

# Corrigan of the Seventh:

## The Memoirs of Joseph C. Corrigan

Edited By Steve Alexander

*In my travels as General Custer, I have had many opportunities to meet unique and often very interesting people including some individuals that were swept up for a moment in time that is now our history. In the Fall 2005 Dispatch, William Richardson recalled his own experiences in "The Seventh U. S. Cavalry 1940." Albeit during World War II, he reflected the pride and esprit de corps of a regiment known as the "GarryOwens." One cavalryman in particular, Joe Corrigan of Millersburg, Ohio, has become a very dear friend. He and I have continued to correspond for some years now. Joe has shared his life as a horseman and his own experiences of being among the last horse mounted troopers of the Seventh Cavalry. I sent him a copy of the Richardson article and Joe has given me permission to publish his memoirs in their entirety. I would like to share some highlights, in his own words, of how he became "Corrigan of the Seventh." Steve Alexander*

William Richardson's recollections awakened a lot of wartime memories, something that I never dwelt on too much. My father lived in Detroit and I decided to visit him in the Spring of 1942. When I got off the bus, [I noticed] across the street an Army enlistment station. I was in the draft but had not yet been called. I walked over and asked about enlisting in the horse cavalry. They just handed me the papers to sign and two days later I was at Fort Custer, Michigan. I guess it was an omen, as I spent my whole Army career in the Seventh Cavalry. Another three or four days later, I was on a train for the Fort Riley, Kansas Cavalry Replacement Training Center. Right away we started basic training. Our particular group was to receive tank training and would go to an armored unit near Fort Riley. I said "No way" was I about to get near a tank, let alone get in one. I meant it! There is enough claustrophobia in my makeup that I could not handle it. They then sent me over to train as a weapons carrier and jeep driver. I kept insisting that I had enlisted in the horse cavalry. I made such a mess of the driving, ground enough gears and scared a couple of instructors that they finally sent me to the horse-training unit.

Before I enlisted I had done a lot of riding. But most of the completely horse ignorant recruits either learned to stay on or spent their time falling off. Some of them had no inkling whatsoever as to riding or caring for their mounts. And some could not seem to learn. We were issued old World War I flat steel helmets, Springfield rifles and blue fatigues. The cavalry as in the Old Army issued a campaign hat. For small arms we carried the Model 1911 .45 caliber automatic pistol attached to a canvas web suspender belt in a leather holster with a rawhide tie to keep it from juggling around on horseback. My horse cavalry manual described in detail how to pack the equipment on a fully loaded McClellan Army Saddle. It started with the saddlebags and canteen roll, which contained the second wool blanket. The blanket was used as a saddle pad. Also in the roll was an extra change of clothes, tent pegs and rope. The roll was made with the canvas shelter half and was tucked in on the ends to hold the roll together. When unpacked, the shelter half was put together with another trooper's half to make the army two-man tent.

The saddlebags had a white cotton canvas liner and when fully loaded held two spare horseshoes and our mess kit. There were C rations (two cans), K rations (a waxed waterproof field ration box) and the 10-in-1 ration (one man for ten days or ten men for one day). All contained a kind ofhardtack biscuit.

The feed bag was made of canvas and was designed to carry two feeds, always oats, and could be hung on the horse's head in such a way so that it had access to one side of the bag or the other. It was strapped to the [saddle] pommel and the raincoat was fastened over it. A canteen was fastened to the near side with a cup that fit in the bottom of the

canteen. All over the prairie lands surrounding Fort Riley permanent picket lines set up in the middle of nowhere [to tie the horses]. We spent a really cold winter there. The winds in that country were terrific. There were a number of frozen and frostbitten ears, faces and hands as a result. They sent us out for overnight operations unprepared. You can bet that whoever ordered the trip wasn't along for the ride. I've ridden horses in the winter but never any colder than that trip.

After about three weeks, twelve of us were told to pack our belongings and by noon we were on a train for Fort Bliss, Texas. Four of us were sent on to the Seventh and the rest to other units as replacements. I went right into "A" Troop. The mounted band of the Seventh Cavalry, as you know, dates back to Custer's time. They were still going strong when I was at Fort Bliss. Our barracks were on the parade ground and every morning bright and early the band marched close to our barracks, first playing *Garry Owen*, then *El Rancho Grande*. I think that the band was attached to regimental headquarters. Most of the old cavalymen were small or lean and wiry types. We had lots of Indians: Apache, Pima, Navaho, Sioux, Blackfoot, Osage, Cherokee and various other tribes from all over. A lot came from the Southwest and certainly Oklahoma. The Seventh no doubt had a much larger proportion of Mexicans and Indians than any other race. I never remember any of the Seventh Cavalry Indians making any complaints about being in Custer's Regiment. Although a lot of our Indians did not handle their drinks too well, there were hardly any troopers that did not drink more than they should. We would hit Juarez once a week at least. Liquor was cheap. Tequila could be bought for 50 to 75 cents a quart. They drank it straight down without salt or lime. Good brandy and rum were available to those who didn't like cactus liquors. One could buy a pretty good steak or Mexican dinner for 50 cents. Mixed drinks ran 15 cents and beer sold for 10 cents a bottle.

