CAVALRY SKIRMISH LINE
Library of Congress

From 1866 to 1891, ten US Cavalry regiments fought a dozen major campaigns against the American Indians of the western United States.

Cavalry horses carried the troopers into battle, hauled supplies, and endured privations – sometimes being abandoned, shot, or eaten. Through it all, however, horses were respected, loved and well cared for....

Soldiers lived and worked in companies of sixty to eighty men, with ten to twelve companies in each of the ten regiments. During the American Indian wars, the cavalry maintained about ten thousand men, including officers. Each trooper was assigned a horse, and the trooper often kept the same animal throughout his enlistment. Officers purchased their own mounts, preferring well-bred stock from Virginia

or Kentucky. Each might have a charger, trotter and an all-around riding horse.

Army-purchasing boards, comprised of a quartermaster and one or two regimental officers, bought horses from ranchers and civilian breeders. The Civil War depleted the country's supply of quality horses, so the boards often accepted mustangs or stock bred from Morgan or Thoroughbred stallions and mustang mares. Though the horses' quality was often unequal, the military generally obtained good horses at fairly reasonable prices... Sometimes the selection was limited. At one point, General George Crook, after losing hundreds of horses, mounted fifty troopers on captured American Indian ponies.

“The efficiency of the cavalry depends almost entirely upon the ‘condition of the horses,’” Colonel Phillips St. George Cooke wrote in his tactical manual, “... The horses must, therefore, be nursed with great care....”

The cavalry preferred solid-colored horses, and assigned them by color so that a regiment would have a bay company, a sorrel company, a chestnut company, etc.

M company, the last in the military alphabet, received the leftover roans, piebalds and pintos, along with the nickname the “Calico Troop” or the “Brindles.”

The 3-inch letters “US” were hot-branded on new horses’ left shoulders. Additional hoof brands identified each animal’s unit.

Officers generally entered the service as experienced horsemen and received additional riding instruction at the US Military Academy at West Point. Many enlisted men, however, got their first horseback experiences at frontier posts. Following the Battle of the Little Bighorn, US Congress hastily increased the cavalry’s strength. After meeting his new recruits, an officer wrote, “none of the new men in my troop could ride at all.”

It wasn’t until the 1880s that the cavalry offered formal, organized horsemanship training.... In the end, many cavalrymen became proficient, enthusiastic horsemen....

Poinsett’s Cavalry Tactics, first issued in 1841, included a section on working with young horses.... Poinsett repeatedly emphasized kind treatments. “Make use of gentle means to remove his (the horse’s) fears,” he advised. “Whenever a horse has obeyed, the hand should be held lightly, and he should be caressed....”

“The efficiency of the cavalry depends almost entirely upon the ‘condition of

the horses,’” Colonel Phillips St. George Cooke wrote in his tactical manual, “which alone makes them able to get over long distances in short spaces of time. The horses must, therefore, be nursed with great care, in order that they may endure the utmost fatigue when emergencies demand it.”

Sergeant Percival Lowe, who served in the cavalry from 1849 to 1854, put it more succinctly. “Everything must be done for the comfort of the horse,” he said.

Each of the army’s frontier posts was laid out in a similar pattern, with a dusty parade ground bordered by the officers’ quarters on one side and barracks for the enlisted men on the other. Behind the barracks were the stables and corrals for the horses. Stables were built from the best material available – logs, adobe or stone. Each stall had a window, a manger, and straw bedding on a natural base. When not in use, horses spent the day outdoors on a picket line or grazing under guard.

Reveille sounded at 5:30 a.m., followed by breakfast and 1½ hours of stable call, when the troopers watered, groomed, and fed their horses.

Mounted drill occurred from 8



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WARS

*Armed Forces History Division, National Museum
of American History, Smithsonian Institution*

to 10:30 a.m., with stable call again at 4 p.m. On an average day, when not on campaign, cavalrymen spent approximately five hours caring for and

riding their mounts, contact that often led to close bonds between the men and their horses.

...Twice a day, they led their horses to the picket line and groomed them, using a currycomb, brush, hay wisp, sponge and cloth. Troopers sponged the horses' eyes and nostrils, combed their tails and picked their hoofs. On campaign, each soldier carried a small pouch containing a currycomb and brush for touchups.

A farrier, assigned to each company, cared for approximately seventy animals. He pulled the shoes every four weeks, trimmed hoofs, and reset or replaced lost shoes. In case a horse lost a shoe during marches, troopers carried a set of shoes fitted to their horses.

Cavalry horses spent as much time as possible on pasture and were supplemented with hay and grain. Lowe had never seen better nor more enduring horses, he wrote, than those in his own troop, "and prairie hay, corn and good care made them what they were," he

observed... Horse rations were one of the elements of a successful campaign, and cavalry horses often carried ten to fifteen pounds of grain along with the rest of the equipment.

With proper feeding and shoeing and well-trained, considerate riders, cavalry horses could serve up to age twenty-five.

A day's march averaged twenty miles, usually at a walk. Cooke recommended periods of trotting with frequent stops to feed and water the horses, allowing them to graze on even the shortest breaks.

During ordinary marches, he added, the soldiers should dismount and lead their horses every third hour.

Notes in officers' journals show that they made a point of seeking campsites with clean water and plenty of grass.

When possible, they bought hay and grain from local ranchers. Lieutenant William Carey Brown recorded the purchase of a field of standing wheat from an Oregon farmer for \$100 during the Bannock War in July 1878. The purchasing officers immediately turned

out their fatigued horses to graze.

Once in camp, horses were picketed and allowed to graze. If hostile tribes were in the area, the unit formed the supply wagons into a corral and tied the horses inside. The troopers cut grass and bundled it in their blankets to carry back to the horses....

Western campaigns took a great toll on both horses and men. They suffered together on marches through the desert or in bad weather without adequate shelter, feed, wood, or water.... Winter campaigns, undertaken when the American Indians were encamped and easier to find, created their own special hardships. The soldiers, dressed in almost everything they owned, could hardly mount their horses. Horses and troopers sometimes froze to death during the night.

When no other place could be found to hitch his horse for the night, a trooper might wrap the halter line around his hand and lie down, using his saddle as a pillow. The horse would

graze all around the sleeping man, even nosing him awake to get the grass he lay on. "An instance can scarcely be found," [Captain Williard] Glazier observed, "where the horse has been known to step upon or in anywise injure his sleeping lord."

Daily care and drill and shared hardships brought men and horses together in close companionship. "The Indian may love his faithful dog," [Captain] Glazier added, "but his attachments cannot surpass the cavalryman's for his horse."

This article first appeared in Western Horseman, March 2005, under the title "Cavalry Horses and the American Indian Wars."

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