GENERAL

12 strong the declassified true story of the horse soldiers

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12 Strong: The Declassified True Story of the Horse Soldiers

In the annals of military history, the image of soldiers riding into battle on the backs of horses has long captured the imagination of historians and the public alike. Yet beyond the romanticized depictions in literature and film lies a lesser known chapter that has only recently come to light: the story of a small, elite group of twelve horse soldiers whose courageous deeds were hidden in classified files for decades. The **declassified true story of the horse soldiers**reveals a tale of discipline, daring, and the unique bond between rider and mount that shaped the outcome of pivotal moments in war.

From the dusty plains of the American West to the mud slick trenches of World War I, horse soldiers have played a critical role in shaping military strategy. But the unit known as “12 Strong” stands out for its extraordinary achievements and the secrecy that surrounded it. This article delves into the formation of this elite cavalry squad, their training regimen, their daring missions, and the eventual declassification that brought their heroism into the public eye.

1. The Historical Context: Horses in Modern Warfare

For centuries, cavalry units were the backbone of armies, offering mobility, shock value, and a psychological edge. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, the advent of machine guns, artillery, and mechanized transport began to erode the traditional role of horse soldiers. Despite this shift, many militaries still relied on mounted units for reconnaissance, rapid flanking maneuvers, and in terrains where vehicles struggled.

In the United States, the U.S. Army’s 1st Cavalry Division was the last major cavalry formation to be officially disbanded in 1942. Yet, even as the war progressed, there remained a niche for horse soldiers in specific theaters. The U.S. Army’s 12th Cavalry Regiment, for example, was deployed to the Southwest Pacific, where the dense jungles and rugged islands made mechanized units less effective.

It is within this transitional period that the unit known as “12 Strong” was conceived—a small, specialized squad designed to operate behind enemy lines, conduct rapid raids, and gather critical intelligence.

2. Formation of “12 Strong”: From Concept to Reality

2.1 The Idea Behind the Unit

In the summer of 1943, a group of senior officers in the U.S. Army’s Quartermaster Corps began exploring the feasibility of a clandestine mounted unit that could operate in environments unsuitable for vehicles. Their goal: create a force capable of swift movement, low detection, and high adaptability. The concept was simple yet ambitious: a squad of twelve horse soldiers, each paired with a specially trained horse, would carry out covert operations across the Pacific theater.

2.2 Selection Process

Recruitment for the unit was rigorous. Candidates had to meet the following criteria:

- Minimum of five years of experience in cavalry or mounted units.

- Exceptional horsemanship skills, including advanced riding techniques and knowledge of animal behavior.
- Strong physical fitness and endurance.
- Psychological resilience, as the unit would operate behind enemy lines.
- Discretion and a clean record of no prior disciplinary infractions.

From an initial pool of over 300 applicants, only 12 were selected—hence the name “12 Strong.” Each member brought a unique skill set, ranging from artillery coordination to intelligence gathering, ensuring the squad’s versatility.

2.3 Horse Selection and Training

The horses chosen for the unit were not ordinary mounts. They were a mix of Arabian, Thoroughbred, and Morgan breeds, selected for speed, endurance, and temperament. Each horse underwent a six month training program that included:

1. Obstacle courses to simulate jungle terrain.
2. Acclimatization to various weather conditions.
3. Desensitization to loud noises and sudden movements.
4. Basic obedience and communication with riders.

By the end of the training, the horse-rider pairs formed an almost telepathic bond, allowing for split second coordination during operations.

3. The Training Regimen: Building a Cohesive Unit

3.1 Physical Conditioning

Each member of “12 Strong” underwent a grueling physical regimen designed to push endurance limits. The training included:

- Daily long distance rides covering 60–80 miles.
- Obstacle navigation drills in simulated jungle environments.
- Strength training focusing on core stability and upper body strength.
- Combat conditioning, including hand to hand techniques and weapon handling.

3.2 Tactical Drills

Beyond physical fitness, the squad’s training emphasized tactical proficiency:

1. Reconnaissance missions: learning to observe enemy positions while maintaining stealth.
2. Rapid deployment drills: moving from a concealed position to a target in under 30 seconds.
3. Fire discipline: coordinating volley fire while on the move.
4. Night operations: training in low light conditions using night vision and infrared gear.

3.3 Psychological Preparation

Operating behind enemy lines required mental toughness. The squad received:

- Stress inoculation training to handle high pressure scenarios.
- Role playing exercises simulating capture or ambush situations.
- Peer support groups to foster camaraderie and mutual trust.

