



The Last of the Best

By Robert E. Keiss

Cheyenne Parade, Battery Gun Section. The white mule is the famous "Hamobne"

In the spring of 1954, I found myself driving from Oklahoma to Colorado. Having spent the prior three months at the Army Artillery School at Fort Sill, I was on my way to my first duty assignment in the army. I was assigned to Battery A 4th field Artillery Battalion, Mule Pack at Fort Carson, Colorado. I had no idea what to expect and little did I know that this would be a one of a kind assignment.

Having received my orders prior to leaving Fort Sill, I had a chance to investigate the mule pack artillery. I soon

learned that Battery A was the only battery left in the 4th Field Artillery Battalion and was accompanied by the 35th Quarter Master Mule Pack Company. These two animal units operated out of Fort Carson near Colorado Springs and Camp Hale located near Leadville, Colorado.

My biggest question was, "How did I ever get an assignment to an animal unit?" I remembered that as I was filling out my army papers, I had indicated having experience with ranch work and

breaking and training horses. I also listed my experience as a member of National Ski Patrol. I figured the guy at the Pentagon making assignments of school graduates was the same one that assigned John (Jack) Frost to a duty station in Iceland.

Historically these animal units were used during the Indian Wars and deployed in many major campaigns in World War I and World War II. An excellent history of the mule in military operations has been researched by Dr. Milton Bradley and

published in his book, The Missouri Mule, His Origin and Times. This work by Dr. Bradley chronicles the military horses and mules of the past and present, and includes extensive references to their role in military history. In his section on chapter highlights, Dr. Bradley states, "Some historians claim that no horse Calvary or mules were used in World War II." He then makes reference to more than one hundred citations about their extensive use in at least ten campaigns in World War II. Included in the book are many

pictures of animals and their handlers in conflict. The book covers years of animal use from their beginning to the deactivation parade of the last animal unit in 1956.

With my assignment to the mule pack artillery in 1954, little did I know that the next two years would be spent with the last animal unit in the U.S. Army. At the urging of friends to relate some of the experiences of these last two years, I offer the following narration.

Upon arrival at a newly assigned duty station, it is customary for any new officer

to report to the commanding officer. Upon entering the battery headquarters, I requested to meet the commanding officer but was told, "Sorry, Sir, but the C.O. hasn't been here for the last twelve months. He is on "temporary duty" with the army pistol team traveling the world, and isn't expected to be back." I then met the staff and began to settle into a normal routine and to become familiar with the mule pack units.

There were several hundred animals and a professional group of career mili-



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tary men there. Many of them had been assigned to animal units since World War II. They ranked as non-commissioned officers and warrant officers and had many years of experience in the use and care of horses and mules. I regretted not having a tape recorder to record their many unusual stories and experiences they had in various campaigns in World War II. A number of these individuals had taken part in the China Burma Campaign and the Mars Task Force.

To properly set the stage for a discussion of a mule pack organization, I quote from the Field Manual FM 25-7 Pack Transportation dated August 25, 1944. "Mission: The mission of Pack Transportation is to transport loads on the backs of animals over terrain which is difficult for or impossible to wheeled or track-laying vehicles. Its success depends largely upon the careful selection and training of personnel and pack animals. The employment of correct packing and march techniques is essential."

Pack transportation units are of three distinct types: Cargo Pack Trains operated by Quartermaster Corps; Artillery Combat Pack Units transporting artillery

pieces and the Horse Cavalry. Cargo pack trains and artillery combat units use mules and Cavalry uses either mules or horses. Pack transportation units are not organized, trained or equipped to operate on roads, highways, deserts, or in deep snow. When moving in mountainous terrain, the pack mule may be expected to travel twenty miles a day, carrying a load of 250 pounds, but the distance should be reduced to 10-15 miles per day. Loaded pack mules are usually able to travel anywhere a man can walk without using his hands for support.

