Gaius Julius Caesar took advantage of his German enemies' ferocity by enlisting them in his cavalry.

By Ludwig H. Dyck

The Roman cavalrymen shown at left in Lionel Royer's painting *Vercingetorix Throws His Arms at the Feet of Caesar* were probably Germanic tribesmen in Gaius Julius Caesar's service—the elite of his auxiliary horse.

**BY THE TURN OF THE FIRST century BC**, the cavalry of the Roman Republic was typically made up entirely of auxiliaries. In his Gallic campaigns, Gaius Julius Caesar relied heavily on several thousand horsemen levied from allied Gallic tribes and smaller numbers of Iberians. After he beat back German tribal intrusions into Gaul in 58 and 55 BC, Caesar further boosted his cavalry by enlisting 400 German mercenaries and former hostages. They bailed out his Gallic cavalry in 52 BC, when the latter ran into trouble against rebellious Gauls at the Battle of Noviodunum. Later that year, more Germans swelled his cavalry and light infantry ranks to about 1,000.

The fact that Caesar's former German foes were willing to fight for him is not too surprising. The retainers, or *comitatenses*, of a German chief were drawn not just from his own tribe but also from warriors who wandered the land in search of martial glory and plunder. To such men it did not matter if they served a German chief of a different tribe, a Gallic lord or even a Roman consul. Germans even served as bodyguards for Cleopatra VII of Egypt and Herod the Great in Judaea.

Caesar's Germans included the feared Suebi, the Usipetes and the Tenctheri. They were the tribes that Caesar had fought, but one might also see a Harii, who blackened his shield, dyed his body and preferred to fight in the dead of night, or an Aestii, who wore a protective emblem of the wild boar, symbol of the mother of the gods.

Caesar learned to respect the Teutonic warriors. When he fought them in 58, mere rumors spread by the Gauls of the valor, strength and martial skill of the
Suebi sent even battle-hardened legionaries into a panic. "All over the camp men were signing and sealing their wills," lamented Caesar. After all, half a century earlier the Germanic Cimbri and Teutoones had crushed four Roman armies before finally being defeated.

During the 55 BC campaign against the Usipetes and Tenctheri, Caesar's 5,000 Gallic cavalrymen were scattered by 800 Germans. Caesar wrote that "as warriors they are superior to the Gauls...they [the Gauls] do not even compare themselves in point of valor with the Germans," adding that even the "fierce glance of their eyes was more than they could endure." Caesar valued his German recruits so highly that he replaced their ponylike horses with the larger steeds of his bodyguard, tribunes and knights.

When fighting for Caesar, the Germans likely retained most of their native offensive tactic, a columnar or "boar's head" charge. Ostensibly carried out by a mass of enragéd berserkers, such an attack was calculated to break the enemy by its sheer ferocity, and was dubbed *Furore Teutonicus* by the Romans.

Like hounds of war, fleet infantrymen ran alongside the cavalrymen protecting the riders' flanks, coming to their rescue if they were dismounted or wounded. In a lengthy advance or retreat, they would hang onto the horse's mane to keep pace. The Germans' tough little steeds were well trained. At times the rider leapt off his mount to fight on foot, and in the chaos of battle, his horse would remain on the spot. How the Germans fared with Caesar's larger, faster steeds is unclear. Possibly they continued to use their ponies in most battles unless speed was important.

Even in Roman service, a German infantryman had little more than a wattle shield and an ash-wood spear with a point of bone or iron with which to protect himself. Horses were usually reserved for warriors of high merit. The hostages who joined Caesar in 55 BC were mostly chiefs and their attendants. Among such men, mail hauberks, helmets and swords were much more common, and others surely acquired such arms from war booty.

**INITIAL DISUNITY BETWEEN** the Gallic tribes allowed Caesar to defeat them piecemeal, but in 52 BC, the victory of the rebellious chief Vercingetorix at Gergovia enflamed a pan-Gallic uprising against the Roman overlords. Caesar's legions could still hold their own against the Gallic infantry, but with few of the Gallic tribes remaining loyal to him his deficiency in cavalry became critical, compelling him to hire additional Germans.

Forced onto the defensive, Caesar moved toward the threatened Roman province of Gallia Narbonensis. In early September, Vercingetorix sent his cavalry against the Roman column near what is now Dijon. The three-pronged attacks on their vanguard and flanks took the marching Romans by surprise, but Caesar's cavalry managed to keep the Gallic horse from overrunning their baggage train, while his legionaries formed a defensive square. The Germans, meanwhile, gained the summit of a nearby hill and then charged, driving a body of the attacking Gauls back upon Vercingetorix's nearby infantry. Alarmed at the rout of their comrades, the entire Gallic cavalry force took flight. Vercingetorix ordered a retreat toward the fortified stronghold of Alesia. Caesar immediately led his legions in pursuit, engaged the Gallic rear guard and inflicted up to 3,000 casualties. The battle completely reversed the course of the war. With the defeat of their cavalry arm, Gallic spirits sank, while Caesar regained the initiative.

Still, perched on a plateau and surrounded by hills and streams, Alesia seemed impervious to assault. Caesar decided to surround the city with two concentric 14-mile-long rings of earthworks, ditches, ramparts, spikes, stakes, covered pits, forts and camps. The inner ring, the line of contravallation, faced Alesia's defenders, while the outer, the line of circumvallation, protected the Romans from anticipated relief forces. Barely had the siege begun in late September when Vercingetorix's cavalry assaulted Caesar's horsemen, presumably to reduce the Romans' foraging capability. Perceiving that his auxiliary Gallic and Spanish cavalry were taking the worst of it, Caesar unleashed his Germans and drew up his legions for support, stopping the Gallic assault cold. The Germans then harried the Gauls back against their outer wall and trench, slaughtering those who could not scramble through.

