

## Cav Hats

Football fans are likely aware that for the 2019 Army-Navy game, the West Point team was outfitted in uniforms that paid homage to our 1st Cavalry Division. A website that was set up to call attention to those uniforms included this picture:



Accompanying text says the tradition of the ‘Cav Hat’ began before the Vietnam War, when cavalry scout pilots looking to distinguish themselves from other troops adopted the Model 1876 campaign hat for wear. It further states that LTC John B. Stockton, commander of the division’s Air Cavalry Squadron [3-17 Cav, redesignated 1-9 Cav for deployment to Vietnam], is given credit for establishing the tradition of wearing the Cavalry Stetson, “much to the chagrin of the Division command group.” Today, Cav Hats are worn by many more units, inside and outside the 1st Cavalry Division, so the time is right to tell the story of its origins.

Sources for what follows are an article written by LTC (Ret) Bill Gillette for the March 2011 newsletter of the now-sadly-defunct Bullwhip Squadron Association, and an account attributed to COL Stockton himself that was reprinted in a *Bullwhip Squadron Reunion Booklet* compiled in 2000 by the late Bert Chole.

Bill Gillette’s article, “From the Waterdee to the Pee Dee,” is quoted below, edited for length:

The title of this article was taken from the operations of the 3-17th Air Cavalry Squadron during Air Assault II conducted by the 11th Air Assault Division in South and North Carolina in the fall of 1964. This was the final peacetime test of the air assault and air cavalry concepts. The next test was at An Khe. During this momentous exercise, the Air Cavalry Squadron validated its operational techniques and expertly trained its troops. Aside from the operational magnitude of the squadron's Air Assault II experience, there occurred another significant event in the annals of the U.S. Cavalry. The cavalry hat was reborn.

In the ensuing years I have heard with amusement several tales concerning the genesis of the current Cav Hat; through this article, I hope to set the record straight. Principal players in

the reincarnation were Lieutenant Colonel John B. Stockton (Squadron Commander), Major General Harry Kinnard (Division Commander), General Harold K. Johnson (Chief of Staff of the Army), and Captains Walter Harman and myself (Cavalrymen). The stage was a goat pasture on the shores of Wateree Pond and the time was November 1964.

After a period of intensive simulated combat, members of the squadron were authorized several days rest and recreation (R&R) on a staggered schedule. Since both Walt and I had wives at Fort Benning (our home station), we returned to the banks of the Chattahoochie for R&R. Walt went home a couple of days before me and must have rested quickly, for when I arrived, he was roaming around. His travels took him to the Fort Benning salvage store, where he found some olive drab, Montana-peak drill sergeant hats for sale [like this one]:



Having purchased some of these hats, Walt posted over to my quarters where we convened a planning session. It didn't take long for two dashing captains of Cavalry to decide that the motley specimens we held could be turned into the campaign hats of yesteryear. Initially there were three problems: the color of the hats, the shape of the hats, and the necessary hat cords to designate general officers, commissioned officers, warrant officers, and troopers by branch. The color problem resolved itself when we convinced our wives that some black dye could easily turn our hats black. This was not as simple a task as it first appeared. It took several dyeings before our hats attained the proper color, and of course the dye pot had to boil over in the kitchen once or twice. Walt and I thought a deploying action was called for as we were about to become decisively engaged on the home front, so we withdrew smartly in an effort to solve our remaining two problems.

In Phenix City across the Chattahoochie, we found an establishment that consented to block our hats into the prescribed shape. Not knowing how to solve the problem of hat cords, we conducted an area reconnaissance of Columbus. Somewhere in the back alleys of the city, I located the owner of a second-hand shop who had a drawer full of hat cords and didn't know what to do with them. A bargain was soon struck, and we were able to produce several specimens of what was to become the black cavalry hat.

Having reached the end of our R&R, Walt and I reported back to the squadron assembly area on the banks of Wateree Pond. Back in our troop area, we decided the best way to

propagate the black cavalry hats within the squadron would be to give our squadron commander one for his birthday, which would come to pass in the next couple of days.

The voice of the recipient now takes over the story. In “The Stuff of Which Legends are Born,” which appeared in Bert Chole’s *Reunion Booklet* in 2000, COL Stockton wrote:

Perhaps the most lasting achievement of our Jul 64-Dec 65 Bullwhip generation was the tradition which seems to have evolved during what started out to be an hour or two of fun and games the last afternoon of a three-day break for us on the Wateree Pond during the 1964 Carolina maneuvers.

