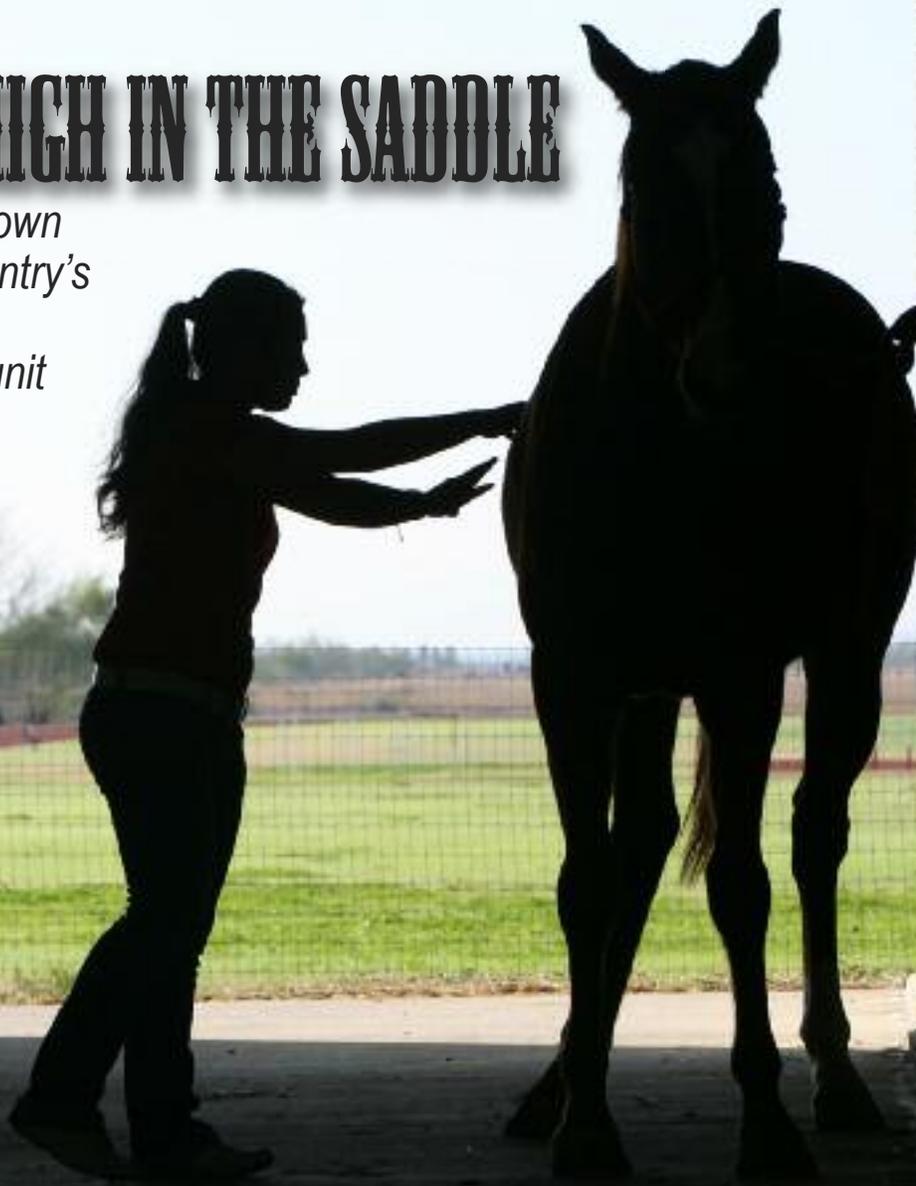


# RIDING HIGH IN THE SADDLE

Texas border town  
boasts the country's  
only mounted  
Junior ROTC unit



A Cadet positions one of the horses of the 12th Cavalry memorial unit for grooming recently at Rio Grande City High School. Cadets assist in the care and feeding of the animals as their school schedule permits.