The primary purpose of the Pack Artillery Battery was to transport the 75 mm pack Howitzer into battle and position it where the weapon could be fired to support infantry in areas where there were no roads or other means to move heavy equipment. Each battery was made up of four separate gun sections and everything necessary to support the operation of the section. Each gun section consisted of seven mules. The Howitzer broke down into six separate loads and an extra mule was used to carry the tools necessary to operate the Howitzer. The Howitzer loads weighed about 250 pounds each and were

carried by an individual mule led by a handler on foot. These individual gun section handlers were very competitive to see which one could unload and set up the howitzer the quickest. A well trained and coordinated section could accomplish this in about two minutes. The same procedure in reserve was practiced in loading the howitzer on the mules and march away.

In addition to the gun sections, each battery had a whole cadre of mules which were used to carry the necessary equipment to support the men and mules. These animals carried the kitchen mess equipment; all the personal belongings of the soldiers; tents; stoves; tools for saddles and harness maintenance; as well as the feed and forage for the animals.

During the winter of 1953-1954 the pack units had been assigned to Camp Hale and returned to Fort Carson for the spring and summer months. Camp Hale is located in the high Colorado mountains near Leadville (two miles above sea level.) Camp Hale was constructed in 1942 for the purpose of training ski troops and was the home of the 10th Mountain Division. The terrain was very mountain-

ous and serves well for training troops in skiing, rock climbing, combat and use of animals.

In the construction of Camp Hale, the specifications called for accommodations to support in excess of 22,000 military personnel and 11,000 animals. The animals necessitated stables, corrals, hay storage, blacksmith shops, saddle shops and more. This was no small operation and reflected the importance of using mules and horses in the overall mission of the camp in preparing army units for use in World War II.

After the pack units returned to Fort Carson, they settled into a routine of training and preparation for summer operations. The battery made several trips to the artillery firing range at Fort Carson to train in live fire exercises and spend several days camping out. Most of the efforts went into "spit and polish" in preparation for the many public appearances in and around Colorado. Many of the parade committees and organizations in the area would invite the mule packers to appear in their parades. This made the parades unique as few people had ever seen the spectacle of the mules before. The Color Guard was in demand to lead off the parades and were often accompanied by the Fort Carson Band. The gun sections were lead down the parade route as well as the 35th Quarter Master Company. Gun mules were led by personnel on foot while the Quartermaster mules were deployed in lead lines. Lead lines consisted of two riding mules about 20 feet apart, with two ropes running between and the lead riding mule and the last riding mule on each side of the saddles. The pack mules loaded with packs were tied at intervals between the two ropes in single file and were trained to follow the mule in front of it. Usually four lead lines were used and the mules were marched along in a group. This maneuver required a great deal of coordination between the lead riding mule and the rear-riding mule, to keep all of the animals under control. In some conditions the pack mules could be tied head to tail in long lines. This procedure worked well under certain conditions but not in a parade situation.

In early summer, for some strange reason, someone in the 5th Army Headquarters and the Cheyenne, Wyoming Frontier Days Organization committee came up with a grand idea. It would be spectacular for the Mule Pack



Camp Hale, gun section unloading weapon

Units stationed at Fort Carson to make an appearance at Frontier Days and the last week of July. The big question was, "How do we get several hundred mules, men, non-coms, and officers plus equipment to Cheyenne?" The answer was, "Have them march!" The wheels were set in motion and it was decided that the 4th FA BN and 35th QM Pack Company would walk to

Cheyenne (approximately 225 miles one way). The march was to take the majority of the summer as it would take ten full days march each way and then ten days at Cheyenne for Frontier Days which could be a ten day vacation!

The personnel in the Army, as everyone realizes, turns over with soldiers coming in, finishing their duty time and then

being discharged. The rank and file of the mule units were sadly depleted at this time, as we were not high on the essential list of the 40th Field Artillery group. The units were down to almost a skeleton crew necessary to care for animals. Since the Cheyenne trip was mandated by 5th Army it got the attention of the “high brass”. A call went out to each battalion commander in the 40th Artillery group with orders that they were to select a few good men to be assigned to the mule pack units.

As any good commander knows this is an open invitation to transfer “problem” personnel out of their hair. As a result we had all of these new “recruits” transferred

the animals by grooming, feeding and watering. In preparation for the march to Cheyenne it was mandatory that all of the men and animals be conditioned to march day after day in the heat of the July sun. A number of the young men learned how hard it was to take care of the mules on a twenty-mile walk after they had been in a local bar the night before. This was a rough way to cure a hangover.

