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Kit Carson's Last Fight: The Adobe Walls Campaign of 1864

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**KIT CARSON'S LAST FIGHT:
THE ADOBE WALLS CAMPAIGN OF 1864**

by

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DISSERTATION

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No one spent more time poring over my text and directing me to sources than Dr. Durwood Ball. Editing can be a thankless and unglamorous task. Dr. Ball's patience, kindness, and generosity are endless. I thank Dr. Margaret Connell-Szasz for helping direct me to works on and by Native Americans. My conversations with Dr. Jerry Thompson of Texas A&M International were not only helpful, but very enjoyable. Dr. Virginia Scharff was instrumental in helping me develop a better writing style (you should have seen it before). Dr. Mel Yazawa helped me learn to be direct, thorough, and precise. The late Dr. Frank Szasz helped me think about how to write people, and for that I thank him. The history department staff at the University of New Mexico always

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My patient and unassuming wife, Stephanie, tolerated all of the hours I spent writing, years I spent studying, vacations sidetracked to historical sites, and soapbox lectures on historical topics without even making me feel like it bothered her or was in any way a waste of time or resources. My exceptional children, Kirsten, Audrey, Preston, Andrew, Kimberly, and Caleb, only occasionally complained about having to listen to *another* history book in the car when there was, after all, music. It is my hope that growing up in a home that values learning will help prepare them for success in whatever niches they find.

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ABSTRACT

In the fall of 1864, Brigadier General James H. Carleton sent Kit Carson and about four hundred men on a punitive campaign against the Kiowa and Comanche Indians of the high plains. The resulting battle was one of the largest in the history of North American Indian Wars. Yet this conflict has been relegated to historical obscurity.

In this paper, I examine why Kit Carson's 1864 Adobe Walls Campaign remains obscure, I measure the success of the mission, and place it in the larger context of nineteenth century Indian Wars, particularly those prosecuted against Plains tribes.

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Introduction

Visiting Adobe Walls

A cold, late Panhandle norther doubled over the yellow grass. I squinted against its chilling force as I stepped out of my truck and into the bottoms on the north side of the Canadian River. A twelve-mile trek off State Highway 207 had taken me to the site of the Adobe Walls fight. Not much remains. Were it not for fingerboards pointing the way and a few markers placed by the Panhandle-Plains Historical Society, I would never have found the site. A gate impedes travel beyond a wide spot between the barbed wire on a caliche road near the Turkey Track Ranch headquarters. Miles of empty prairie surround Adobe Walls. Hours later, as I departed, an inbound driver stopped me to ask whether he was on the right road.

Not many people know that two important battles were fought at Adobe Walls. I made this first trip to the battle site after becoming interested in Christopher “Kit” Carson’s last fight, the 1864 Battle of Adobe Walls. This battle featured Carson, 321 New Mexico and California volunteers, and 75 Utes taking on well over a thousand Comanche, Kiowa, and Kiowa-Apache (or “Plains Apache”) warriors. Department of New Mexico commander General James H. Carleton sent Carson’s force to strike a punitive blow against the Kiowa and Comanche. Their raids on the Santa Fe Trail threatened communications, emigration, commerce, and army logistics between New Mexico Territory and the states. Carleton meant to open the trail, once and for all.

The Second Battle of Adobe Walls occurred in 1874. Buffalo hide hunters had established a small community at the site of William Bent’s old trading post on the Canadian, and had commenced to slaughter vast herds of buffalo. They did this for what

little gain they could extract from the hides alone, and the government encouraged them, understanding the importance of the buffalo as a resource of the Plains tribes. The Indians understood the full measure of danger to them that lay in this kind of destruction as well. Over seven hundred Comanches, Kiowas, and Cheyennes attacked the camp of these scraggly hunters, of which there were only about thirty. Chief Quannah Parker and a medicine man named Isa-tai (literally, either Coyote Poop or Coyote Butt) led the attack. Isa-tai claimed to have a supernatural body paint that would render the hide hunters' bullets ineffective. The Indians snuck up on the hide hunters in the early dawn. After inflicting a few casualties in the initial early morning raid, they settled in for a siege. On the second day of the conflict, the famous scout Billy Dixon reputedly shot an Indian off of his horse at a range of nearly a mile. This extraordinary shot startled and discouraged the Indians, who lost faith in Isa-tai's medicine. One by one, they abandoned the enterprise and returned to their villages.

On my arrival at the battlefield, I spent an hour traipsing around the site and reading the markers. One marker lists participants thought to have taken part in the 1874 fight on the side of the hide hunters. Another monument of equal prominence notes the Native Americans known to have lost their lives in the battle. One stone honors Billy Dixon, who lived until 1913 and was buried at Texline. Dixon's widow had his remains exhumed and reinterred at Adobe Walls. Markers pay homage to the four casualties from the party of hide hunters.

There are no walls at Adobe Walls – at the site or in the distance. The markers are about the only cultural geography. I found the perimeter of one building after a thorough search. Nothing remains of the hide hunters' village. No pump-jacks, pivot sprinklers, or

buildings pollute the view. Dry grass climbs the steep slopes toward the caprock. Isolated trees mark the location of water. It seems the only colors left on God's palate when painting that part of the Canadian Valley were powder blue and dry gold, with just a dot of green here and there. Most visitors would not call the scenery "beautiful," but it has a subtle, lonely allure.

I pondered the Panhandle-Plains Historical Society's presentation of the site as I wandered the grounds. I found it strange that every existing marker commemorated the 1874 battle. The Second Battle of Adobe Walls triggered the Red River War. It sparked a response that would end the reign of the Comanches, who had earned the moniker, "Lords of the South Plains." At the close of the war, federal authorities removed the remaining Southern Plains tribes to Indian Territory. It makes sense that the Panhandle-Plains Historical Society would commemorate that significant event. The main original marker emphasizes the valiant defense of the few against the many. Locals who know something of Adobe Walls usually remember it for "the shot."

