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Boots and Saddles: The Story of Squadron A

Since Alexander the Great the horseman has been the most daring and aristocratic of soldiers. (It may surprise some to know that Herodotus wrote that the Amazons, "those unnatural women," were the first to employ cavalry.) (Graves 2, p. 125] Because the mounted warrior normally supplied his own horse or horses, and was often accompanied by a groom or servant, he was generally a class above the common foot soldier.

In the nineteenth century, the mission of the light cavalry was to crash into infantry squares and artillery batteries as a shock troop to break them up. This style of courageous action reached its pinnacle at Waterloo. However, the apotheosis of glorious dash and flamboyance occurred some forty years later in the Crimean war. The charge of the Light Brigade was a terrible scandal. Of the 700⁺ cavalry men who charged the Russian guns only 195 returned and 500 horses were killed. (The Reason Why, 248). Of the charge, a French Marshall observed, "C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre."

In *The Reason Why*, Cecil Woodham-Smith describes the 11th Hussars at Balaclava named after the legendary fifteenth century Hungarian horsemen and a component of the Light Brigade, as superb. "They wore trousers of cherry color, jackets of royal blue edged with gold, furred pelisses [cloaks], short coats, worn as capes, glittering; with bullion braid and gold lace, high fur hats adorned with brilliant plumes. Wrote the Times of London, "The brevity of their jackets, the irrationality of their headgear, the incredible tightness of their cherry colored pants, altogether defy description".

By the 1880s memories of the Civil War had dimmed and those of Crimea practically forgotten. In 1885, in New York a group of fortunate young gentlemen who were keen horsemen, formed themselves into the New York Hussars. They adopted blue uniforms and the appropriate headgear, which, while not up to Crimean standards of foppery, were nevertheless splendid.

The men soon began to take themselves seriously and invited a twenty-year veteran of the US Army Cavalry, Captain Charles F. Roe, to join the Hussars to inspire the membership with the cavalry spirit and military discipline. His efforts were so successful that in 1889 fifty-three men were mustered into the New York State National Guard as Troop A, becoming the cavalry arm of the Empire State. The Squadron was founded.

Squadron A was often called out from its Madison Avenue Armory, which occupied an entire city block between 94th and 95th Streets, to escort presidents, governors and foreign dignitaries. The Squadron was known for its fine riding skills and elegant uniforms, which it showed off in parades and at the National Horse Show.

They earned their spurs as soldiers as well. Volunteer Squadron A troopers went to Puerto Rico in 1898 to serve in the Spanish American War, and in 1916 the entire Squadron was called into federal service to patrol the Mexican Border and to chase the bandit, Pancho Villa.

During World War I, 796 Squadron A members served, and 609 became commissioned officers. As the 105th Machine Gun Battalion, the Squadron played an important role in the smashing of the Hindenburg Line. Members were highly decorated, including a Medal of Honor.

In World War II, the unit was federalized as the 101st Cavalry, Horse/Mechanized in early 1941. Following Pearl Harbor, Squadron A men served in all branches of the armed forces worldwide, and two additional Medals of Honor were earned in addition to an array of other distinctions.

In peacetime both between the Wars and after, the Squadron was the focus of a very active social life. Aside from official ceremonial duties, there was indoor polo in the Armory every Saturday night followed by a black tie-dance and on Sunday afternoon, tea dances.

Judge Edward P. Sharretts, Jr., who joined the Squadron in 1939, told me that becoming a member was just like joining a club. Although he was a well-known steeplechase rider whose father and uncle had been Squadron A troopers, he still had to face an interrogation on his horsemanship before being admitted. The interviewing officer asked him how he would jump over his horse. When he replied that he had no idea, as he had never tried it, the officer replied, "Correct answer, welcome to the Squadron!"

Sadly, the 94th Street Armory came down in 1965, but its facade, with the Squadron motto BOUTEZ EN AVANT (charge!), is still intact. Squadron A memorabilia is respectfully maintained in a museum at the Staten Island armory of the 101st Cavalry (Tank), NYARNG, the worthy successor unit to the Squadron. The 101st was one of the first military units to respond to the September 11th, 2001, atrocity, aiding both citizens and police. They have just been activated over the Iraqi crisis.

Spirit and traditions are further maintained by the Squadron A Association, housed in the Women's National Republican building on 51st Street In Manhattan. Michael Witter is president of the Association which boasts more than 600⁺ members and is a testimony to the enduring cavalry esprit de corps of the Squadron. The Pub is decorated with pictures of the unit, a number of which I was permitted to borrow for this article.

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