The non-coms did an excellent job to bring all of the personnel into a cohesive unit that could be counted on to get the job accomplished. A great deal of coordination and planning was necessary to bring all of the various components together. This included the kitchen mess, personal equipments and belongings,

march progress. We had a great deal of media coverage.

In Cheyenne the animal units were accommodated by Frances C. Warren Air Force Base, which is located on the west side of Cheyenne. Fort Warren was an old cavalry post established in 1867. The fort was established to protect the transcontinental railroad construction and served in the Indian Wars. In 1958 Fort Warren was taken over by the air force and became the headquarters to manage ICBM missiles in Colorado, Wyoming and Nebraska. Since the post was established for cavalry, many of the barns and corrals were still in place and served the needs of our animal units very well. Accommodations were well suited for the men as they were billeted in



“On the march,”

35th QM in foreground. These mules are in a “Lead Line”

into our unit. Very few had ever seen a mule before or knew anything about handling one. The weeks leading up to our departure date were very interesting. To start with, none of the men had ever worn boots and britches, which were the official uniform of animal unit personnel. Just learning to walk with spurs on the heels of their boots without tripping required some practice. Many of these men were afraid of the animals and were stepped on or clobbered by a swift kick from an irritated mule.

The non-commissioned officers took charge and under the circumstances did a masterful job to get these young Americans ready to serve in an animal unit. They were trained to saddle the mules, pack the various loads and care for

service personnel to handle equipment repairs, saddle shop, blacksmith shop, as well as all of the hay, grain and water needed.

The route from Fort Carson to Cheyenne had to be determined and the bivouacked areas secured in various towns along the route of the march. Most of the camping areas were municipal parks or county fairgrounds that could accommodate the animal units. This exercise of setting up camps was rather unique and each evening attracted many people who came out to see the large number of animals and men. It was a new experience for viewers to watch an operation like this. One of the local radio stations in Denver sent their roving reporter to join the march and gave a blow by blow coverage of the daily

existing barracks and had good mess hall facilities. Officers were billeted in fine old homes that had served as housing for base officers in the past.

The stay in Cheyenne was centered around the Frontier Days Celebration. Our schedule included appearances in three parades through downtown Cheyenne and two daily appearances in the rodeo. The grand entry was made by our men and animals including the color guard and at least one gun section. The gun section entered the arena with each mule led by a handler. The Howitzer was unloaded and then assembled and fired to start the Star Spangled Banner. After the opening ceremony was completed, the howitzer was reloaded onto the mules and they were led from the arena. On one very

nice warm day, we had a full contingent of all the battery gun sections, and all of the 34th QM Company with all the riders mounted, and four lead lines of mules. The color guard was patiently waiting and the animals were settled into a relaxed state of napping. This was a special appearance as the Commanding General and staff of the 5th army was in attendance for the rodeo performance. In addition to the animal units, the Fort Carson Band, Drum and Bugle Corps with bagpipes, was waiting to make the grand entry "very special." The scene was one of lethargic contentment, as we all were waiting for what seemed an eternity. Suddenly the drums hit a loud bang, the bagpipes screeched, and the bugles let out a blast! Every mule jumped up simultaneously and it was hectic herd panic! The animals bolted in all directions. Handlers holding the artillery carrying mules managed to keep them under reasonable control. The lead line mules panicked and many of them stepped over the lead lines and became entangled into a mass of ropes, mules, packs, etc. After the pandemonium settled down, it required a half hour to get the animals and equipment

sorted out but the show did go on!

After ten days of parades and rodeos, the units were ready to hit the road and head back to Fort Carson. The trip back was about the same as the trip up to Cheyenne except that we took a different route and visited many of the towns along the Front Range of Colorado. Arrival back at the base in Fort Carson was welcomed by all and we soon settled into our routine of maintenance and getting ready to move the animal units back to Camp Hale for the coming fall and winter. The men, assigned on temporary duty for the Cheyenne trip, were transferred back to their units so that our units were not at full strength but were adequate to care for the animals. The move to Camp Hale was carried out by hauling the mules by truck from Fort Carson to Camp Hale and went off without complications.

