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TITLE: Mechanized Reconnaissance From D-day to St. Lo

SCOPE: To illustrate the principles of employment of the  
cavalry reconnaissance squadron during the Normandy  
campaign in Europe.

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Prepared by: BROOKS O. NORMAN

Major Cavalry

The history of the United States armed forces in their campaign in Normandy has been written and re-written by far more competent technicians than the author. However, as we learn primarily by our own experiences and by studying the experiences of others, this paper is presented in the hope that the actions of the 4th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron will illustrate and emphasize the principles of employment of this type of unit.

The actions of the squadron were characterized by rapid mobility, heavy automatic firepower, multiple communications and, to a limited extent, flexibility. It proved capable of performing all of the various types of missions assigned.

Because of its organization and equipment it performed most efficiently when mounted and on a security type mission. The squadron was used in many instances, and rightly so, as an economy force in order for the commander to economize on the striking force of his main elements. In several cases the squadron was used dismounted as a flankguard security force, this however, was not the most efficient employment of the unit as its firepower and communication capabilities were greatly reduced when dismounted. The squadron was further called upon to provide the attached reconnaissance troops to the 82d and 101st Airborne Divisions. In order to better understand the operations of this unit it is ad-

visible to briefly review its organization.

The 4th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron was the sister unit of the 24th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron; both were members of the oldest cavalry regiment still active, the 4th Cavalry Group. The 4th Cavalry Group was the reconnaissance agency of the VII United States Army Corps. The squadron consisted of a headquarters and service troop; three reconnaissance troops, designated A, B and C; one 75 MM assault gun troop, designated as E Troop, and F Company, which was the light tank company. The combat vehicles of the reconnaissance troops were the  $\frac{1}{2}$  Ton truck and the M-8 armored car mounting a 37 MM gun. E Troop was equipped with the M-8 assault gun, a short barreled 75 MM howitzer mounted in an open turret on the light tank chassis. F Company was equipped with the M-5 series light tank mounting a 37 MM gun. Headquarters and Service Troop contained the necessary supply and maintenance facilities to make the squadron self-sufficient. Inasmuch as 85% of the combat vehicles mounted an automatic weapon and/or a radio, it can readily be seen that the squadron was heavily endowed with firepower and communications. Due to its light armor protection and relatively small caliber weapons it could not stand and slug it out with the German tank units. The reconnaissance unit commander had to employ mobility and ingenuity to fight on an equal footing with the German armor.

The squadron's greatest weakness lay in the fact that there was no organic dismounted force within the organization.

Much has been written of the terrain in Normandy; of its famous hedgerows and the swamps and flooded areas West and Southwest of CARENTAN. It was ideal for defensive tactics and was very poor country for armored action. The squadron found its wheeled vehicles almost entirely road bound, as were its tanks until the invention of the ingenious "hedgecutter", however, by use of all the existing roadnet the unit was able to accomplish many of its missions mounted.

D-day marked the first appearance of the 4th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron in combat during World War II. Prior planning called for an economy force commitment of the squadron with three separate missions assigned for the initial phases of the invasion. Elements of Troop A of the 4th Squadron together with elements of Troop B of the 24th Squadron were formed into an especially trained task force under the command of Lt. Col. Edward C. Dunn. A reduced operating headquarters was selected from the 4th Squadron's normal headquarters staff. The mission of this force was to seize and hold the ISLES ST. MARCOUF, 6000 yards off the beaches where American forces would invade the Continent.

For the second mission, Troop B was detached from the 4th Squadron and attached to the 82d Airborne Division. One platoon was to land on UTAH Beach shortly after H-hour and

fight its way inland to effect a link-up with the parachute and glider forces near STE. MERE EGLISE. The remainder of Troop B was ordered to land on D plus 1 and join the advance platoon in the same area. Following the junction, all elements of the troop would be employed as directed by the division commander.

