

# KNIGHTS OF THE WIND

*“They are daughters of the wind ... the legend is that a fierce wind came from the south storming across the land and from this heat and swirling sand, the Arabian horse was born ... because of this birth they are able to run faster than the wind itself.”*

The Mamluk (13<sup>th</sup> -16<sup>th</sup> c) dynasty was built upon a military force whose cornerstone was the Arabian horse. Their style of combat cavalry was known as *furrisiya*, developed out of the conflict between the Roman and Persian empires. The use of the sword (Roman), the lance (Indian) and the bow and arrow (Persian) were refined by the Mamluks during their rule over Egypt and the region that now embraces Israel, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria. *Furrisiya* reflects to some extent the training and discipline of the *Samurai* of ancient Japan. Like the warriors of the Orient, these Arabian cavalry soldiers were fiercely devoted to their leaders, highly educated in multi-disciplines, and revered for their devotion as defenders of their empire. All of this was built upon the nearly mystical relationship between the warriors and their Arabian mounts.

In combat, the balance for victory rested with the stronger Arabian horse ... ‘the moment of equality’ where the only outcome in the next instant will be the death of one rider or the other.

There is something that sets the Arabian horse apart from all others.

Long ago, the men that served in the cavalry were not just savage fighters. If accepted into the military to become a *furrisiya* warrior, the regimen of study included religion, logistics, engineering as well as military tactics. The success of the Mamluk dynasty is directly attributed to these highly educated, extremely motivated military leaders. On retirement, their skills often led them to careers in politics or law.

The old texts that remain and the poetry of the Arabian writers often describe the relationship between rider and horse as nothing short of mystical. Yet, the discipline that created this “oneness” between man and Arabian began to fade away in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and then disappeared altogether nearly 200 years ago. The two primary reasons for the decline in *furrisiya* ... first, the cavalry and military became two separate entities. Second, the armor makers, skilled in the craft of fashioning sword blades, all but vanished.

The cavalry was a discipline that took the elements of weaponry, an animal, riding skills and the rider’s personal valor and melded them into a unified force. The Arabian was not just an extension of the rider but a part of a single, cohesive fighting element. It isn’t just the technical aspects that make this special; it is the philosophy of it. “The power of these warriors was created by the flow of energy up from the ground, through the horse, into the sword arm, out to the blade and then back down to the earth”. The training of a *furrisiya* warrior was a nine-year path of instruction with his horse. While instruction in the use of the lance and sword was given to all, in the eighth year of study, the recruits were given a bow and a sleeve of arrows. Without any instruction, they were told to ride at a full gallop and strike a stationary target. If they missed two of five arrows, they would be released from the cavalry to become an ordinary soldier. They believed that “handling the bow comes from the heart.”

Arabians are so intelligent, that when they were worked four or five times a day for two weeks, the horse knew the maneuver and would never forget it. Humans tend to forget quickly and lose any mastery over a particular task as time goes on ... horses don’t.

Training the warhorse ... never changed even the slightest thing. So much of what the horse knows is based on their familiarity with the equipment as much as it is with rider and the weapons. The rider has to trust the horse sometimes, even more than yourself.

Standing close to a blazing, half-ton animal carrying a fully armed cavalry soldier was not the thunderous sound; it was the feel of the earth. The soil shakes and dust flies three feet into the air as the hooves pound the ground rhythmically. As fighting unit, they were majestic, rider and horse, in a completely terrifying sort of way.

The Arabian horse, according to an Arabic proverb is "God's gift to man." They are wondrous creatures of the very wind itself.