After World War II had come to an end, Camp Hale was deactivated and most of the buildings were removed. Living accommodations were not the same as they were in previous years. The barns were removed and new corrals were constructed for our mules but they didn't have the comfort of barns or sheds. The personnel were accommodated in James

Ways, which were designed for arctic living. They consisted of a quonset hut but were covered with thick insulated fabric instead of metal. Each could accommodate ten men and they were heated by an oil-burning stove at each end of the structure. There were no windows but they were relatively comfortable. The only buildings that we had were prefab types that served for the mess hall and battery officers, and day room. The only building left from the old days was the 18,000 square foot field house, which provided recreational activities for the men. It was said that our basketball team could beat any team in the country on our home court. This was because the altitude there was two miles above sea level and required very good conditioning to run up and down the court.

In late October, the weather took a turn for the worst, which was a preview of what was in store for us for the rest of the winter. It snowed for two months without quitting. By December the accumulation was approaching three to four feet and kept coming down. The annual snowfall is 13.6 feet. The animals and men settled into a routine. Taking care of horses and mules facing relatively harsh conditions



"Trail march"

This is the type of terrain that the mule pack was intended to work in.

with the snow and cold every day and night required constant attention. The unit veterinarian had to keep close watch over the animals and every effort was made to insure proper diet and adequate water. Hoof care was especially emphasized because of the exposure to constant snow and ice as they were standing.

The primary mission of Camp Hale during the winter months was the training of Special Forces Troops (Green Berets). Cross-country traveling on skis and snowshoes was a good part of their survival training. The men were also trained in the construction and use of snow caves and bow shelters, which served as protection from the elements and offered overnight shelters when necessary for survival.

Training in animal care and packing as well as the use of artillery support firepower in combat situations was also included.

On one occasion a group of several hundred Special Forces Troops were coming to Camp Hale for training. It was suggested that since the soldiers were air born qualified it would be different if they were flown in and deployed in a drop zone near Camp Hale. Whoever came up with the plan neglected to check the zone for snow depth. As it turned out the snow was four to five feet in the drop zone and at an altitude of 10,580 feet. These troops were in full battle gear including weapons. When they landed in the deep snow it was their responsibility to gather

their parachutes and make their way to the nearest road where transportation to camp was waiting. Between the deep snow, high altitude and heavy equipment load, it was a harsh welcome to the Colorado Rockies. Many of the soldiers were a mile or more from the road and they were exhausted by the time they were picked up. They were a tough bunch of guys and came through this welcome and finished the tour of duty at Camp Hale in fine military tradition.

The Mule Pack Artillery and Quartermaster Pack units were limited in their ability to function in these extreme snow depth conditions. We could use unsaddled mules to break trail but even then they were limited to how far they could travel. We often marched to the top of Tennessee Pass where we could bulldoze the snow to make space for mules and tents. This required the use of D-8 caterpillar tractors and I often wondered if the "cats" could make it up there why did we need mules to carry the Howitzer? This area was the firing range for the artillery pieces and on occasion we could set up and live fire our Howitzers.

The Army had developed a new weapon: the 105 mm mortar. This was an adaption to the classic 105 mm Howitzer which was used extensively for many years in numerous military operations. The planners were looking for new uses for this weapon and someone came up with the idea that perhaps it could be transported via mules.

In response we received several of these new weapons and our packsaddle specialists went to work designing the hangers and clamps to attach these weapons to the Philips Pack Saddle. These mortars break down into the base plate, barrel and some accessories. The tube was no problem to adapt to the packsaddle but the base plate was about 4x4 feet square and very heavy. The challenge was that it had to be carried on top of the saddle where the center of gravity was high over the animal's back. It had the tendency to rock back and forth as the mule walked causing considerable problems of stability and was very hard on the mules' back. They had a test exercise where we packed the weapons to the top of Tennessee Pass and were going to fire live ammunition. Everything went as planned until the gunners unpacked the ammo rounds and small pieces of metal fell out of the shell canisters onto the ground. These tests were under the watch-

ful eyes of the ordinance people and they were alarmed with what they saw. These small pieces were the bore-riding safety pins. They were not supposed to come loose until the round was fired and cleared the end of the barrel at which time the round was armed, a very dangerous situation. The mortars and ammo were quickly rounded up, packed away in trucks, and that was the last time we ever saw the 105 mm mortar.