Troop C, attached to the 101st Airborne Division, had a somewhat similar mission. The troop was to land on UTAH Beach on D plus 1, contact the 101st and be used thereafter as the division commander should direct. Remaining elements of the squadron were scheduled to land on UTAH Beach on 16 June, after which the squadron would be consolidated, with the exception of Troop B, to function as one unit on whatever missions the VII Corps Commander directed. Thus we see the squadron was required to undertake three separate missions simultaneously, one of which was an assault landing.

#### ISLES ST. MARCOUF OPERATIONS

Six thousand yards off UTAH Beach lie the ILES ST. MARCOUF, composed of two rocky surfaced islands, the ILE DE TERRE and the ILE DU LARGE. Uninhabited in peace time, aerial reconnaissance photos had detected signs of activity on the islands and a network of trenches. On each island, facing the Channel, was a small concrete fort and their commanding position with respect to the landing beaches necessitated that they be neutralized prior to H-hour (0630).

Capture of the islands would afford the Allies with valuable sites for anti-aircraft batteries, which would possibly be needed to ward off the Luftwaffe.

As the first wave of C-47's and gliders swept overhead and before the naval guns opened up on shore defenses, the task force commanded by Col. Dunn boarded assault craft and headed for the islands. At 0430, two hours before H-hour, this force effected a seaborne landing as directed by Field Order No. 1, VII Corps, 1944.

As the landing craft waited off shore in the early morning darkness, two enlisted men from the 4th and two from the 24th Squadron, each armed with only a knife, swam ashore to mark the beaches for the assault force. These four men thus became the first American Ground Force soldiers to invade French soil. The two islands were taken without opposition other than a thick network of mines and sporadic shelling from coastal batteries. With the positions consolidated the force commander dispatched the first message to be received aboard the VII Corps Command Ship reporting the mission accomplished. The force secured the islands until the arrival of a friendly anti-aircraft unit on the following day. After the relief was accomplished, the detachment re-embarked and proceeded to the mainland where they reported to the VII Corps Command Post in the vicinity of AUDOUILLE LA HUBERT. Thus the

squadron successfully completed the first of its economy force missions; an infantry assault landing.

OPERATIONS OF TROOP B (DETACHED) 6 JUNE - 3 JULY 1944

The 82d Airborne Division dropped in the early morning of D-day on the COTENTIN Peninsula. Inasmuch as airberne units depend on a rapid link up with ground forces for successful operations Troop B, commanded by Captain William Larned, was assigned the important mission of effecting a link-up with the 82d Airborne Division. The 3d platoon of Troop B landed on the beach at 0930 on D-day and fought its way to STE. MERE EGLISE. Contact was made on 7 June while the division was engaged in repelling sporadic enemy counter attacks on its positions near STE. MERE EGLISE.

With more and more Allied troops pouring ashore and the American positions beginning to take shape, B Troop's initial task of escorting trains to the 82d Airborne was cancelled and the remainder of the troop did not land until 10 June. On that day they joined the 3d platoon, which under the direct command of the 82d Airberne Division, had been correctly employed on various patrol and security missions. In four days of hedgerow warfare, this platoon had accounted for well over 500 Germans killed or captured. The day after their link-up with the 82d this platoon encountered a large enemy column approaching STE. MERE EGLISE from the West. In

ambush, the platoon waited until the enemy force was less than 200 yards distant and then swept through the column mounted, firing 37 MM cannister and 30 and 50 caliber machine-guns. The remnants of the German column fled, leaving over 200 counted dead. The enemy force that was to have attacked STE. MERE EGLISE had been completely routed before reaching the town by an old fashioned but very effective cavalry charge.

