

## THE COMMAND STRUCTURE

To understand a military unit and its actions it is often necessary to examine its commanding officer and his staff. It is very typical at various stages that a military formation will experience several commanding officers. In the case of the 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group Colonel Mark A. Devine took the group into combat in Europe and it would be fair to surmise that its commanding officer shaped and dictated its actions and all officers and men would share the outcome of the decisions made prior to and during the Ardennes offensive.

There were tensions and negative undercurrents within the command structure. Lt. Colonel Dugan who would eventually become the group executive officer has been described as cool and soft spoken and well liked by members of both squadrons. Lt. Colonel William F. Damon Jr., commander of the 18<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron was more discreet than Colonel Devine however at times could be just as stern. He was known for inflicting a constant stream of sarcasm towards his immediate subordinates and was not fond of Colonel Devine. Regardless of this Damon never revealed his dislike for Devine to his enlisted men and concealed his feelings. Major James W. Faris, Damon's executive officer was described as an older officer and had taken about as much as he could stand from Lt. Colonel Damon. He had grown tired of Damon's insistent sarcasm and petty demands. Faris had been reclassified as "limited service" on the day prior to the squadron's departure for Europe however Damon did not see fit to release Faris. The strained relationship between Damon and Faris becomes evident when on two occasions he is forced to temporarily relinquish command to a subordinate he appoints first Lt. Colonel Paul Ridge at Poteau and once again when assigned as the group commander he gives Major Walter J. Dill, the Squadron S-3 that responsibility. When similar situation occur within the 32<sup>nd</sup> Squadron, Lt. Colonel Paul Ridge turns command over to his Executive Officer Major John Kracke which is standard procedure. Major Faris never gets the opportunity; apparently Faris is available however never Damon's choice. It is not necessarily a requirement for officers to like each other. They do not even need to be liked by their men; however the issue of respect is of vital importance. It is possible for a commander to invoke respect but not necessarily be liked. If the respect is lacking serious questions will arise as to how far a commanders subordinates will support him or his decisions.

What scant information that is available on Colonel Devine prior to assuming command of the group one is still able to formulate a basic perception of his command style and of his attitude towards his subordinate officers and enlisted men. One must also consider the man's personality and his aspirations and goals for his military career. If all of this information can be assembled and examined it is possible to provide a hypothesis or an explanation for the groups controversial exploits.

Mark Andrew Devine Jr. was born on July 23, 1897 in California. He earned a B.S. in education at the University of San Francisco. He entered the U.S. Army in 1918 as a Second Lieutenant and was assigned to the American Expeditionary Force as a First Lieutenant and spent time in Germany from 1919 to 1923. Sometime during the 1920's Devine was a captain in a cavalry troop of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Division from which the 9<sup>th</sup> Armored Division was eventually formed in early 1942. Devine met and married the daughter of the commanding general of the post. His military record back in the United States parallels many thousands of officers between the wars during this period. Cavalry Troop Officers School in 1924 followed by advanced courses in cavalry through 1934. In 1936 and 1937 he attended the Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth Kansas. Devine proceeds through the ranks and in 1939 he is promoted to the rank of Major. He also transferred to the field artillery for a brief period of time. In 1940 he is awarded the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and in January 16 of 1941 becomes a full Colonel. During this period he serves as GSC Military Attaché in Panama. Eventually he is posted to Fort Bliss Texas in 1942 and in 1943 Devine is at Camp Hood as a colonel at the tank destroyer school.

When Colonel Devine was assigned to take command of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> Squadrons, then at Camp Maxey Texas, his superiors must have been aware of his command style which was "by the book" and very strict, possibly to the point of being "over the line". As there had been disciplinary problems at Camp Maxey predominately with the 32<sup>nd</sup> Squadron an officer of his demeanor and command was obviously in order. As stated earlier, his assignment had been to take command of the group and correct any disciplinary problems and make sure that it was prepared for combat over seas.