In general our winter in Camp Hale was spent fighting the elements. Those of us who enjoyed skiing spent many hours at this endeavor. Spring began to warm things up and it was time for the mules, horses, and men to return to their home base at Fort Carson. We soon learned that since we had such a great time and experience the previous year at Cheyenne Frontier Days, we could do it all over again! The second trip was similar to the first and we spent most of the summer of 1956 traveling to and from Cheyenne, Wyoming.

One highlight of the return trip occurred when we bivouacked at Colorado A&M College in Fort Collins (now CSU). A few years previously as a student at A&M, I had become friends with retired colonel, Elwood Nye. He was an old army veterinarian who spent most of his military career in animal unit service. Colonel Nye was on faculty at A&M at the time we made our visit. While we were setting up our bivouac area, I saw the Colonel standing by watching the action. I approached him, reintroduced myself, and I observed a sense of nostalgia across the old Colonel's face. I took him on a personal tour of the area, introduced him to the officers and staff and invited him to join us for lunch. We spent a very enjoyable afternoon reminiscing about older times. Later I returned to A&M for graduate work and whenever I saw Colonel Nye, he would always talk about that summer afternoon.

After arriving back at Fort Carson, many of our temporarily assigned men returned to their respective units and we concentrated on getting ready for our return to Camp Hale. During this time our major and two captains were reassigned to other duties leaving three 1st lieutenants in charge. I was one of these lieutenants and I had date of rank over the other two, which gave the job of battery commander to me. At the age of 25 I was

the "Old Man".

As we settled back into our normal routine, what occurred in the following weeks made me a unique person in military history. One beautiful fall day while we were in the battery area, a big black limousine pulled up by the mule barns. The occupants stayed a few minutes and then drove away. We learned later that this was the Under Secretary of the Army and the top Brass of 5th Army on an inspection tour.

The Secretary was quoted as asking, "What the hell are these?"

The answer was, "These are the mules of the Mule Pack Artillery and 35th Quartermaster Pack Company."

His next question was, "What do we need them for?"

No sufficient answer was forth coming, and several weeks later orders came down from the Department of the Army to disband the two units.

Time had finally caught up with the last animal units of the Army. The helicopter was coming into its own and occupied an ever increasing importance in the military. Just one attack helicopter has more firepower than several battalions of mule pack artillery firing 75mm rounds. A helicopter when not in use can be parked in a hanger and does not require food or water 24-7. This was an end of a long and glorious era in military history, going all the way back to the Continental Army and every military encounter between. I was the last unit commander of an animal unit

in the U.S. Army.

On December 15, 1956, the deactivation parade was held on the parade grounds at Fort Carson and the colors were cased for the last time. My military tour of duty was finished around the same time so I was not involved in the process of turning in all of the equipment. The first question asked is, "What did the Army do with all the horses and mules?" Rumor has it that several pet food processors were salivating over the prospect of purchasing all these animals for obvious reasons.

The Army, to its credit, decided that no one person or entity could purchase more than two animals. This put the pet food companies out of the running. The Forest Service took some of the mules for their use and a number were purchased by the Al Kaly Shrine Club for their parade unit in Colorado Springs. Many of the animals were used by the base recreation group as riding mules for recreation purposes. Several of the horses were sent to Fort Meyers, Virginia for use in the military funerals at Arlington National Cemetery. Two of the more famous mules, "Trotter" and "Hambone", were assigned to West Point for duty in the Honor Guard and as mascots for the Cadets. Some of the chief warrant officers were assigned to Fort Meyers and finished out their military careers there.

The Unit Motto of the 4th Field Artillery Battalion Pack was, "THE LAST OF THE BEST." This surely was "The Last of the Best".



Fort Carson - Pass in Review

Note: the author, Robert E. Keiss is the one who is saluting in the photo.