**T**he smell of aged-leather, the sight of crisp campaign hats and the sound of a creaky covered wagon set against the backdrop of palm trees and scrubby brush of the Texas-Mexico border evoke images of a time long past. Those thoughts hark back to an era in Rio Grande City, Texas, when the plodding of thundering hooves from the U.S. Army's 12th Cavalry echoed across La Frontera in pursuit of Mexican bandits and raiders.

To celebrate and remember their heritage, the Rattler Battalion of Rio Grande City High School's Army Junior ROTC formed the nation's only mounted JROTC cavalry unit in 2002. Thirty young men and women dressed in replica 1922 cavalry uniforms march silently behind a covered wagon drawn by an enormous mule, while leading the way, a row of four horses and riders bear the American, Texas, unit and 12th Cavalry colors.

This is how the program represents its heritage at parades and events across Texas and as far away as the nation's capital.

The idea to start the unit in this town of about 15,000 residents that sits on the southern tip of Texas at the Mexican border surfaced in 1996 from several people, including the school board president and JROTC instructors. It was seen as way to pay homage and celebrate the traditions of the 12th Cavalry.

With school district and community support, the unit began in 1998. To embrace the city's heritage, JROTC leadership chose to have members of the mounted unit don the 1922 style of 12th Cavalry uniforms, complete with distinctive flared cavalry pants, wide-brimmed campaign hats, gauntlets, riding boots, Sam Browne belts and cavalry sabers.

"The military has always been a part of the life of Rio Grande

Photos and story by  
JOHN WAYNE LISTON

City,” said R.C. Salinas, a prominent local historian. “The community has always been supportive because they grew up together.”

When then-Camp Ringgold was founded in 1848 in the heart of the current-day Rio Grande City, the land was just a transfer and supply point for the Army to support the Mexican-American War. As the camp started, so too was the city.

The 2nd Squadron, 12th Cavalry was headquartered at Fort Ringgold from 1921–41. The unit patrolled the border with Mexican Federales from Ciudad Miguel Aleman, protecting the citizens of the Rio Grande Valley from the violence of cross-border raids and bandits.

The unit exists today, having traded in its horses for M1A2 SEP tanks, Humvees and armored personnel carriers and is assigned to the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division stationed at Fort Hood.

“My great-grandfather served in the 12th Cavalry when it was stationed at Fort Ringgold,” Rio Grande Cadet Ruby Perez said. “He always talked about it. Before he died, he got to see me in this uniform and to continue doing this now makes me feel a great connection to him. I think it would make him happy.”

For several years, the JROTC mounted unit marched and performed dismounted until horses were acquired in 2002.

Eloy Rodriguez was hired by the school as the first horse wrangler for the unit. As a wrangler, Rodriguez, is the primary caretaker of the animals. He took on the first task of finding the right horses with the right temperament for the team.

“You can’t get too young or high-spirited animals,” he said. “They got to be able to handle the noise and crowds of a parade.”

When the horses were first purchased, Rodriguez cared for them at his ranch.

Now the horses are stabled at the school in a clean, well-kept stable with a large pasture/training area. Care and feeding of the animals is shared between Rodriguez and the Cadets as their school schedules permit.

“We’ve had great support from the school board and administration. They gave me everything I needed to properly care for these animals,” Rodriguez said.

A second horse wrangler, Omar Saenz, and two volunteers from the school transportation department were brought in to help with day-to-day activities and at events. The wranglers spend considerable time teaching the Cadets

about working with and around horses, their needs and the proper care of the animals that weigh more than 1,200 pounds each.

The unit now has four horses – Junior, Jocy, Estrellita and Gilbert. They also have a large mule, George, to pull the wagon.

Having the ability to get the students to work with the horses has helped with their JROTC training.

