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### VOLUNTEER CAVALRY.—No. XVII.

#### THE LESSONS OF THE DECADE.

BY A VOLUNTEER CAVALRYMAN.

(From the United States Army and Navy Journal.)

#### OUTPOSTS AND PICKET DUTY.

AFTER the march comes the camp, after the camp the picket. So many volumes, good, bad, and indifferent, have been written on the subject of picket duty, that the man who attempts more on the subject runs the risk of repetition. Every modern cavalry book contains the same stereotyped directions for "grand guards, pickets, and vedettes," with the same plate, representing a village, a wood, and a stream, with a chain of pickets around it. I do not propose to enter into any description which will require an elaborate map to display the author's (or his draughtman's) skill. A description which is not clear without constant turning to a map is faulty, besides being useless to the majority of officers.

The most difficult circumstances under which a picket can be posted are those of a raid, especially towards the end of a successful one when exasperated enemies are near you hourly. The same pickets that, when with the main army, are only necessary in front of the corps, whose flanks are protected by other troops, must not be thrust out on all sides.

A corps of three divisions, under these circumstances, should be encamped in an equilateral triangle, and the reserve of the pickets stationed to cover the salient. Each brigade in turn should picket the front of its own division, and in the brigade alternate regiments should be sent on picket bodily. This plan works better than making small details from each regiment nightly. A regiment sent on picket bodily, works together better than a number of independent details. Three full regiments ought to picket the whole three fronts of a corps without any difficulty in a radius of a mile from the camp, a distance ample for safety.

At a distance of a hundred feet apart, a fair average distance, fifty men will picket a mile, and three hundred the whole circle of six miles. Three reliefs are necessary for the pickets, and a reserve of three hundred men will be left. I am counting a regiment at four hundred men, a very fair average campaigning strength.

During the civil war there was much slackness on both sides in the matter of picket duty. As a general rule, especially when the army lay for any length of time in the same place, the pickets were too weak and too close in. I have known several disasters caused by the latter fault, notably so the surprise at Cedar Creek. If the pickets of the army had been twice as strong and a mile out instead of a hundred yards, that surprise need never have taken place.

On another occasion, I remember the pickets of the Sixth New York Cavalry being driven in by a handful of guerillas, and the camp ridden into, before any defence could be organized. The men were luckily old soldiers, and turned out of their huts (it was winter) in their shirts, driving off the enemy with their carbines, but the disaster need never have happened with proper pickets.

The directions in the outpost duty manuals, and other books of the same sort, recommend the placing of vedettes in pairs, and frequent patrols. I do not believe that during the whole civil war the vedettes were ever so posted, and the patrolling was by no means what it should have been. Weakness of numbers was the cause of the first neglect, condition of horses the second. On both sides of the contest there was too much negligence, and the infantry pickets were notoriously slack.

After the surprise of Cedar Creek the pickets of Sheridan's army were pushed out much further, and with advantage, but the duty was still very carelessly performed. I remember once myself getting outside the line without knowing it, and being stopped by an officer on the road in charge of the picket post, who refused to let me through, as my pass had not been countersigned at division headquarters. Now it was in looking for these very division headquarters that I had lost my way in the snow and had got outside the line. The same officer simply turned me back. If he had suspected me of being a spy, he should have detained me. Instead of this he simply told me I must go back. I did so, walked around a wood, and flanked the post about a quarter of a mile further up. The enemy's scouts had just as little difficulty in penetrating and going back and forth, I make no doubt.

Two grand principles should be kept in sight to regulate the performance of picket duty:

I. An enemy in force must follow the roads.

II. Scouts and spies go across country

These two dangers have to be met properly by a good picket system.

In the first place, all the roads within a radius of a mile, leading to the camp, must be occupied by the full force of the picket reserves or regiments. The outside vedettes should be placed a good mile from the camp, and barricades erected, as an invariable rule, across all the roads a quarter of a mile back; and about midway between every two roads is the proper place for the picket scouts. A barricade should also be invariably put up to shelter their front, the vedettes being warned of the proper path to take if driven to its shelter. A quarter of a mile further back again, and midway between its picket posts, lies the regiment or picket reserve, also fortified. The camp itself should be surrounded with a cordon of sentries, a hundred yards out, dismounted. With such a system of picket posts and reserves a corps may sleep in peace in any country, secure of plenty of time to form. A full mile of increasing resistance has to be passed over by an enemy before a camp can be reached. The strength of the reserve is half a mile from camp.

Between the roads the cordon of vedettes is drawn, a hundred feet apart, and the outposts are established, as economically as possible consistent with safety.

Now let us examine the way in which the duty should be done. In the ordinary picket systems we find too much adherence to red tape and routine. As our fathers did so do we, without applying common sense and experience to improve on the model according to ground. For instance, we find it laid down as a rule, in most books on the subject, that cavalry picket posts should mount and remain mounted during the whole time that each relief is being put on. The amount of standing still under heavy loads, inflicted on the poor horses under duty soon wears out cavalry horses. The practice of keeping all vedettes mounted, without exception, is also a matter of red tape and tradition. Officers are afraid to allow any other plan in the face of precedent.

Now the real fact is, that at night a man on foot is much more likely to be vigilant and quick of hearing than the same man mounted. If every cavalry vedette at night would hobble his horse, as we have recommended for scouts, and patrol his own beat in a fashion similar to a sentry, the picket line would be much harder to pass at night. The duties of a chain of vedettes at night are to stop scouts, spies, and guerillas, and shoot them if possible. A man stealing about in the dark cannot be picked off so readily as a statuesque mounted vedette, sitting still for a target. The horse will take his rest well enough if the man is off