But what about the much larger 1864 fight with its intriguing characters and ties to so many other elements of nineteenth-century American frontier and military history? That battle has ties to the Civil War, other Indian War campaigns, the adaptation of winter campaigning as a means of finally pinning down the almost miraculously mobile horse-based Plains tribes. The first campaign featured Kit Carson, Satanta, dueling prairie fires, mountain howitzers, and Indians blowing bugle calls to confuse Carson's troops. In the 1864 battle, thousands of Comanches, Kiowas, and Kiowa-Apaches streamed from their lodges to send Carson and company back to New Mexico. Only a heroic extrication saved Carson's command from the fate – annihilation – that met Custer's Seventh

Cavalry at Little Bighorn twelve years later. One would never know this earlier, larger engagement took place at Adobe Walls by reading the monuments.¹

Why has history bypassed this battle? The Battle of Adobe Walls of 1864 was the second-largest single battle ever fought between an army and Indians on the North American Plains, and one of only a small handful of large-scale battles between the U.S. Army and Indians. This historical omission cannot be due to a lack of colorful action. Carson's almost miraculous extraction of his force, saving his party the dubious distinction that later befell Custer, surely compares to Billy Dixon's legendary long-distance marksmanship in 1874. It cannot be due to a difference in star power among the participants. Satanta and Dohasan (1864) might be slightly less recognizable to many than Isa-tai and Quannah Parker (1874), but Kit Carson (1864) – maligned though he now is in some circles – is clearly a more recognizable hero than Billy Dixon or Bat Masterson (1874).



¹Part of this disparity of recognition comes from the fact that the site memorialized by the Panhandle-Plains Historical Society was the site of the 1874 battle. The 1864 battle took place just over a mile from the site, but is on inaccessible private land, now part of the Turkey Track Ranch. The fact that the PPHS negotiated with the ranch to make the 1874 site accessible and place markers there, but did not do so for the 1864 site is a direct statement about which battle they considered more important.

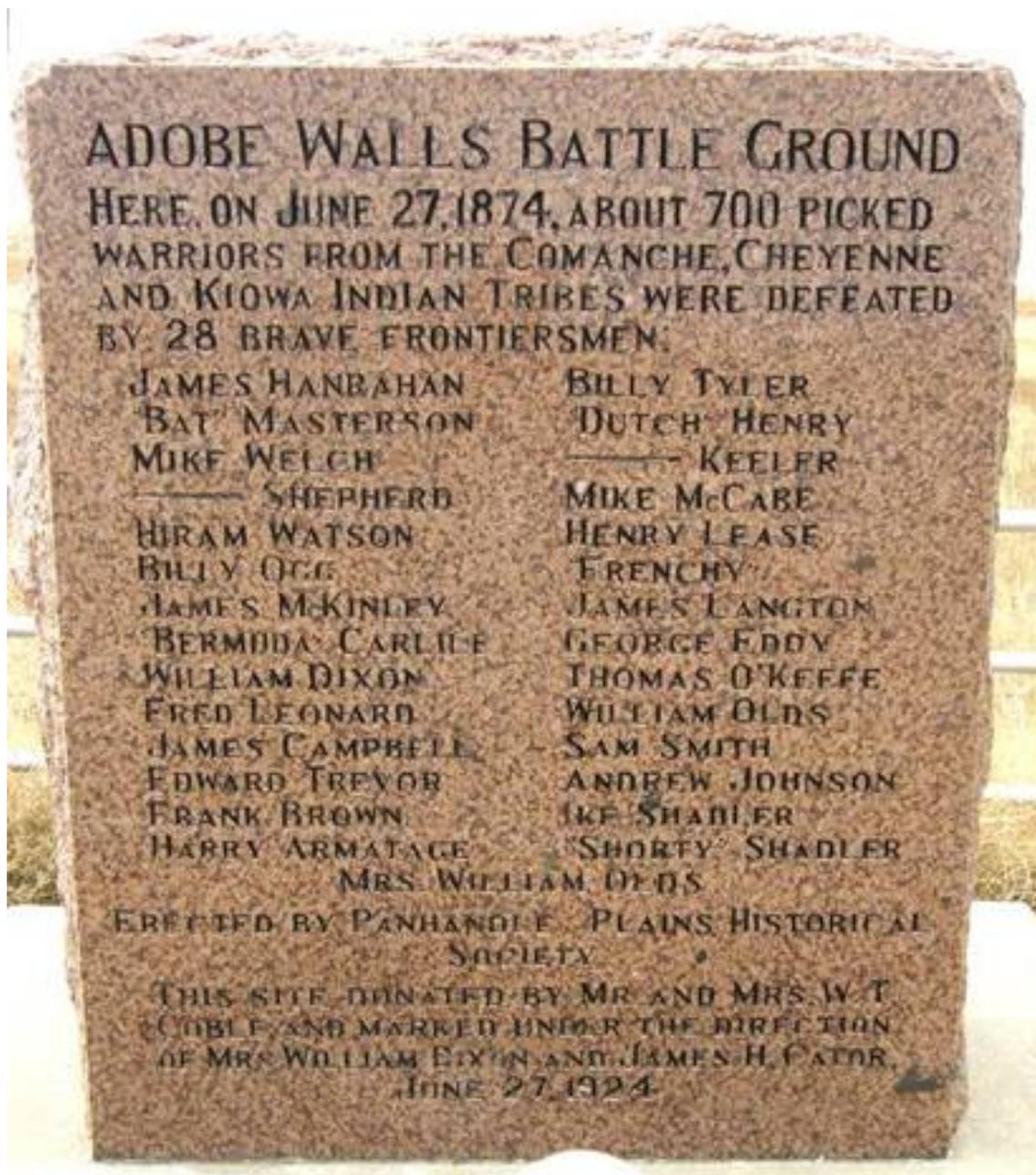
Monument to Comanche and Cheyenne Casualties in 1874 Adobe Walls Fight with the Dry Texas Plains in the Background. Photograph by Barclay Gibson, December, 2008, in Adobe Walls, TX. <http://www.texasescapes.com/TexasPanhandleTowns/Adobe-Walls-Texas.htm#battle> (accessed 26 June 2010).



Marker for Scout and Medal of Honor Winner Billy Dixon. His remains are interred at the Adobe Walls site. Photograph by Barclay Gibson, December, 2008, in Adobe Walls, TX. <http://www.texasescapes.com/TexasPanhandleTowns/Adobe-Walls-Texas.htm#battle> (accessed 26 June 2010).



