

Riding for the Lone Star: Frontier Cavalry and the Texas Way of War, 1822-1865

Alex Mendoza

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Mendoza, Alex (2016) "Riding for the Lone Star: Frontier Cavalry and the Texas Way of War, 1822-1865," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 3 , Article 25.

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.3.26

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss3/25>

Review

Mendoza, Alex

Summer 2016

Jennings, Nathan A. *Riding for the Lone Star: Frontier Cavalry and the Texas Way of War, 1822-1865*. University of North Texas Press, \$32.95 ISBN 9781574416350

Combat on the Frontier: Texas Cavalry from the Colonial Period to the Civil War Era

Nathan A. Jennings has done an admirable service to historians of Texas and the Western Frontier. He has written a comprehensive study of Texas cavalry operations in the Lone Star from the colonial period to the Civil War era. While historians have examined cavalry operations dealing with Texas or Texans before, Jennings undertakes quite a task by analyzing the Texas way of war. His goals are threefold. First, he wants to explore how various cultures—Indian, Spanish, and Anglo-Americans—all converged to create a unique style of frontier warfare. Second, he traces how this style of warfare influenced centralized governments and frontier settlements mobilize its citizenry based on the foes they encountered. Finally, Jennings attempts to ascertain how “Texans waged war on the periphery of Western civilization” and how the frontier influenced the style of fighting north of the Río Grande (p. 6).

Certainly, the author’s ambitious goals for the scope of his work factor prominently in his work. Yet, in addition, he also strives to study the martial spirit and the fighting ability of the cavalymen of the nineteenth century. While acknowledging the differences of fighting for various governments, as well as in numerous voluntary forces during this time period, it is important to note the wide breadth and scope of this project. Clearly, the author’s background as a U.S. Army officer and instructor at the United States Military Academy at West Point helps him piece together a disparate array of sources and a continual flood of changing key figures and personalities in his book.

Jennings’s first chapter explores the tribal warfare present in *colonial* Tejas, from 1822 to 1835, and the eve of the Texas Revolution. The author maintains

that the area's dependence on armed horsemen coupled with an ever-changing political unrest molded military proficient militia who was comparable to their Native American foes. In the subsequent War for Texas independence forced Texans to adopt to meet threats from the Mexican army to the south and raiders on the northwestern frontier. The resulting forces, molded by an attempt to create a semblance of nationalism, proved notable to the citizenry. As Jennings traces the development of the mounted arm in the period of the Texas Republic and early statehood, he outlines that attempts to replicate a standing army were overshadowed by the use of irregular forces. After all, the main foes facing Texans practically required that residents be mobile and have the ability to marshal their forces quickly and decisively. By the time the nation-states got involved in the warfare of Texas, during the Mexican-American War, 1846-1848, the author argues that Texans possessed an "enviable fighting reputation" and a level of ferocity that marked many horsemen with a negative reputation from Mexican Texans. The following years, however, did not assuage the independent spirit of Texas cavalymen, even as they acquiesced to the frontier forces of the U.S. Army. To be sure, when Texas joined the Confederacy in its attempt to secede from the Union, the Texas volunteer forces once more joined the fray and served in campaigns in the Trans-Mississippi, in the East, and in New Mexico, all while defending against the Indian presence along the frontier.

Jennings concludes that after the Civil War, as technology and a redirected focus on internal security all served to decrease Texas's reliance on cavalymen. Yet personalities did not wane as effectively as the mounted arm. Notorious Texas Rangers leaders continued their legacies along the frontiers of Texas toward the turn of the twentieth century.

Overall, the author has done a valuable service. The depth of his coverage of Texas cavalry operations from the colonial period to the Civil War is a daunting task. This is not to say the book is without weaknesses. Greater depth in fully defining what the "distinctive Texan way of war" (p. 5) could have proven useful in weighing the analysis in the narrative. Additionally, a greater balance viewing the perspective of Tejanos (Mexican Texans) or Native Americans could have lent greater acuity to the analysis of notable Texas Rangers and their personalities. Nevertheless, despite these gaps, there is a lot to be gained from *Riding for the Lone Star*. Whether discussing regular forces or irregular operations, the reader can gain a lot from the narrative. The book is well-researched and complimented by informative anecdotes and keen

observations. Ample maps and photos only serve to augment the study. While it is probable that a professional historian might find the lack of an identifiable Texas military identity frustrating, Jennings still provides a valuable service for the readers and scholars of Texas military history who are interested about warfare on the frontier and the role of Texas cavalry in helping forge the path of the Lone Star State.

Alex Mendoza is an associate professor of history at the University of North Texas.