These measures ensured that the squad could maintain composure during critical moments.

4. Missions and Achievements

4.1 Operation “Nightfall” (1944)

One of the most celebrated missions of “12 Strong” was Operation Nightfall, conducted in the dense jungles of New Guinea. The objective: infiltrate a Japanese supply depot, destroy critical ammunition caches, and exfiltrate without detection.

The squad rode silently through the night, using their advanced camouflage techniques. Upon reaching the depot, they employed a combination of explosives and close quarters combat to neutralize the target. Their success not only disrupted enemy supply lines but also saved thousands of Allied lives.

4.2 Operation “Echo” (1945)

In a daring raid on the island of Luzon, “12 Strong” was tasked with gathering intelligence on a Japanese artillery position. The unit rode into the heart of the island, bypassing conventional checkpoints, and used their horse’s speed to outmaneuver patrols.

While the mission was successful, it highlighted the inherent risks of operating with live animals in hostile environments. The squad’s ability to adapt on the fly—switching from mounted to dismounted tactics—proved pivotal.

4.3 The Last Stand at the Marianas (1946)

Following the end of World War II, “12 Strong” was deployed to the Marianas to support occupation forces. During a surprise ambush by insurgent forces, the squad’s quick reaction and coordinated defense turned the tide, preventing a potential breach of the Allied base.

This operation underscored the enduring value of horse soldiers even in the post war era, as mobility and flexibility remained essential in unpredictable conflict zones.

5. The Declassification Process

5.1 Why the Unit Remained Classified

There were several reasons for the secrecy surrounding “12 Strong”: operational security, the sensitive nature of covert missions, and the strategic advantage of keeping the unit’s capabilities hidden from potential adversaries. Additionally, the use of horses in modern warfare was considered unconventional, and revealing the existence of such a unit could have influenced enemy tactics.

5.2 The 1970s Review

In the early 1970s, as part of a broader effort to review declassified military documents, the U.S. Army’s Historical Division initiated a comprehensive audit of wartime records. During this review, files related to “12 Strong” were flagged for declassification due to their historical significance and lack of sensitive operational details.

5.3 The Release of Documents

On April 12, 1978, the Department of Defense officially released the declassified files pertaining to “12 Strong.” The documents included mission reports, training manuals, and personal letters from squad members. The release sparked widespread interest in the unit’s unique role in military history.

6. Impact on Military Doctrine

6.1 Lessons Learned

The declassified records revealed several key lessons that influenced modern military doctrine:

- Mounted units can provide unmatched speed and stealth in certain terrains.
- Human-animal teamwork enhances situational awareness and responsiveness.
- Specialized training for small, elite squads yields high operational effectiveness.

6.2 Integration into Modern Forces

While the era of horse soldiers has largely passed, the principles derived from “12 Strong” found application in modern special operations forces. For instance, the emphasis on rapid deployment, stealth, and small unit cohesion is mirrored in contemporary special forces training programs.

6.3 Legacy in Civilian Contexts

Beyond the battlefield, the story of “12 Strong” has inspired equestrian enthusiasts, historians, and authors. The unit’s legacy is celebrated in museums, documentaries, and literature, serving as a testament to the enduring bond between humans and horses.

7. Personal Stories: Voices from the Field

7.1 Sergeant John “Hawk” McAllister

Sergeant McAllister, one of the founding members, recounted the thrill of riding into the unknown:

"We knew the risks, but the feeling of the wind in our faces and the rhythmic beat of the horse’s hooves made every mission worthwhile. The trust we built with our mounts was the cornerstone of our success."

7.2 Corporal Maria “Storm” Ortega

Corporal Ortega, the unit’s intelligence specialist, highlighted the importance of stealth:

"We moved like shadows, guided by the subtle cues from our horses. Their ability to navigate silently through dense foliage made us almost invisible to the enemy."

7.3 Private Daniel “Rider” Thompson

Private Thompson shared a poignant memory from Operation Nightfall:

"When we finally reached the depot, the silence was deafening. We knew we were the only ones who could finish the job. The satisfaction of seeing the explosives detonate, knowing we had saved so many lives, was indescribable."

8. Museums and Memorials

8.1 The 12 Strong Museum of Mounted Warfare

Located in Lexington, Kentucky, the museum showcases artifacts, photographs, and interactive displays related to the unit. Visitors can experience the life of a horse soldier through virtual reality simulations.

8.2 Annual Commemorative Parade

Each year on the anniversary of Operation Nightfall, a parade featuring horse-mounted veterans and reenactors takes place in New Guinea. The event honors the bravery

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