As it happened, the last day of rest was also my 42nd birthday. Ever alert, CSM Kennedy got with his network of sources in the Squadron and came up with the idea of an impromptu surprise birthday celebration. Some of you may remember that Kennedy and a couple of his carpenter cohorts had built a shelter onto the bed of the command jeep’s quarter-ton trailer and painted it Army green. It looked like a camouflaged outhouse on wheels, but it served admirably the purpose of keeping rain off. Kennedy lured me into the trailer for some purpose and kept me there talking for about half an hour. When I poked my head outside, it seemed that maybe half the squadron had gathered in virtual silence around the CP trailer.

Looming out of the crowd was Bill Gillette, wearing the crudest World War I campaign hat known to man. It was kind of a slimy gray/green mottled color, the sweatband was virtually rotted out, and there was much evidence that moths had been hard at work on the felt for many years. With full ceremony, young Gillette presented me this monstrosity on behalf of his fellow troopers.

Strangely enough, for I have a long and narrow size 7 1/2 head, the old campaign hat fit me almost perfectly. I promptly put it on and suffered through the rest of my birthday surprise.

Just as we were breaking up to get back to duty there was a flurry out on the edge of the dispersing crowd, and who should heave into view but the Division CG himself, then-BG HWO Kinnard, in living color. I reported to him immediately, forgetful of my headgear. That was my first but far from my last run-in with military authorities about black hat-wearing.

We now switch back to Bill Gillette’s account:

Cavalry hat procurement went well until early spring of 1965, when we exhausted the supply of salvage hats at Fort Benning. That came as a welcome relief for our wives, who had to dye all of the hats, but it was good training for them because it wasn’t long before they had to dye our underwear green prior to our deployment to Vietnam. Notwithstanding the procurement problems, the demand for cavalry hats increased drastically. The deteriorating situation necessitated another planning conference. Walt Harman and I surmised that since the John B. Stetson Company had produced some of the salvage hats we used, they might be able to supply cavalry hats. I took a picture of my hat and sent it to the Stetson Company with our request. The response was outstanding: the sales manager of the Stetson Company agreed to supply the prescribed hat with cord at a reasonable price. Thus, the machinery was set for the resurrection of the cavalry hat.

As Bill Gillette noted, “the story of the reinstatement of the black cavalry hat would be incomplete if some of the earlier wearing difficulties were not included,” so he concluded his account as follows.

As the Squadron's hats became increasingly visible at Fort Benning, our Division Commander, General Kinnard, became more forceful in his objections to the wearing of cavalry hats. Not desiring to irritate our commander, we became very careful where we wore the hats. They were essentially relegated to wear in the field and the squadron area at Harmony Church (which was almost in the field). All went well until the squadron conducted a counter-insurgency exercise at Camp Shelby, Mississippi. Being in the field, we wore our cavalry hats. Evidently, while there, a news photographer took a picture of members of the squadron wearing black cavalry hats. The aftermath of the Camp Shelby publicity took place at Fort Benning one Sunday morning several weeks later. That was the day Colonel Stockton picked up the telephone and heard the following from the Chief of Staff of the Army: "Colonel, this is General Johnson. Don't you believe in the uniform I have prescribed for the Army?"

COL Stockton ended his account of the Cav Hat's origin, believed written in 1994, with these words:

The original black hat presented to me by Bill Gillette has been in my proud possession ever since that 7 Nov 64 event. As a function of this one-time-only Bullwhip Squadron reunion, I herewith present it to the Squadron for disposition as you collectively see fit.

An “Editor’s Note” in the 2000 *Reunion Booklet* says “This hat is on display in the First Cavalry Division Museum at Fort Hood, Texas.” The Cav Hat in the first photo above, taken from the Army-Navy game web site <https://firstteam.football/>, is believed to be that hat. (The campaign hat in the second photo was worn by the Scribe’s father-in-law, an Artilleryman before and during World War II.)



Cav Hats on Display

L-R: CSM Kennedy and then-LTC Stockton at the former's reenlistment, Camp Radcliff, Vietnam, 17 November 1965; LTC (R) Bill Gillette at Bullwhip Squadron Reunion, Fort Benning, Georgia, October 2010.