A close up of the Comanche and Cheyenne Marker. Photograph by Barclay Gibson, December, 2008, in Adobe Walls, TX.
<http://www.texasescapes.com/TexasPanhanceTowns/Adobe-Walls-Texas.htm#battle>
(accessed 26 June 2010).



ADOBE WALLS BATTLE GROUND

HERE ON JUNE 27, 1874, ABOUT 700 PICKED
WARRIORS FROM THE COMANCHE, CHEYENNE
AND KIOWA INDIAN TRIBES WERE DEFEATED
BY 28 BRAVE FRONTIERSMEN:

JAMES HANBAHAN
"BAT" MASTERSON
MIKE WELCH

— SHEPHERD

HIRAM WATSON

BILLY OGG

JAMES MCKINLEY

BERMUDA CARLILE

WILLIAM DIXON

FRED LEONARD

JAMES CAMPBELL

EDWARD TREVOR

FRANK BROWN

HARRY ARMATAGE

MRS. WILLIAM OLDS

BILLY TYLER

DUTCH HENRY

— KEELER

MIKE McCABE

HENRY LEASE

FRENCHY

JAMES LANGTON

GEORGE EDDY

THOMAS O'KEEFE

WILLIAM OLDS

SAM SMITH

ANDREW JOHNSON

IKE SHADLER

"SHORTY" SHADLER

ERECTED BY PANHANDLE PLAINS HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

THIS SITE DONATED BY MR AND MRS. W. T.
COBLE AND MARKED UNDER THE DIRECTION
OF MRS. WILLIAM EYON AND JAMES H. CATOR,
JUNE 27, 1924

Marker Noting the Hide Hunter Participants in the 1874 Fight. Photograph by Barclay Gibson, December, 2008, in Adobe Walls, TX.

<http://www.texasescapes.com/TexasPanhancleTowns/Adobe-Walls-Texas.htm#battle>
(accessed 26 June 2010).

Success often shapes the perception of historical events. The 1874 battle has always been seen as a victory for the hide hunters and part of American conquest of the West.² Although there has been debate on the matter, historians generally consider the 1864 battle a defeat for the army.³ In this paper, I argue that this perception of the 1864 battle as a failure – or at least confusion over the objectives and achievement of those objectives – has relegated that conflict and its participants to an undeserved erasure from the remembered past.

In order to evaluate meaningfully the success or failure of any military operation, one must understand the objectives of the venture. Historians who have debated the success of the 1864 Adobe Walls campaign have not always agreed on a standard by which that success ought to have been measured. That struggle to come to terms with how the 1864 Adobe Walls campaign should be evaluated has caused confusion over the battle's significance and aided in relegating the conflict to obscurity. I plan to examine the factors that came to determine success in a campaign against Plains Indians during this era. I will examine the objectives set forth by government and military officials prior to the 1864 campaign and then reexamine the success of the campaign based on those

²T. Linday Baker and Billy R. Harrison, *Adobe Walls: The History and Archeology of the 1874 Trading Post* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1986), 93-109; Wilbur S. Nye, *Carbine & Lance: The Story of Old Fort Sill* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1943), 190-191; Frederick W. Rathjen, *The Texas Panhandle Frontier* (1973; reprint, Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1998), 130-131.

³Rathjen, *Texas Panhandle Frontier*, 80; Robert M. Utley, "Kit Carson and the Adobe Walls Campaign," *The American West* 2 (1965): 4; Robert M. Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian, 1848-1865* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1967), 299; Charles L. Kenner, *The Comanchero Frontier: A History of New Mexico-Plains Indian Relations* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969; reprint Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 148-150 (page citations are to the reprint edition); Tom Dunlay, *Kit Carson & the Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 334-337; Nye, *Carbine & Lance*, 37; Wilbur S. Nye, *Bad Medicine & Good: Tales of the Kiowas*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), xv; Edward L. Sabin, *Kit Carson Days, 1809-1868*, vol. 2. (1935; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 746-748; Mildred P. Mayhall, *The Kiowas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 232; Ernest Wallace and E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Comanches: Lords of the South Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952), 306.

objectives. Success ought not be the only measure by which historians judge the significance of past military conflicts. Clearing up the question of success, what defines success, and whether or not this particular conflict should be considered successful will allow us to move beyond that issue to examine other important features of this dramatic clash.

I will examine the strategy and tactics utilized by the army in the 1864 Adobe Walls campaign and compare those applied in previous and subsequent campaigns. Doing so enables meaningful comparison to other engagements with Plains tribes and places the battle in the larger context of the mid-nineteenth-century Indian Wars. I plan to show what influence the execution of this campaign had on the prosecution of other army objectives on the plains over the next few decades.

Understanding the objectives of Carleton's and Carson's 1864 campaign against the Comanches and Kiowas will help determine the success or failure of that enterprise. Clearing up that point of contention will allow a more effective evaluation of the conflict's importance. Comparing this battle with others of the era against the Plains tribes will show the importance of this forgotten, but significant and fascinating campaign. This massive Battle of Adobe Walls fought in 1864 truly deserves a more prominent place in American history.

1. Kit Carson, the Military Commander

Christopher “Kit” Carson’s life may not have been long, but it was incredibly diverse and eventful. He was a man of wide ranging talents and pursued many different vocations. Today, he is best remembered as a mountain man, and for the role this early, rugged, frontier experience gained him as guide for the “pathfinder,” John C. Frémont. Carson spent eight years as agent to the Muache Utes, the Jicarilla Apaches, and the Taos Pueblos in New Mexico Territory prior to the Civil War.¹ As an expert on Indian affairs, and in Indian languages, U.S. governmental authorities sought his advice as to how peace could be made with the tribes of the Southern Plains.² Some – particularly the Navajo nation – remember Carson as brutal military enemy, but that perception of Carson as above all a military man is probably in the minority. Most do not think of Kit Carson as a military commander.

Carson did hold military command at a relatively high level when the Union Army vastly expanded its numbers in the early months of the Civil War. Sometime after President Lincoln sent out the call for volunteers, Carson responded. He was after all a member of the Taos community, a staunchly Unionist area of New Mexico. During the summer of 1861, he was awarded the rank of Lieutenant Colonel as second-in-command of the First New Mexico Volunteer Infantry under the venerable old French frontiersman, Ceran St. Vrain.³ Carson would have been well suited for recruiting volunteers. His reputation had grown such that he was well known to easterners such as Herman Melville who called him one of an elite class of mountain men,⁴ and to travelers such as Ann

¹Dunlay, *Kit Carson and the Indians*, 147, 155, 157.

