

A Tribute to the U.S. Cavalry



"Old Bill"



Of the many fine artists who turned their talents to portraying the great American West, Frederic Remington came perhaps closest to being the United States Cavalry's own. The noted artist contributed materially to the enduring historical record of our western frontier and the Cavalry was a major subject of his pen and brush.

This facet of his work brought Remington single recognition from the mounted fraternity during the 1890s when the United States Cavalry Association, professional society of the mobile arm, and the publishers of the famous Cavalry journal awarded him a life membership.

Several years later Remington took occasion to show his appreciation of this honor. In his gesture lies the story spanning half a century and holding elements of genuine interest for the collector, the historian, the artist, and the soldier.

In 1898 Remington visited the camp of the 3rd Cavalry at Tampa, Florida where the regiment was staging for the Santiago campaign. The artist, on his way to cover the war in Cuba for Harper's Weekly, was a close friend of Captain Francis H. Hardie, commanding Troop G of the 3rd.

During his visit, Remington's attention was drawn to one of the troop's noncommissioned officers, Sergeant John Lannen. A superb rider and an imposing figure, Lannen impressed Remington as the epitome of the cavalryman. With Hardie's approval, the artist made several rough sketches of the white-haired, white-mustached noncommissioned officer in front of the troop commander's tent.

From these roughs Remington later executed the now-famous drawing portraying a cavalryman mounted on his horse and with a carbine cradled in his arms. This he presented to the Cavalry Association in 1902. In January 1903, this drawing first appeared on the cover of the Cavalry Journal. And there it stayed for forty years.

Always a branch of great esprit and highly conscious of history and tradition, the Cavalry took the Remington masterpiece to its heart. Somewhere through the years it picked up the label "Old Bill" and became a sort of symbol, so that, although it was shouldered off the front cover of the Cavalry Journal in mid-1942, and was displaced in turn from the back cover of the successor Armored Cavalry Journal in late 1948, it appears to this day on the masthead page of ARMOR-continuation magazine of the mounted arm- as a trademark of mobility in war.

What of the man who served as model for the Remington sketch? At the time he posed, Sergeant John Lannen was approaching thirty years of service and anticipating retirement. The blue-eyed, ruddy-complected soldier was held in high esteem by his officers as an outstanding noncommissioned officer-loyal, a stern disciplinarian, but with unfailing good humor under trying conditions. Hardie pictured him a "strikingly handsome soldier, a gallant man and a noncommissioned officer of the old-fashioned kind whose orders were always obeyed."

Frederic Remington certainly has captured all of this in "Old Bill" and the result is an effective personification of the mounted soldier.

Fate was not to grant Sergeant Lannen the opportunity to enjoy a well-deserved retirement, nor would it be his destiny, when his time arrived, to fall gloriously on the field of battle. At the end of a campaign and of the eve of his retirement, he succumbed in Cuba, along with many of his comrades, to yellow fever.

But if the manner of the veteran noncommissioned officer's passing was something of less that heroic, he left a legacy in compensation. Everything he represented- a man, a soldier, a service-lives on after him, immortalized in the work of Frederic Remington...

Author Unknown