As many of the officers and enlisted men could corroborate, when Colonel Devine arrived at Camp Maxey his troops would eventually shake in their boots in his presence. Officers and non commissioned officers not up to his standards were removed and shipped out and replaced with personnel who would be forced to obey his very strict regulations. He treated civilian personnel in his office in the same manner. Office staffs were informed that they would stand at attention whenever he entered or left the facility. He had an obsessive demand for clean vehicles and did not allow smoking in his presence.

Years of military service in the officer corps does not necessarily produce nor encourage many of the disciplinary episodes and techniques that Devine displayed while Camp Maxey and up to the period of December 16, 1944. Obviously the group had several command problems and Devine was not able to repair all of them. At this point and time during the war replacements were becoming an issue and the most important task was to get the group up to standards and deploy to Europe.

Many an officer has progressed through their careers with only one goal in mind; to proceed through the ranks and eventually command troops in combat. It would seem unfathomable that Colonel Devine would move through 26 years of various command postings,

military schooling and countless hours of training just to breakdown during his first experience in combat at a time when men needed his leadership and ability.

The cavalry doctrines with which the group went into combat with have been examined. It has been suggested that they were flawed from their conception and even worse had been emblazoned into the minds of the officers and troopers and had been the daily “bible” for instruction in field maneuvers by the squadrons, troops and platoons. However in this case a flawed doctrine was not the only reason for the group’s disintegration in the Ardennes. Deeper insight must be given to the command structure of the group. It is not the intention here to psychoanalyze the command and control structure of the 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group but to attempt to demonstrate that a defective doctrine was not the only explanation for the unit’s demise.

A command change transpired during November 1944 while the two squadrons were detached from the group headquarters and attached to separate infantry divisions. The commanding officer of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Squadron was relieved of command and replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Paul Ridge who had been the 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group Executive Officer. Ridge followed the same philosophy as Devine as far as his authoritarian procedure was concerned. Because of this Devine and Ridge got along quite well and as a result Devine gave the squadron command job to Ridge. Unfortunately Ridge possessed few leadership qualities nor did he generate respect amongst the officers and men of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Squadron.

Lt. Colonel Ridge moved up from Vielsalm with the 32<sup>nd</sup> Squadron and on the morning of December 16 at the group headquarters at Manderfeld he became noticeably bothered by the German shelling. He eventually excused himself from the headquarters to return to Vielsalm to “supervise and secure additional ammunition” which would be brought up to the combat area. Ridge would not be near the Manderfeld area again until the group was in the process of withdrawing. In Ridge’s absence the squadron was under the command of Major John Kracke, the 32<sup>nd</sup> Squadron Executive Officer.

Taking into account the episode at Poteau on December 17 and 18 and the close call at Kaiserbarracke which involved Colonel Devine and most of his staff, one can begin to see the command and control organization begin to break down as a result. This is occurring at a pivotal juncture in the St. Vith sector. As we have seen, Devine has issued a series of withdrawal orders, most of which have been decided upon by the colonel himself without the consent of superior commanders. The excuse that communications had been poor which can make command decisions difficult in a fluid battle can only be allowed to a certain extent. Is it a coincidence that when the group headquarters began to be shelled it was noted that both Colonel Devine and Lt. Colonel Ridge were affected by the shelling and near hits on the headquarters?

Lt. Colonel William M. Slayden, Assistant G-2 VIII Corps was present at the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Headquarters after the German breakthrough at Andler. He heard of reports confirming that the 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group was in full retreat and had withdrawn from its headquarters in Manderfeld. On Saturday evening Colonel Devine arrived at the headquarters in