²Ibid, 347-8.

³Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, 679.

⁴Dunlay, *Kit Carson and the Indians*, 2, 85.

White who was reading a dime novel about him when she was captured by Indians. Carson believed that she knew he was in the vicinity and held out hope that he would come to her rescue.⁵ He was even more renowned in his home state of New Mexico. This renown combined with an engaging personality and his marriage to Josefa Jaramillo ingratiated him with the local populace. So although Carson may not seem by first glance at his education and experiential qualifications to have been a prototypical military leader, his status and reputation made him an ideal fit for recruiting a unit of New Mexico Volunteers.

Colonel Edward R. S. Canby, who commanded the military Department of New Mexico for the Union, worried greatly about recruiting among the territory's Nuevo Mexicano population. Considering that the United States had itself invaded and conquered New Mexico only fifteen years earlier, Canby had legitimate concerns. A majority of locals had their reservations about their new nation. Their sentiments seemed to run from apathy to outright hostility. Army administration and service conditions did little to improve the situation. As of January 1862, regular troops had not been paid for over a year, and those volunteers already serving the United States had never received a cent of compensation for their time. Even under the best of circumstances, Canby put little faith in the military capability of the New Mexico Volunteers, telling headquarters in Washington that:

The volunteer troops are improving slowly in discipline and instruction. They are not efficient, and, in my judgment, cannot be made so in any reasonable period. They are deficient in self-reliance and military spirit, and their ignorance of the English language and want of capacity for

⁵Carson did, in fact, attempt to rescue Mrs. White. Mrs. White was killed during the attempt, after Carson and the commander quarreled about the best means of proceeding. The pursuing rescue party found a dime novel about Carson among Mrs. White's effects. Milo M. Quaife, *Kit Carson's Autobiography* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 131-134.

instruction are serious obstacles to a rapid improvement. For Indian or partisan warfare, and in conjunction with regular troops or volunteers of American origin, they will make valuable auxiliaries, and their services in these respects are already of considerable importance.⁶

Canby had a two-pronged approach designed to maximize the effectiveness of what he saw as a marginal body of troops, to enlist as many as possible for this auxiliary role, and to alleviate Nuevo Mexicano ill-will against Americans. He persistently pleaded with headquarters to make better efforts at paying troops regularly, and although he did not feel they were the best military leaders, he advised his subordinates to appoint “Mexican” field officers whenever possible to help build trust and esprit de corps.⁷ Carson’s rapport with these Hispanic New Mexicans may well have curtailed negative feelings toward the United States, and helped sway many a young Hispanic recruit to the Union cause.

Colonel Ceran St. Vrain’s tenure as nominal commander of the First New Mexico Volunteer Infantry did not last long. He soon resigned, citing health concerns on September 30, 1861, and command fell to Kit Carson, who was then promoted to colonel.⁸ Carson had been along on military endeavors such as Frémont’s explorations. He fought with General Stephen W. Kearny at San Pasqual – one of the Mexican War skirmishes occurring in California. He had aided Colonel Philip St. George Cooke and Major James H. Carleton against the Jicarilla Apaches at the Battle of Ojo Caliente and its aftermath in the mid-1850s.

⁶Canby to AG in Washington, 8 December 1861; *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (OR) series 1, volume 4, chapter 11, p. 78.

⁷Canby to Col. G. R. Paul at Fort Union, 15 January 1862; OR series 1, volume 4, chapter 11, p. 85; Canby to Paymaster General of the Army, 18 November 1861; OR series 1, volume 4, chapter 11, p. 75; Canby to Adjutant General of the Army, 13 January 1862; OR series 1, volume 4, chapter 11, p. 84-85; Miller, “Hispanos and the Civil War in New Mexico: A Reconsideration,” *New Mexico Historical Review* 54, 2 (April 1979):109.

⁸Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, 681.

None of this indirect military experience prepared Carson for a traditional military command, however. By the mid-nineteenth century, most professional U. S. Army officers had been trained at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. The academy provided what may well have been the best education in the country at the time – certainly in military and civil engineering. Carson was not unique in his lack of formal military education. The expansion of the Union Army for the Civil War drew in hundreds of volunteer officers who, like Carson, had no formal military training.

Unique or not, Colonel Kit Carson faced the problem of preparing relatively raw volunteer troops for what he and many others expected would be a conventional war against a Confederate invasion force entering New Mexico either from the South up the Rio Grande Valley, or across the vast plains of the Llano Estacado. Fortunately, enough of Carson's subordinates had some militia knowledge and experience to introduce his New Mexico Volunteers to the manual of arms. What training they did receive still would not have seemed conventional. Tactical orders were more often than not delivered in Spanish, the native language of most troops of the First New Mexico.⁹

By the end of the Civil War, Carson and his troops had seen far more duty against Indians than Confederates. He and the majority of his unit fought against a Rebel foe in only one major engagement – the Battle of Valverde, on 21 February 1862. Carson's First New Mexico performed admirably, though Valverde is generally considered a Confederate victory. After the invading Texans departed, an old acquaintance of Carson's – Brigadier General James H. Carleton – took command of the Department of New Mexico. The new commander sent Carson on a series of campaigns against Indians in

⁹Miller, "Hispanos and the Civil War in New Mexico," 109.

and around New Mexico. Campaigns against hostile Indians suited Carson far better than conventional nineteenth century warfare. He knew Indians. He had dealt with them and fought them before. Given the nature of the tasks that would eventually face his Volunteers, no one was better prepared to command the First New Mexico than Kit Carson.