Between 10 June and 14 June the troop was dispatched on repeated combat patrols in the GOURBESVILLE area East of STE. MERE EGLISE. On 11 June the 2d platoon was ambushed in the vicinity of GOURBESVILLE after it had penetrated the enemy lines on the main East-West highway. All but two members were either killed or captured. From 15 June to 18 June the troop carried out patrol missions in the PONT L'ABBE - ST SAUVEUR LE VICOMTE sector. From 19 to 22 June the patrol area was changed to the ST JORGES - VINDEFONTAINE area. On 23 June the troop was attached to the 90th Infantry Division and given the mission of making a detailed reconnaissance from PORTBAIL to BARNEVILLE on the COTENTIN Peninsula. Troop B, the only armored unit West of the DOUVE River, was reinforced with one platoon of infantry for this mission. This was the first purely reconnaissance mission assigned to the unit and it was accomplished with only light resistance after which the troop was assigned a coastal zone to patrol. From 25 to 28 June the troop patrolled the ST. SAUVEUR LE VICOMTE - BARNEVILLE - PORTBAIL area



picking up stragglers, searching out snipers and maintaining order. On 29 June the troop took over a front line position for a 24 hour period, covering the withdrawal of one battalion of the 90th Infantry Division. Detached from the 90th the following day, Troop B rejoined the 4th Squadron in the vicinity of BIVILLE.

The troop was immediately attached to the 39th Infantry Regiment of the 9th Division with the mission of reconnoitering in advance of the regiment to the town of AUDERVILLE. Facing the 39th Infantry was a continuous enemy defense line. Troop B was confronted with the hazardous task of penetrating the built-up position with its vehicles. Under cover of darkness the vehicles were driven to the top of a hill behind friendly lines and then one by one the "jeeps" and armored cars rolled down the highway with their engines shut off. Before they could be detected the coasting vehicles had infiltrated the line without drawing a single round of fire. The Germans, completely surprised by the daring maneuver, realized that their position was then untenable and the infantry forces overran them at daybreak encountering only light resistance. Meanwhile, Troop B raced on to AUDERVILLE where they overcame the surprised garrison and by daylight the troop was in full control of the village. Striking North the troop continued reconnoitering in their zone, mopping up scattered enemy

elements. The mission successfully accomplished the troop reverted to squadron control on 3 July.

Thus one element of the squadron completed almost one month of operations. During this time, the unit was used primarily in its most advantageous role, that of providing security for a larger force. However, it was also used on a special mission, that of contacting and supporting an airborne division; further, it was dismounted and used in a defensive position covering an infantry withdrawal. On several occasions the troop was used purely for reconnaissance and in some instances was given attack missions. In all cases, no matter what the method of employment, the troop proved itself capable of accomplishing their mission successfully.

#### OPERATIONS OF TROOP C (DETACHED) 7 JUNE - 15 JUNE 1944

Troop c, commanded by Captain William S. McCauley, did not land until the evening of 9 June, two days behind schedule. The delay was caused by bad weather which forced the ship to land at OMAHA Beach instead of UTAH Beach as planned. The troop immediately reported to the 101st Airborne Division and was placed in division reserve. On 12 June it was ordered to assist in the final assault on the vital road center of CARENTAN, capture of which would strengthen the line across the Southern part of the COTENTIN Peninsula and facilitate a link-up with British forces. While the 101st attacked the town, Troop C

contacted enemy forces one mile South of CATZ and by maintaining pressure protected the divisions Southern flank. After the capture of CARENTAN, patrols were sent South of the city to make a detailed terrain reconnaissance with special emphasis on estimating the security afforded by the inundated areas in that vicinity. The mission was accomplished without incidents.

On 14 June patrols were dispatched to reconnoiter and provide security for both flanks of the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, which was holding against strong German counterattacks attempting to retake CARENTAN. Patrols were also sent further to the flank to make liaison with elements of the 82d Airborne on the right at BAUPTE and with elements of the 29th Infantry Division on the left, Southeast of CATZ. All of these patrol missions were successfully carried out. On the next day, Troop C, reinforced by ten light tanks and two reconnaissance platoons from Combat Command A, 2d Armored Division, made two unsuccessful attempts to penetrate the German positions immediately in front of CARENTAN. At 1500 the same day the troop was relieved from further attachment to the 101st Airborne Division and rejoined the 4th Cavalry Squadron at STE. MERE EGLISE.