Changing to a defensive strategy, Vercingetorix sent his cavalry abroad among the rebellious tribes. A Gallic relief army led by Commius arrived around noon on September 30. Commius sent his cavalry, archers and light troops to assault the line of circumvallation, and Vercingetorix's infantry stormed the line of contravallation. While his legionaries held Vercingetorix's men at bay, Caesar sent his cavalry to engage Commius' troops. As the sun dipped near the horizon, the Germans massed all their squadrons for a charge that sent Commius' cavalry reeling. That exposed the Gallic archers, who were surrounded and annihilated by the German cavalry.

Seeing Commius' force routed, Vercingetorix retreated back to Alesia. The Gauls rallied to launch a second assault on the night of October 1, but that attacked died in the fire of Roman siege engines. A third attack on October 2 saw Caesar's cavalry strike at Commius' infantry from the rear, utterly beating them. Demoralized, Vercingetorix surrendered to Caesar, bringing to an end the siege of Alesia and with it, apart from minor engagements, the end of the Gallic revolt.

**THREE YEARS LATER, IN 49 BC,** Caesar plunged the Roman Republic into civil war when he marched his legions across the Rubicon River into Italy. For the next four years his Gallic and German cavalry accompanied his legions against Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (Pompey the Great). After performing admirably in the Iberian Ilerda campaign of 49 BC, Caesar's auxiliary cavalry crossed the Adriatic Sea to Greece in 48 BC. There, Caesar moved to block Pompey from reaching his base at Dyrrachium, but in turn found his own supply route to Italy severed by Pompey's naval dominance of the Adriatic.

Pompey eventually forced Caesar to withdraw into Thessaly, where Caesar stormed the defiant town of Gomphi and gave it over to be ransacked by his half-starved soldiers. The whole army, especially the Germans, embarked on an orgy of gluttony and drinking. Pompey finally caught up with Caesar at Pharsalus, only to go down in defeat. Pompey fled to Egypt, where Ptoleminus, chief adviser to Ptolemy XIII, had him murdered.

Arriving in pursuit of Pompey, Caesar became involved with Cleopatra VII and her dynastic struggles with her brother and co-regent Ptolemy XIII. With the aid of Mithridates of Pergamon, on January 13, 47 BC Caesar cornered Ptolemy near the Nile, where his army sought protection on a hill flanked by a canal. German cavalrymen were the first to swim the canal and struck the Egyptians in the flank, allowing the Romans to cross on hastily constructed bridges. In the ensuing battle the Romans annihilated the Egyptians with Ptolemy drowning in the Nile.
After the Egyptian interlude, Caesar conducted a lightning campaign against Pharnaces of Pontus, who had occupied Armenia and Cappadocia. Near Zela the legionaries defeated Pharnaces in a defensive battle. With affairs in the Asian provinces settled, Caesar returned to Italy.

By 46 BC, Caesar was ready to continue the civil war against Pompey's followers in North Africa but found himself vastly outnumbered by the forces of Quintus Metellus Scipio and King Juba of Numidia. His predicament was exacerbated by his cavalry's failure to deal with the hit-and-run tactics of the Numidian cavalry and light troops. Caesar overcame those problems through extensive maneuvering, the iron discipline of his legions, ingenious use of entrenchment and by training some of his legionaries to act as light troops in support of his cavalry.

When Caesar finally received reinforcements, the campaign was brought to an end at Thapsus. His overeager veterans launched themselves into battle before the lines had been formed and without waiting for Caesar's order. Peppercorned with Roman arrows, the enemy's elephants panicked and steamrolled through their own lines. Juba's Numidians and Scipio's legions collapsed like dominos, and Caesar's soldiers butchered 10,000 Pompeians and Numidians.

With Scipio's forces crushed in North Africa, the only Pompeians remaining were the younger Gnaeus Pompeius and his brother Sextus, who together with fugitives from Africa raised 13 legions in Iberia. In 45, Caesar faced Gnaeus at Munda. In addition to eight legions, Caesar possessed more than 8,000 cavalry, including his veteran Gauls and Germans, and King Bogud of Mauretania, with his corps of Moorish horsemen. Caesar's Legio X caved in the Pompeian left flank while the cavalry, with Bogud in the lead, vanquished the Pompeian horse and fell upon their flank and rear.

THE DEFEAT OF GNAEOS brought the civil war to an end. Caesar returned to Rome and became dictator for life. After his triumphs, he awarded each of his veteran legions a war gratuity of 240 aureus, or gold coins, in addition to the 20 paid at the outbreak of the wars—together the equivalent of 27 years' pay. Caesar disbanded his Praetorian bodyguard and his Iberian cohorts. When they could, his Gallic cavalry usually returned to their tribes after each campaign, and his German cavalry almost certainly was disbanded as well. It is reasonable to assume that Caesar rewarded his auxiliary cavalry handsomely. Perhaps a few were even granted Roman citizenship and settled down inside the borders of the empire. Others may have wandered back to their tribal homelands across the Rhine, where their loot and experience increased their prestige. No doubt many stayed in some sort of Roman military service. There was certainly no lack of opportunity for a skilled sword-for-hire when Caesar's assassination in 44 BC brought on a new civil war.

The career of Caesar's German cavalry illustrates how a small but crack corps of soldiers can influence the course of combat. Their success was due to a combination of his skilled generalship and their own prowess. Though they were few in number, Caesar treated his German cavalry as an elite unit and often held them in reserve until the situation became desperate. In many ways, they were the prototype of the dual-purpose mounted troops, the Cohors Equitatae, that would one day replace the legions as the backbone of the Roman army. MH