The Confederate Invasion

It would have been difficult to forecast the unit's heavy involvement in Indian fighting in 1861, as exuberant shouts supporting secession rang through the air throughout the South – the southern United States *and* southern New Mexico. Secessionist sentiment ran high in both Mesilla and Tucson – among the few people actually living in that latter town in the 1860s. Enough secessionists and Confederate sympathizers called southern New Mexico home to drive a secession convention at Mesilla in March of 1861. The convention voted to establish a Confederate Arizona Territory composed of the southern portions of present-day Arizona and New Mexico. Another convention met later that year in tiny Tucson to adopt the recommendations that came out of the Mesilla meeting. Confederate sympathizers constituted a political majority in southern New Mexico.¹⁰ This pro-Confederate sympathy in the southern part of the territory must have combined with the traditional hostility between New Mexicans and neighboring Texas to create an atmosphere of urgency among Carson's volunteers and their communities.

¹⁰Donald S. Frazier, *Blood and Treasure: Confederate Empire in the Southwest* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press: 1995), 34; Howard R. Lamar, *The Far Southwest, 1846-1912: A Territorial History*, rev. ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 97-102.

Most Hispanic New Mexicans associated the Confederate cause with Texas and Texans. Nuevo Mexicanos outside the southern settlements had likely never met a Confederate sympathizer who was not a Texan. As far as they were concerned, the Confederacy might as well just be Texas, and General Sibley's invasion force was entirely Texan, save for its Louisianan commander. If there was one group Hispanic New Mexicans as a group hated more than Navajos, it was Texans. Republic of Texas president Mirabeau B. Lamar sent an invading force west from the Austin area toward Santa Fe in 1841 intent on asserting Texas sovereignty on lands that had not historically been part of Texas, but were claimed by Texas after its independence in 1836. The mission was a complete disaster for the Texans. New Mexico governor Manuel Armijo captured the starving, destitute party.¹¹ Even so, memories of the invasion continued to fuel suspicions of anything or anyone from Texas. Some New Mexican mothers even threatened their children with the ultimatum, "If you don't behave, I'll sell you to the Tejanos."¹²

The Confederate invasion from Texas only exacerbated the long-standing New Mexican dislike of all things Texan. General Sibley had hoped to win the hearts and minds of New Mexicans – which probably would have been necessary to affect a conquest of such a large area with so few men. Ultimately, lack of supplies would compel the Confederates to forage, which they did not always do in a manner conducive to winning hearts and minds. Most New Mexicans had only been Americans for about fifteen years when the Civil War began, and had no vested interest in their new country,

¹¹Joseph M. Nance. *After San Jacinto: The Texas-Mexican Frontier, 1836-1841* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963), 504-507.

¹²Kenner, *The Comanchero Frontier*, 171.

or Union preservation. If they had been on the fence as to loyalty, the behavior of Sibley's troops probably knocked them off on the Union. But what else would a Nuevo Mexicano expect from invading Texans? The mere fact that they were invading *Texans* probably convinced for most of the Hispanic population to side with the Union.

As Americans throughout the land thought out their positions and loyalties, a solid majority of the army's regular officers in New Mexico resigned their commissions and headed South to defend their home states. Louisiana native Henry Hopkins Sibley wrestled with the decision. Sibley held the brevet rank of major, and commanded a detachment first assigned to Taos and later Fort Union, the United States' most important military post in New Mexico.¹³ Sibley eventually resigned his commission, relinquished his command, and cast his lot with the Confederacy. He briefly considered a plot turning his entire command over to Southern authorities in a move that would have mirrored David Twigg's surrender of the Department of Texas to Confederate authorities in 1861. Ultimately, Sibley opted against this course of action, swayed, he said, by a "sickly sentimentality."¹⁴

Once he decided to resign, Sibley set out to use his knowledge and experience to the benefit of the Confederacy, and his own personal military advancement. He headed off via New Orleans to Richmond, Virginia, where he met personally with Confederate president Jefferson Davis. He related to Davis the resources that could be obtained from New Mexico on behalf of the Southern states. He optimistically described the morale of Union forces there as poor, and the populace as ready to side with the rebel cause at the

¹³Jerry D. Thompson, *Henry Hopkins Sibley: Confederate General of the West* (Natchitoches, LA: Northwestern State University Press, 1987), 208-210.

¹⁴Ibid; Frazier, *Blood and Treasure*, 46-47.

drop of a hat. Sibley included a detailed description of the distribution of Federal forces and supplies around his recent assignments. In short, Sibley presented to Davis a rich, potentially Confederate territory ripe for the picking, if only he would be allowed to raise a brigade-sized army of eager Texans to aid him in harvesting it. In fact, the task of raising the Texans had a head-start. Sibley told Davis how Lieutenant Colonel John Baylor waited at Fort Bliss near Franklin (present El Paso), Texas with close to four hundred men of the Second Regiment of Mounted Rifles. These men could be the foundation upon which an army under Sibley could be built for the conquest of New Mexico.¹⁵

The beauty of Sibley's proposal rested in its contrast between risk and reward. The invading army would support itself by living off the land. Sibley's men would be supplied by arms confiscated from federal forts in Texas. The whole operation would not cost the fledgling Confederacy much more than an endorsement! Sibley's campaign objectives are not clear, but they were clearly grandiose. He discussed different potential objectives with various political leaders and subordinate officers. The Colorado gold fields presented one clear and logical potential objective. From its inception, the Confederate government was strapped for specie. Sibley also mentioned California – a far more ambitious goal considering the size of Sibley's force, even if he had been able to raise a full-strength regiment. Capturing California would have held the metallic allure of Colorado while also presenting the possibility of a continental Confederacy with Pacific ports, that could be used to open trade with the Orient. There were also political possibilities. Mexico struggled to control many of her outlying provinces during the

¹⁵Thompson, *Henry Hopkins Sibley*, 216-217.