During its attachment to the 101st the troop was used primarily as a security agency, and was further given one reconnaissance and one attack mission. It is believed that the

mobility of the troop as a unit was not fully exploited during its period of attachment to the 101st Airborne.

#### OPERATIONS OF THE 4th SQUADRON 7 JUNE - 14 JULY 1944

The task force that had seized the ILES ST. MARCOUF early on D-day had been employed as corps security from the time they reached the mainland until 15 June. By 18 June the squadron had been consolidated with the exception of Troop B which was still attached to the 82d Airborne Division and was engaged in patrolling missions West of the DOUVE River.

The 9th Infantry Division's drive to the West coast had sealed off German forces in the Northern part of the COTENTIN Peninsula. With the vital port of CHERBOURG, as their objective, the 9th and 79th Divisions struck North and the 4th Squadron was assigned the mission of maintaining contact between these two units. This mission of maintaining contact between two divisions, was to become one of the most typical of the squadrons actions during the remainder of the war.

Moving out from the vicinity of ST. SAUVEUR LE VICOMTE on 19 June, the squadron initiated reconnaissance in its zone with the two reconnaissance troops abreast. Advancing swiftly over the narrow, hedge lined Normandy roads, Troop C encountered enemy opposition in NEGREVILLE. After a brief, sharp clash the enemy fled North and Troop C pushed on toward ROCHEVILLE. At ROCHEVILLE, Troop A met with heavy small arms and artillery

fire and pulled back to organize an assault on the well defended strongpoint. Reinforced by one platoon of Troop C and mounted on F Company tanks, the attack was launched under a barrage of E Troop artillery fire. This coordinated attack was very successful and the town was captured and secured until the arrival of friendly infantry forces later in the day. At this time the squadron was attached to the 9th Infantry Division and given a typical security mission of protecting the divisions right flank.

Enroute to an assembly area South of LES FLAGUES, the squadron pushed aside small arms resistance in the vicinity of RAUVILLE LA BIGOT and pushed on to ST. MARTIN LE GREARD. Here the squadron coiled for the night and moved out at daylight with Company F tanks in the lead. Driving out onto the comparatively open approaches to LES FLAGUES, leading elements were halted by a road block well defended from the high ground to the East of the main road. Company F, supported by one platoon of assault guns from Troop E, attempted to reduce the block, but was met with well directed anti-tank, artillery and mortar fire from the commanding enemy position. The barrage destroyed two tanks including the company commander's and further mounted action was not feasible. The entire squadron pulled back and again instituted an organized dismounted attack on the position. After a heavy preparation by the 9th

Division Artillery and coordinated fire from Troop E assault guns, Troops A and C overran the position.

With this commanding ground captured the squadron was ordered to relieve the 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry Regiment, in the vicinity of VASTEVILLE. From this position the squadron could protect the left flank and rear of the 9th Division which was preparing for the final assault on the port of CHERBOURG.

Relieved by the 1st Battalion, 39th Infantry Regiment, the squadron moved to the new positions on 21 June and by 1800 had accomplished the relief of the infantry forces holding a line one mile West of VASTEVILLE. The positions were used to probe enemy defenses in the vicinity of STE. CROIX HAGUE - BRANVILLE - FLEURY - VAUVILLE. After infiltrating enemy lines, dismounted patrols remained in observation of the enemy's rear for periods ranging from 24 hours to 3 days and sent messenger patrols back with locations of German strongpoints, outposts, artillery and troop concentrations. The information thus obtained provided excellent artillery targets many of which were destroyed.