a completely demoralized state from the events and had vague knowledge of the dispositions of his units. Devine described the fighting in the front line villages of Roth, Krewinkle and Auw and of the sudden appearance without warning of German tanks and infantry in a large scale attack early in the morning. This resulted in their confusion and retreat with what few vehicles they could get out on the ice and snow covered roads. Many of his troops had been captured or left behind as the command structure was cut off, communications lost and men and equipment scattered in the cold and snow covered forests. This utter confusion in the front ranks was witnessed by Slayden during his trip to Andler. Casualties were heavy in both personnel and equipment due to the suddenness and overwhelming force of the attack. Colonel Devine, not having had any experience in combat and enjoying the “quiet front” positions for an extended period of time had been suddenly “awakened” by heavy artillery followed by a tremendous infantry/tank attack on his entire front. This was at the least unnerving and the cause of what Slayden concluded to be his “shell shocked” condition. Slayden felt that had Major General Jones of the 106<sup>th</sup> Division been more experienced he would have relieved Devine on the spot. Instead he was sent back to his badly shaken unit which continued a series of withdrawals culminating finally at Vielsalm.<sup>1</sup>

Many of these withdrawals had been issued without elements of the squadrons having been in direct contact with advancing German forces. Colonel Devine appeared to be overtly attempting to preserve his squadrons no matter what the cost. In this case the price was the left flank of the advancing 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division. The question is whether his concern was for his troops or a feeble attempt to preserve his career. Paramount in Devine’s mind apparently was that his cavalry group was not trained nor equipped to fight a pitched battle with advancing enemy armor supported by infantry. However examples did occur as with B Troop of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Squadron at Huem and the defensive stand north of Manderfeld, that in the proper combination of terrain and organized firepower that squadron elements could delay the German spearheads at least long enough to gain time for reserves to filter in and strengthen the defenses. A combination of apparent battle fatigue and putting his cavalry group on the east-west road through Poteau was enough for Colonel Devine to be relieved of his command. Although the relationship between Colonel Devine and Major General Jones of the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division had not been one of mutual respect and understanding the two commanders had been in communications directly or through liaison staffs before and after the German offensive began on December 16. Devine had on at least two occasions visited the 106<sup>th</sup> headquarters after the German breakthrough and had to have been made aware of the movements of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division into the St. Vith area and that his group along with elements of the 99<sup>th</sup> and 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Divisions were to be responsible for the delaying of the German attack until their arrival. It is unclear whether Colonel Devine was aware as to the exact march routes and the estimated time of arrival of the division. It was obvious that most of the elements fleeing west had no idea of the arrival of the armored division. In a time of almost complete confusion and withdrawal, the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division was the only division heading into the storm instead of escaping it.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts from “A World War Two Experience” by Colonel William M. Slayden II, U.S. Army Ret.

The following encounter displays just one example of Colonel Devine's demeanor while on the battlefield. Colonel Richard D. Gillis of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division was in the vicinity of Poteau on December 17, 1944. During the afternoon Devine arrived in a staff car and asked "what outfit is this?" Gillis replied it's the Headquarters of Combat Command R of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division. Devine's reply was "you are now in charge of this sector of the front." Colonel Gillis was unaware of the German threat in this area and asked to see a map of the area to get his bearings. Devine's reply was "don't ask stupid questions, just do as you are told." He then proceeded to race off in the vicinity of Recht. Gillis believes that he had only a driver with him. On another occasion he declared to a burgomeister of a local village "your damn town is dirty, clean it up".

It is possible that Colonel Devine and Lt. Colonel Ridge both suffered from the inability to conform to combat situations and be flexible enough to observe the critical situation and to command accordingly. They both employed similar disciplinary and authoritarian command styles applying tight control over subordinate officers and men. The very nature of their need for total control in all situations and demanding conformity as well as rigid compliance and respect did not allow them the ability to make decisions in a very confused and dangerous situation. It is possible that this very meticulous unyielding style of command eventually became their downfall.

Discipline and a strong command figure are essential requirements for an officer. Devine and Ridge was the type of officers that thrived during the peacetime army. An existence of staff commands and postings were they enjoyed the obedience and respect that they felt was due them. These officers were surrounded by routine and many of them in a sense became "synthetic" leaders, carrying out the orders of their superiors and passing them down to their subordinates. They had been following a definite pattern which had been laid out before them. They performed in channels but if they were called on to execute their own judgment many had been found wanting. Colonel Devine had the desire to move through the ranks to earn his first star. Unfortunately this all came crashing down one early December morning in 1944, just like the German artillery from the east side of the Schnee Eifel.