1860s, as was the case throughout that nation's first century of existence. Perhaps an alliance could be struck with Sonora and Chihuahua that would be mutually beneficial. Annexation might not be out of the question. There was the potential for a Confederate empire in the West. With that much potential and so small an investment required in Confederate manpower and treasure, the proposition seemed attractive enough to Davis, and he authorized the endeavor. Thus, Sibley's wild and aggressive dreams were fueled by Davis's still glimmering hopes not just for Confederate independence, but a Southern version of Manifest Destiny.¹⁶

The newly commissioned Brigadier General Henry Hopkins Sibley made his way back westward toward San Antonio, where he set about raising his brigade. Meanwhile, Colonel John Baylor's battalion of four hundred had already run Union troops out of the Mesilla Valley. Sibley began to worry that he might not arrive in time to collect his share of the glory of conquest after the delays he encountered in San Antonio raising and equipping his troops. The Sibley Brigade embarked across the West Texas deserts in waves to conserve the sparse water, forage, and food resources available along the way. These smaller parties trickled into Fort Bliss in December of 1861 and January of 1862 only to find most of the sustenance of that region and the Mesilla Valley, which Sibley intended to fuel his northward push, already consumed by Baylor's small force. The situation must have been of grave concern. Sibley had sold the entire operation to President Davis in part because he believed his force would need no significant outside Confederate resources. His men would live off the land.¹⁷ This part of the plan now began to seem questionable. Throughout the war, the Confederate government suffered

¹⁶Frazier, *Blood and Treasure*, 3-22; Thompson, *Henry Hopkins Sibley*, 215-221.

¹⁷Thompson, *Henry Hopkins Sibley*, 224-226, 245.

from severe shortages of nearly every resource, and even had Davis and the Confederacy had the forage and supplies to spare, getting supplies to Sibley's men along the route from San Antonio in any reasonable time would have been virtually impossible.

This lack of available supplies – not to mention the Texans' general contempt for Hispanic New Mexicans – may have contributed to some unauthorized “foraging” among the homes and farmsteads in the area. Sibley never was known to be a strict disciplinarian. Upon his arrival, he had issued a bold and stirring proclamation attempting to win the hearts and minds of New Mexicans over to the Confederate cause. In it, he declared that nothing would be stolen, and that the populace had nothing to fear. Any goods required would be purchased at fair market value.

Follow...quietly your peaceful avocations, and from my forces you have nothing to fear. Your persons, your families, and your property shall be secure and safe. Such forage and supplies as my army shall require will be purchased in open market and paid for at fair prices. If destroyed or removed to prevent me from availing myself of them, those who so co-operate with our enemies will be treated accordingly, and must prepare to share their fate.¹⁸

Many hungry, desperate, or sometimes just downright avaricious men in his force did not live by the same high minded principles Sibley overtly espoused. Their antics did little to win over Hispanic New Mexicans, and few if any were converted to the Southern cause. Aggressive Confederate foraging served only to stoke the fires of the generations-old anti-Texan sentiment harbored by so many Nuevo Mexicanos and to quell the enthusiasm of many a would-be supporter of a Confederate annexation of the territory.¹⁹

Local Indians further exacerbated Sibley's predicament. Frontier Texans knew Indians could make retaining supplies and especially livestock a challenge, but many of

¹⁸Sibley to the People of New Mexico, 20 December 1861, OR series 1, volume 4, chapter 11, p. 89-90.

¹⁹Frazier, *Blood and Treasure*, 131-134.

Sibley's Texans hailed from the Piney Woods and other far-eastern parts of the state which had seen their Indian troubles fade from memory a generation ago. Thus not all were particularly adept at thwarting the kinds of raids that kept Indians well supplied with livestock. Mescalero, Chiricahua, and Mimbres Apache bands pilfered the Sibley brigade's horse and mule remudas throughout the winter of 1861-1862 in spite of posted guards and pickets. It is likely that East Texas men, no longer threatened by Indian raiding at home, simply walked their prescribed beats and failed to see Apaches sneak in behind them to liberate their animals, sometimes a few at a time, other times whole herds that numbered in the hundreds. The barren geography the Texans had to traverse jeopardized Sibley's subsistence operation to begin with. They certainly could not afford to lose livestock.²⁰

In one instance, a group of Mescalero Apaches crept into a Confederate camp at Willow Bar, twelve miles below Fort Fillmore along the Rio Grande Valley. The Mescaleros absconded with between seventy-five and eighty Confederate mules, and made for the Organ Mountains – a picturesque but harsh and craggy range clearly visible looking east from present-day Las Cruces. Sibley sent one of his most reliable company commanders, Major Henry W. Raguet to run down the Mescaleros and retrieve the precious livestock the rebels could not do without. Raguet and his little band made it all the way to St. Augustine Springs, on the opposite slope of the mountains before losing the trail. By this time, Raguet's men had other problems. They were short on food, and of greater immediate concern, ran out of water, leaving the Confederate troopers to

²⁰Ibid, 133-134.

stumble back toward the Rio Grande parched and on faltering horses – their mules still in the hands of the long-disappeared Mescaleros.²¹

Carson may not have had overall field command, but the Union forces that were operating under the direction of the old Indian fighter would have been better prepared to cope with this type of threat. His Nuevo Mexicano troops, with generations of experience dealing with Navajo raiding, may not have been immune to such depredations, but stood far better prepared to stave off Indian raids than their East Texas rebel adversaries. In fact, in the summer of 1861 Carson had suggested that he could in short order assemble a band of “Mexicans and Utes” sufficient to steal all of the livestock of any invading Texan force before they arrived, rendering them helpless.²²

General Canby, the Union commander, understood that the Confederate supply and logistics problem would be a crucial lever he could exploit in his defense of the territory. He knew that the Texans did not bring enough supplies for such a long campaign and would have to subsist. Canby surmised that the resources available in the Mesilla Valley would not likely be sufficient to support Sibley’s force, calculating that the Confederates would find only light horses unfit to serve as draft animals, a small amount of very expensive beef, and three to three and a half million pounds of flour per season. The only items to be procured in adequate quantity were beans and salt, and even the salt was of inferior quality.²³ This overall lack of available resources in New Mexico would

²¹Theophilus Noel, *A campaign from Santa Fe to the Mississippi; being a history of the old Sibley brigade from its first organization to the present time; its campaigns in New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas, in the years of 1861-2-3-4* (Shreveport, LA: Shreveport News Printing Establishment – John Dickinson, Proprietor, 1865), 20-21.

²²Chapman to Canby’s Acting Assistant Assistant Adjutant General, 2 August 1861, in John P. Wilson, *When the Texans Came: Missing Records from the Civil War in the Southwest 1861-1862*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 67.

²³Canby to Headquarters, Department of the West, 1 December 1861; OR series 1, volume 4, chapter 11, p. 77-80.

later contribute to Brigadier General James H. Carleton's (Canby's successor) acute fear of losing food and supplies to Indian raiders on the Santa Fe Trail.