The combined land, sea and air attacks had overwhelmed the defenders of CHERBOURG and the strategic port was now in Allied hands, but scattered enemy forces still clung to the CAPE DE LA HAGUE Peninsula in the North. To the 4th Squadron

went the mission of advancing on the left flank of the 9th Division in an effort to eliminate the shrinking pocket. On 28 June the 4th Cavalry Group Commander selected 15 successive objectives, mainly high ground, capture of which would clear the Western coast of the peninsula and deprive the Germans of an opportunity to escape by sea. Due to the nature of the terrain it meant that the action would have to be entirely dismounted.

The first two objectives were taken with only feeble resistance, but Troop C patrols, returning from objective number 3, reported that position heavily defended. Advancing 50 yards behind a rolling artillery barrage Troop C attacked and swept through the position. Over 200 Germans were captured and an uncounted number were killed. Contact was immediately established with friendly infantry on the high ground South of BEAUMONT HAGUE and the assault force pushed on. The defenders of objective number 3 had been the outer perimeter of a line that the Germans had been hastily attempting to stabilize. Completely routed and disorganized, remnants of the force fled Northward. The squadron advanced rapidly and by 1 July had captured the village of THIEBOT with a surprise night attack that netted 150 prisoners. On 2 July, the 5th day of the attack, the mission was completed with the capture of the 15th objective. Troops A and C had captured over 600

prisoners in six miles of dismounted attacks.

Commencing 2 July and continuing through 8 July the entire 4th Cavalry Group was attached to the 101st Airborne Division with the mission of mopping up scattered German forces on the CAPE DE LA HAGUE Peninsula. On 8 July the group reverted to VII Corps control and spent a two day period performing maintenance and refitting.

During the period 7 June - 8 July the majority of the squadron's missions were of a security nature, however, in the performance of these missions it was necessary to dismount the squadron on many occasions. As stated earlier, this is poor policy for three very good reasons. First, the squadron's communications facilities were very markedly reduced, the only radio organic to the unit which could be hand packed was the cumbersome SCR 510. Secondly the squadron sacrificed almost all of its automatic firepower when dismounted. This was keenly felt in the many dismounted attacks. Although it is thoroughly understood that no man or machine is non-expendable in battle, the third reason for not dismounting the squadron was the resultant loss of technicians. The squadron depended heavily on technicians in order to function properly and loss of radio operators and armored vehicle drivers in dismounted action is felt to be inefficient use of personnel.

During this period the squadron also got its first taste of a type of mission which was later to become common; namely,



maintaining contact and filling the gap between two divisions. In this case it was successfully accomplished mounted. During the closing days of the period the squadron was given an economy force mission of mopping up scattered resistance over a large but restricted area. This was an ideal mounted mission for the unit. Day by day it had become more apparent to all members of the squadron that the concept of reconnaissance by the "sneak and peak" method was a false doctrine. It became clear that if the squadron was to gather information and carry out its other missions it was going to have to fight. This was contrary to many of the basic principles and training of the unit and it is a compliment to the officers and men of the squadron that they were able to adjust themselves rapidly and effectively. ✓

On 10 July the squadron moved to a new assembly area at the base of the COTENTIN Peninsula and on the following day relieved the 8th Infantry Regiment with the mission of screening enemy positions on two islands of firm ground surrounded by marsh and swamp, three miles Southwest of BLEHOU. On 15 July the squadron was pulled out of the line to refit in preparation for the forthcoming ST. LO breakthrough.

Although initially committed piecemeal, during its first 39 days of combat the unit performed ably and carried out all assigned tasks. The squadron was plagued by the trials

and tribulations of all units new to combat but found its organization flexible enough to cope with all situations; some to a greater extent than others. During this period the squadron had been given only two days to rest and perform maintenance. Although not exchanging blows with the enemy during the entire period the unit was used in some capacity during all but the above mentioned two days. Inasmuch as the squadron was a completely mechanized organization this meant that motor maintenance must be of a superior type. This was a problem that was to be encountered during the entire European war; the squadron, like a comfortable shoe, was too easy to put on and wear for an extended period of time.

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