Many officers that advanced through the ranks between the wars had no business commanding troops in combat. However this problem often does not arise until it is too late. These types are usually "weeded" out during the evaluation process prior to shipping out over seas. Both men were eventually evacuated as "non battle casualties" on December 18 and 19, 1944. Post combat interviews indicate that the changes in command affected the combat efficiency of the group very little. This seems difficult to believe considering that Poteau was the high water mark for the cavalry group.

Most of the criticism for this battle and the manner in which it was conducted should be directed at the 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group command staff. Predominately Colonel Devine. If during the war every other commander who felt slighted as to the way that his troops were deployed and

utilized had disengaged them from contact with the enemy the results could have been catastrophic. Doctrines are subject to interpretation and the interpretation of doctrine is critically affected by combat judgment. This judgment is dictated by several sources such as mentality, education and experience. These are also limited by personal characteristics. Doctrines must also change over time, especially those which have been initiated and executed during a period of new and advanced changes in warfare such as the demise of the old horse cavalry and the incorporation of mechanization. It soon becomes apparent that the application of doctrine is based on experience and judgment and they are subject to change as weapons, defenses and the enemy change.

The rigidity and routine of command must yield to flexibility. Courageous leadership on the battlefield should not only apply to the platoon or company commander but should exist up to and including the corps commander. When a unit is in dire straights someone must revive it and restore the fighting spirit. If the regimental commander fails to do so, then the division commander must step in and set the example. It cannot always be accomplished by mandate and order. At Poteau this officer was Lt. Colonel Dugan.

A comparative example to the contrary could be seen to the south of St. Vith at Bastogne. Elements of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division held out against overwhelming superior German forces. A strong command staff kept the unit together and provided the leadership necessary to hold out until the German “noose” could be eradicated. This was accomplished without their divisional commander who was back in Washington addressing manpower concerns with General Marshall. Many of the airborne troops at Bastogne were support elements such as supply, cooks, administrative and medical. When necessary these men took up arms and were involved in combat because of the attrition rate that the parachute infantry had been suffering. Combat and weather took its toll of troops, both American and German. For many of the men at Bastogne the last time that they fired a weapon, it was a .03 Springfield rifle and had to be educated on the spot concerning the finer points of the M1 Garand.

It has been discussed many times and proven that in the case of the 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group the unit had been used as a gamble that failed. The calculated risk is not a new axiom in this respect. However once the trap had been sprung and the Germans burst out from behind the Schnee Eifel like thousands of ants it was the responsibility of the overall commander on the spot to hold fast and make a stand with whatever resources he had available to him. Devine utilized the groups mobility to initiate several withdrawals even though in many cases contact with the enemy had not been established. That same mobility could have been used to further delay the German advance in the Losheim-Manderfeld sector. As had already been described, the road net in the Ardennes supports the defender especially during the winter months. The 18<sup>th</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> Squadrons were ready, able and willing to conduct a defense in the classic cavalry tradition, albeit mechanized.

If a commanding officer miscalculates an enemy or misinterprets an order the misfortune usually trickles down through his command to the enlisted man, occasionally with deadly results.

When the reputation of a commander is destroyed, so goes the unit that he commands. All surviving ranks will live with this burden, possibly for the rest of their lives. History is not kind in this respect. Regardless of the bloodshed or heroics displayed the final verdict usually leaves a negative imprint.