In the first two months of 1862 the invading Confederate force made its way up the Rio Grande Valley toward Fort Craig, the only major post between the Mesilla Valley and Albuquerque. Fort Craig sat at the end of a long, dry stretch along the El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro (the old Spanish road leading to Santa Fe northward from the heart of Mexico) called the Jornada del Muerto. This so-called journey of death led the road away from the life-giving waters of the Rio Grande along a cutoff often plagued by Indian attacks. Canby, the Federal commander, had been anticipating possible Confederate invasion scenarios since the outbreak of hostilities. His concern was not so much whether the Confederates would invade, but where. Although the Rio Grande route seemed most hospitable, Canby seemed to think this approach too obvious. He believed the imminent Southern invasion would come either across the Llano Estacado, or up the Pecos river and through Abo Pass (between present-day Mountainair and Belen, New Mexico). Canby himself opted to remain at Belen with a considerable portion of his force with the idea that he could meet an invasion force from any route at that point. As late as the third week in January 1862, Canby continued to believe the Pecos a possible Confederate route into New Mexico.²⁴

The idea to concentrate Union forces at a central location from which an invasion from the Pecos, the Canadian, or the Rio Grande could be met may well have been Kit Carson's. In addition to his regimental command, Carson had been given command of the Central Military District of New Mexico. He established a headquarters at

²⁴Thompson, *Henry Hopkins Sibley*, 249; Canby to Connolly, 21 January 1862, OR series 1, vol. 4, 87-88.

Albuquerque. From there, Carson ordered patrols under Major Luis Baca and Captain Juan Sarracino to keep a constant watch on Abo Pass and the Pecos Valley for signs that the Confederate invasion might be coming from that direction. As early as 2 January 1862, Carson recommended that Canby – who at that time was still at Fort Craig – should concentrate the largest possible force at Albuquerque in order to respond *en masse* to any possible invasion scenario.²⁵

Carson and much of his regiment remained at Albuquerque throughout most of January 1862. All that month, Canby continued to ponder likely enemy courses of action. He remained doubtful that Confederates would proceed up the Middle Rio Grande Valley. His first indication that the main rebel force had actually departed northward out of the Mesilla Valley seems to have come from a southern New Mexico newspaper account dated 17 January 1862, describing Sibley's force as poorly provisioned and armed and very short on livestock. According to the paper, Sibley and some elements of his command were due to depart the next morning for Fort Thorn, about fifty miles north of Mesilla near present-day Hatch, New Mexico. Canby did not receive this information until the twenty-fourth.²⁶ By the first of February, Union troops were consolidating at Fort Craig to meet the Confederate advance. Three weeks later, there were 3,810 U.S. troops at that post, including 1,200 regulars. The rest were troops from Carson's First New Mexico Volunteer Infantry, Pino's Second New Mexico Volunteer Infantry, and

²⁵Carson to Captain William J. L. Nicodemus, 2 January 1862, in Wilson, *When the Texans Came*, 204.

²⁶E. R. S. Canby to Major J. L. Donaldson, 23 January 1862, in Wilson, *When the Texans Came*, 218-219; Wm. J. L. Nicodemus to Major J. L. Donaldson, 24 January 1862; in Wilson, *When the Texans Came*, 219-220.

Colonel Jose Gallegos's Third New Mexico Volunteers, as well as about a thousand “disorganized” New Mexico militia.²⁷

As the Texans neared Fort Craig, Sibley moved his men cautiously forward. He and Colonel Canby each had his own set of problems. Sibley's men were short on rations, supplies and stock. Because of this, they needed to capture Fort Craig and whatever stores it contained. The Confederates were outnumbered and lacked the artillery necessary to pound the fort into submission. Sibley, then, needed to entice the Unionists out of the fort where the questionable loyalties, inferior training, and the assumed inferior combat capability of the New Mexico Volunteers and militia could be exploited. Canby, a cautious commander anyhow, shared Sibley's extremely low opinion of the New Mexican troops. He valued his numerical advantage, but preferred to keep the Nuevo Mexicanos behind fortifications and in situations that would not require them to maneuver or take other decisive action while under fire. Not knowing that the Confederate artillery was insufficient to bombard his post into submission, Canby also felt compelled to prevent the Rebels from attaining the section of a nearby mesa from which shells could conceivably threaten his post. So, Sibley and the Southerners needed to draw the New Mexicans out of Fort Craig in order to get into it, while Canby and the Northerners needed to repulse the rebels without vacating their entrenchments.

On the morning of the sixteenth, the Sibley attempted to entice the Federals into battle on the plain immediately south of Fort Craig. Confederate troops demonstrated near an area known as Milligan Gulch. Canby responded by sending out a few cavalry to observe and draw fire from the Southerners. This would allow him to more effectively

²⁷Thompson, *Henry Hopkins Sibley*, 248; Canby to Adjutant General of the Army, 1 March 1862, OR, ser. 1, vol. 9, chapter XXI, 487-493.

gauge enemy troop strength. One of Carson's company commanders, a Prussian-born captain named Charles Deus, who now called Colorado home, participated in this excursion and later reported “heavy firing on both sides.”²⁸ Few casualties resulted and much to Sibley's chagrin, no general engagement ensued.

Still averse to the idea of storming the Union defenses at Fort Craig, Sibley and his officers sought out a different course of action that might draw Canby's men out of the Fort and into an open battle. During a whipping, cold dust-storm which came unseasonably early – the kind New Mexico is prone to in the early spring – the Texan officers settled on the idea of backtracking down the valley to the ford at Paraje, crossing over to the east side of the river, and thence marching in full view of Fort Craig on the opposite side of the Rio Grande toward another ford north of the post near Valverde. Hopefully, the federals would feel threatened by the possibility of being cut off from their base of supplies and possible aid from the north to the point that they would attempt to contest the river crossing, and thus be drawn into an open fight.²⁹ The plan worked according to its near-term conception, although not without considerable difficulty and unanticipated “fog and friction.”

From this point forward, Sibley was consulted on large-scale decisions, but did not perform the duties of field command. From 17 February through 22 February, throughout most of the action that would become known as the Battle of Valverde and its prelude, General Sibley remained confined in his ambulance due to health problems.