“It has helped getting the kids to believe in themselves,” said retired Maj. David Rutledge,



**George the mule uses his size and strength to pull the wagon of the 12th Cavalry commanded by Cadet Roel Ruiz, with Cadet Prisma Hinojosa sitting in the rifle seat and Cadet Mark Aguilar in the back.**

Rio Grande’s senior Army instructor. “Some of them see these large animals and don’t believe they can do it. When they leave here, they can see in themselves just how much they are capable of.”

Some Cadets admit to being nervous when they first come in contact with the horses. But they quickly overcome it.

“This taught me to learn how to control myself and my horse and not show fear,” Cadet Stacey Muñoz said. “It really taught me self-confidence.”

Retired Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez is the former commander of the coalition of ground forces in the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom and a Rattler Battalion alumnus. He said the JROTC program goes a long way in helping Cadets obtain vital knowledge of the past.

“This program helps these Cadets and their community understand where we came from and the sacrifices it takes to preserve our freedom,” Sanchez said. “There is a tremendous linkage built between their Hispanic heritage and their American roots by knowing the history of this area. It really builds their sense of patriotism.”

The students have come to grasp the idea that knowing about the past and showcasing it for the world is meaningful. During a recent tour of Fort Ringgold’s Robert E. Lee House, Cadets were able to look at museum pieces and photographs of the original unit.

“This really sparks me, it makes me proud of what we are doing,” Cadet Adan Guerra said. “It makes me proud to live here.”

The Cadets have developed a love for the 12th Cavalry Memorial unit, said retired Master Sgt. Marco Peña, a Rio Grande instructor.

“I had one student last year postpone a trip to a prospective college,” he said. “She told me, ‘I want to be here. I’m not going to be able to do this forever so I want to enjoy it while I can, because once I graduate, its over.’”

The unit is just one part of the battalion. The Cadets still take part in the same curriculum and activities as other JROTC Cadets across the country. The battalion has 90 Cadets currently, with 30 taking part in the 12th Cavalry Memorial Unit.

“We just raised the bar one step higher for them,” Peña said. “Not only do these Cadets have to account for themselves and all the additional equipment, but now they have to be responsible for a living, breathing 1,200-pound animal. Not every Cadet in the United States gets to do that.”

Cadets start out volunteering for the dismounted unit. When they show dedication to the team, they get the opportunity for leadership, first as commanding the dismounted unit, then on the wagon and eventually through hard work and perseverance, to the mounted color guard.

The unit has been in parades and events around Texas. It was even invited to participate in the 2005 National Cherry Blossom Parade in Washington D.C.

During their appearances, the unit follows their mounted color guard and mule-drawn wagon with a dismounted drill demonstration featuring drill maneuvers patterned after Peña’s tank formations, with Bravo Company, 1st Battalion 67th Armor (Death Dealers), 1st Tiger Brigade, 2nd Armored Division.

“We used all of these formations during the liberation of Kuwait. It brings them a real-world situation and gives meaning to the drill for these Cadets,” he said.

Cadets and instructors continue to look for other opportunities to showcase their unit and hope to one day show in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade.

“Our kids don’t necessarily have the resources to see what’s out there and travel all over,” Rutledge said. “That’s the beauty of the Army and taking them to all these events. When you get out and see the world, you get to realize it’s a really big world filled with lots of opportunities.”

A young woman, Cadet Yvette Zurita, is the central figure in the photograph. She is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved military-style uniform with a matching tie and a dark green campaign hat with a silver emblem. She is riding a brown horse with a white blaze on its face. In her right hand, she holds a large American flag with a gold fringe and tassel. The background is a blurred outdoor setting, possibly a field or training area. The text "LAST LOOK" is overlaid on the left side of the image.

## LAST LOOK

Cadet Yvette Zurita is the battalion commander of the Rio Grande City High School Junior ROTC Rattler Battalion in Rio Grande City, Texas. The battalion is the home of 12th Cavalry Memorial Unit, the only mounted JROTC unit in the nation. *Photo by John Wayne Liston*