It is one thing for a commanding officer to be responsible to train and lead a unit in a campground setting. It is quite another set of circumstances to lead men in combat. To make quick decisions under confusing conditions. An officers training and background play a large role in this process. However some men are simply born to undertake this difficult responsibility, others are not. To put it simplistically, they just don't have what it takes. The following excerpt from a letter from 1/Lt. Edward Schnee, Liaison Officer of the 18th Squadron to Captain John Walker, commanding officer of C Troop reveals some insight into the lack of respect and confidence most of the officers and men felt towards Colonel Devine. "Everyone (I think) is happy about the officer who replaced Devine. Colonel Smith is a hell of a good trade I'd say. Sorry Damon didn't get it but things don't always work out like everyone wants them. He still has Deerskin".<sup>2</sup>

In spite of his many faults and shortcomings Colonel Devine knew cavalry tactics and the limitations as well. He realized that there was no way for his two squadrons to offer any solid resistance in the wake of the German offensive. With no apparent reinforcements arriving and the lack of interest from Major General Jones of the 106<sup>th</sup> Division Devine took it upon himself to extricate his units from possible destruction. Devine found himself in a very difficult situation which can be common in a battle of movement with little or no communication. He used his own initiative and history has not been sympathetic to him for it. However to this day many of his men agree that aside from his many deficiencies he saved many of their lives. After the groups withdrawal from the Ardennes Colonel Devine was replaced by Colonel Lawrence G. Smith. Smith had been transferred from the 5<sup>th</sup> Armored Division where he commanded a combat command. Smith took over the group on January 3, 1945. Smith graduated from West Point in 1920 as a Lieutenant of Cavalry. While at West Point he established himself as an exceptional athlete and horseman. He also gained the reputation as one of the cavalry's foremost polo players. Lawrence Smith initially served as an observer with the British 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group and was eventually transferred to the 5<sup>th</sup> Armored Division. Colonel Smith placed Captain Wendell Broadus, formerly the Communications Officer of the 18<sup>th</sup> Squadron as Damon's executive officer. He shifted Major James Faris to S-4 at group headquarters which was a vacancy created by moving Major L. L. Lee to S-2 duties after Major James Worthington had been selected as Colonel Smith's executive officer. Smith commanded the group in the counterattack against the Germans as well as the final drive into Germany.

At this point one can only speculate as to why a group commander was not selected from the headquarters group or either of the squadrons. It was obvious that Lt. Colonel Damon felt, almost expected to be named as Devine's replacement. After all prior to Dugan's return to

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<sup>2</sup> Letter dated January 6, 1945. From the collection of Laura Slinkard, daughter of John Walker.

headquarters at Poteau, Damon did hold temporary command of the group. However Lt. Colonel Paul Ridge of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Squadron held this position as well. An examination from the top of the command chain would begin with the group executive officer Lt. Colonel Augustine D. Dugan. Dugan had been admired and was the group's corner stone from the morning of December 16. When Colonel Devine could no longer command, Dugan took control at the pivotal Poteau battle, reorganized the confused squadrons into a task force poised to head back east to restore positions at Recht and Born. Unfortunately Dugan was out of the picture by the end of the day on December 18.

Considering these facts, it possibly made sense to fill the group's commanding officer position from outside of the unit. Lt. Colonel Damon had much experience as a squadron commander and had this role since the unit's conception in 1943. Major John Kracke eventually took command of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Squadron. The only other obvious candidate for that slot would have been Major James L. Mayes, the squadron S-3.

The fact that Colonel Devine married the daughter of a staff officer is possibly the reason why he was not immediately shipped back to the United States in disgrace. It is also possible that the fact that he was evacuated as a non battle casualty he avoided the embarrassment and career damaging sacking that many commanders fear. He was eventually assigned to the support section of the 13<sup>th</sup> Armored Division and retired in the late 1940's. Records also indicate that he was awarded the permanent rank of Colonel on March 11, 1948 and apparently retired with this rank. It is believed that Colonel Devine eventually passed away in Washington D.C. sometime in 1952.<sup>3</sup> Colonel Lawrence Smith retired in 1954 after 34 years of service. His awards include the Legion of Merit, the Bronze Star, D.S. Order of Great Britain and the French Legion of Honor and the Croix de Guerre.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with George Gudfin, 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group Liaison Officer.