Introduction

When did mobile warfare start? That's hard to say—but probably not long after somebody realized it was possible to use a horse to move things or people. And it was definitely going strong on the steppes of Central Asia by the third millennium BC. Recent excavations by Russian archaeologists of Bronze Age grave sites on the Kazakh steppes (dated around 2200 to 1800 BC) have unearthed the earliest known remains of chariots. These were invented as high-tech platforms from which warriors could shoot arrows or hurl javelins.

And yet it's quite possible that mobile warfare goes farther back than that. Bones from even earlier sites in the Ukraine suggest that the long love affair between humans and horses may have started more than six thousand years ago. Archaeologists debate the issue, but horses may have been ridden bareback long before they were harnessed to wheeled vehicles. What if the first use of the horse in battle was for reconnaissance? Sitting astride a horse you can see farther than you can while standing on your own two feet. And the horse has four legs, which has advantages, too. More fleet of foot than a man—though only for short distances, and only if properly treated—the horse can give his rider the ability to locate the enemy, approach him, count his numbers, perhaps harass him a little, and then escape unhurt to report to the chieftain. And so from time immemorial, these two missions have been the main missions of the cavalry: to locate the enemy, and to sting him.

Cavalry has rarely been a decisive arm by itself. For one thing, the size of the horse gave cavalry troopers lower combat density than the infantry. The breadth of a horse's chest and the space needed to avoid crushing a rider's legs against his neighbor's mount meant that two or three infantrymen occupied the same frontage as a single horse and rider. Two or three spears, swords, or bows in the hands of foot soldiers confronted each warrior on horseback. Less appreciated is a horse's unwillingness to plunge headlong into a barrier it cannot see through. Though a horse might not be the smartest living thing on earth, only men will knowingly hurl away their lives. Third, a horse is not a machine. To operate and perform properly, it needs food, water, and rest. Denied those things, it dies; and all the spare parts in an Army inventory can't fix that. And so it was a rule of the American West that on any long-distance trip of more than five days, an infantry company could outmarch a cavalry troop. A horse afforded a trooper a relatively high dash-speed, but only over

fairly short distances. A man sitting on a horse also made an easy target, especially after the development of firearms. And yet, despite these drawbacks, the horse remained important in war for three millennia. More precisely, the horseman performed several crucial missions: find the enemy; prevent the enemy from finding you; collect information on the enemy before your main force collides with his; harass his flanks and communications; pursue him in defeat; screen your own forces when you are forced to withdraw.

Today the horse is used mainly for parades and ceremonies, but the missions it once performed remain as vital as ever. Though today's cavalry "companies" are called "troops," and the "battalions" are called "squadrons," the troopers (otherwise called "soldiers"—traditions do die hard, especially when John Ford made so many great movies about the glorious horse-soldiers) ride to battle not on Front Royal remounts, but mostly within sophisticated fighting vehicles.

Always the Army's proud arm, the socially prominent arm, the "pretty" arm—and for all those reasons despised by the infantry—the United States Cavalry[1] is not—and never was—just fashionable. It grows and changes. And so in the 1950s and '60s it mutated into a shock-arm. In those days, the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR)[2] was tasked with covering the Fulda Gap, an historic invasion route into western Germany. The job of the 11th ACR was to slow down, break up, and generally obstruct the advance of an armored formation as large as the Soviet Third Shock Army (about twelve times its size). That job demanded a new kind of unit, different from one designed for reconnaissance. Consequently the armored cavalry regiment evolved into something like an unusually robust brigade, or even a mini-division—a superbly balanced combat formation, containing a little bit of everything the Army has, under the command of a full colonel. In due course, the ACR became a plum assignment, where successful stewardship was the passage to greater things. In fact, the top ranks of the U.S. Army are packed with men who have served in, and commanded, the three ACRs that operated during the Cold War.

This growth process, whose purpose was simply to give the unit designated to be the first target for the Red Army a modest chance at survival, ended up producing a military organization with unusual relevance for the world that is now emerging after the fall of Communism. Relatively small in size, the ACR is heavy on "teeth" and short on "tail"—a weighted fist with deceptive agility on the battlefield. It has global mobility, and the greatest concentration of firepower of any land combat force yet created. As we will see, the marriage of weapons and mobility, added to the coming revolution in battlefield-information technology, will transform the ACR yet again into a form that will make it the most important land component in the U.S. military's continuing mission of keeping the peace—and punishing those who violate it.

And that will continue to be the legacy of those who stir to the sound of "Boots and Saddles."

Tom Clancy
Peregrine Cliff, December 1993