The popular song of the day was *Rose of Juarez*. Across the border there were plenty of slightly faded Roses ready for the plucking.

For a while our troop was sent to Morpha, Texas as border guards. We patrolled an area that took us as far as Columbus, New Mexico, the same town raided by Poncho Villa. We had about fifteen to twenty old timers who had ridden with [Gen. John "Black Jack"] Pershing against Villa. One night one of the guards on duty got drunk and tried to break into the bar that was closed. He tried to shoot the lock off the door with his pistol as he had seen in a lot of cowboy movies. Luckily no one was hurt but him. The other guard hit him in the head and bloodied him up pretty well. He got a month in the guardhouse. "A" Troop was generally a wild bunch for the most part and booze only aggravated the situation. A lot of them came out of the Depression; some right off boxcars and a hard life. Several were ex-prize fighters, really tough nuts. They did their assigned job but would not stand to be pushed around or crossed. They respected reasonable authority but also demanded respect by the same token. But when the chips were down they were the ones you could depend on!

In September 1942 the First Squadron (Troops "A," "B," "C" and "D") was sent to Fort Riley as demonstration troops for the officer candidate classes at the cavalry school. Our troop was quartered in the old 3 C Barracks on the main post. Heated by a gas burner in an old pot bellied stove, it's a wonder that we didn't catch fire or lose everyone to carbon monoxide fumes.

It was one cold and dry winter in Junction City, Kansas! Kansas was dry in that no liquor was sold. Beer was available as well as bootleg whiskey called "Paul Jones." The terrible stuff sold for \$2.00 a pint. Often we'd get weekend passes to Kansas City, Missouri just across the river. Our base pay at \$20.00 a month allowed us to purchase whiskey and to sell to the teamsters on the post. Several were in the bootleg business. Even though we'd doubled our money, the teamsters were able to mark up and make double their money.

On Saturday mornings mounted inspection was held. It was immediately followed by a few fast miles of horse exercise, back to the stables to care for the animals and then to the barracks for inspection. If one had a pass, there was a train for Kansas City around noon. There wasn't much entertainment in Junction City.

When the whole squadron was together, the command “Front into line” would be given followed by “Trot” and soon “Gallop” would find us charging across the prairie. You could always bet on a runaway. Few horses could be pulled back from “Charge” or even slowed once they’d broke into a full gallop. The Army kept a Morgan horse remount station in Vermont but close to 90% of our remounts came from thoroughbred stallions in the West. The names of most horses were on their service records along with their Preston brand numbers on the near side of the neck three or four inches below the crest. A few of the older horses were still branded “US.” A lot of good horseflesh passed through Fort Riley while I was posted there. One of the sergeants who carried the guidon fought in the boxing matches at the main post. He put on a couple of exhibitions there and so impressed the Army that he fought in USO shows throughout the war as the “Brown Bomber.” Joseph Louis Barrow went on to become Heavy Weight Champion of the World.

In February 1943 Troops “B,” “C” and “D” of the First Squadron U. S. Seventh Cavalry were dismounted and sent back to Fort Bliss to rejoin the First Cavalry Division. Our troop (“A”) remained at Fort Riley until March, when the last officer candidate class was completed at the cavalry school. We were dismounted just before shipping back to Bliss. By then the rest of the division was already dismounted, as Richardson has stated. When they took our horses at Fort Riley, we turned in our horse equipment. Upon our arrival at Bliss we turned in our spurs, cavalry boots, campaign hats and .45s. I managed to hang on to my best campaign hat, as I had two. “A” Troop was thus the last horse-mounted unit of the Seventh Cavalry and the First Cavalry Division, barring the mule outfits.

*Joseph C. Corrigan served in Troop “A,” First Squadron, Seventh U. S. Cavalry, First Cavalry Division in the Asiatic-Pacific Theater from June 26, 1943 with the invasion of Oro Bay, New Guinea to the first troops in Tokyo, Japan on Sept. 8, 1945. “The First was first.”*