²⁸Daniel B. Costello, “Life of Captain Deus on the Frontier,” unpublished dictated memoir, Charles Deus collection, MSS 205 (FF25-26), History Colorado, 22-24. Flint Whitlock, *Distant Bugles, Distant Drums: The Union Response to the Confederate Invasion of New Mexico* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2006), 105-106.

²⁹Whitlock, *Distant Bugles, Distant Drums*, 106-107; Sibley to Cooper, 4 May 1862, OR ser. 1, vol. 9, ch. XXI, 507.

Several witnesses described him as inebriated – a condition Sibley seemed rather prone to in the course of his career – but whether his inebriation was the cause of his health problems, or the result of his efforts to self-medicate remains difficult to determine. Either way, the result was that Colonel Tom Green assumed command for most of the action.³⁰

On the morning of the nineteenth, the Texans forded the river through chilly February Rio Grande runoff and began their trek up its east bank astride Fort Craig. Once Canby became aware of this maneuver, he sent a party across the river to secure some higher points that could host Confederate artillery, and to prevent any surprise river crossings immediately abeam the fort. Kit Carson's First New Mexico Volunteers and Captain Henry Selden's battalion crossed the river early in the morning, and doubtless shivered atop the little knoll they were sent to protect as they struggled to keep dry and warm in the crisp February dawn.³¹

Meanwhile, the northbound rebel troops elected to angle off of the main road as they came abreast Fort Craig in order to remain out of range of federal artillery. This forced them through a rough badland area called a pedregal. Confederate supply wagons traversed rugged ravines and ventured into some deep sand which at times sank the wagons up to the hubs. Wagons had to be shuttled forward using two or three teams per rig until by four in the afternoon, the exhausted Texans attempted to call it a night.³² Canby then ordered Carson's bedraggled regiment along with Selden's men, reinforced by Piño's Second New Mexico Volunteer Infantry, to attack the exhausted Texans. But the

³⁰Thompson, *Henry Hopkins Sibley*, 252.

³¹Canby to Adjutant General of the Army, 1 March 1862, OR ser. 1, vol. 9, 488; Whitlock, *Distant Bugles, Distant Drums*, 106-107.

³²Canby to Adjutant General of the Army, 1 March 1862, OR ser. 1, vol. 9, 488-489.

Second never engaged. The men became disoriented at the first sounds of distant artillery shots from Trevanion Teel's battery and eventually fled, and the general assault failed to seriously damage the Confederates. This lack of execution on the part of the New Mexico Volunteers seemed to confirm Canby's (and almost everyone else's) estimation of the value of Volunteer and militia troops in any situation requiring maneuver or performance under the stress of battle. The attack was, however, successful in further taxing the Texans in their miserable dry camp in the sand. Components of the Union force – the cavalry, artillery, and Carson's men – slogged back through the river to overnight at the fort, while a few infantry units, including Piño's command (which apparently had not run all that far), Selden's battalion, and several other companies of regular and volunteer infantry remained to protect strategically important points such as a small piece of high ground from which the invaders could have established an artillery position from which to shell Fort Craig.³³

The forced dry camp may have been the costliest element of the entire battle for the Confederate side. During the night of the twentieth, Captain Paddy Graydon of the Independent Spy Company concocted a plan to strap explosives to two of the oldest, most decrepit animals of the Union mule train. The Union troops would then release the mules into the Confederate camp, where they would deliver their payload. Unfortunately for Graydon and federals, the mules proved unwilling to desert and sought to follow their masters right back toward their own camp. The fuses had already been lit, and before the poor mules could get back to Union camp, the explosives went off with a mighty flash exploding twenty-four-pounder shells and slinging mule gruel in all directions. Though

³³Canby to Adjutant General of the Army, 1 March 1862, OR ser. 1, vol. 9, 488-489; Taylor, *Bloody Valverde*, 33-35; Carson to Nicodemus, 26 Feb 1862, OR Ser. 1, vol. 9, 502-503.

the ruse may not have gone as Graydon planned, the great ruckus startled any Confederate livestock not tied down, and the thirst-crazed animals stampeded toward water. The U.S. troops captured between 200 and 300 Rebel horses and mules they could not afford to lose that night.³⁴

Sibley's plan to draw Union troops out of their fortifications and into an open fight by circumventing their position and forcing a fight over the ford to the north was eventually successful in its immediate design. His men continued northward toward the Valverde ford on the morning of 21 February. Understanding the importance of the ford, Canby sent an advance detachment of cavalry to hold it early that same day. Other federal units arrived throughout the morning as Canby pulled the remaining infantry back to the west side of the river.

Carson's men arrived at the field of battle relatively early, but the First New Mexico did not see action until being ordered across the river shortly after noon. Sometime between seven and eight in the morning, advance forces under Pyron and Roberts joined a small, meeting engagement at the ford. Each side sent reinforcements and the hottest part of the battle developed along the fords near the ruined remains of a village called Valverde. As the morning wore on, Carson's men were held in observation of the enemy as Confederate reinforcements stretched the line to their right. The First New Mexico mirrored those movements, slowly creeping up the west bank of the river.³⁵

After several exhausting charges and repulses by each side, General Canby finally arrived at the scene midafternoon and implemented a tactical plan. He understood that

³⁴Canby to Adjutant General of the Army, 1 March 1862, OR Ser. 1, vol. 9, 489; Jerry D. Thompson, *Desert Tiger: Captain Paddy Graydon and the Civil War in the Far Southwest* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1992), 35.

³⁵Whitlock, *Distant Bugles, Distant Drums*, 119; Carson to Nicodemus, 26 Feb 1862, OR ser. 1, vol. 9, 502.

numerically and in terms of the relative positions of the two sides, a direct frontal assault would almost certainly end in defeat, likely at great cost. He therefore devised a plan to use his right and center to enact a leftward wheeling movement that he hoped would enfilade the Confederates and sweep them from the field.³⁶ Canby placed Carson's regiment in the thick of this action along the Union right. Dubious though such a maneuver seems considering the rough terrain of tree thickets, old riverbeds, and other obstacles, a fortuitous turn of events came within a hair's breadth of bringing great success to Canby's plan. Just as the First New Mexico and the federal right flank advanced, they came across a charging rebel detachment under Major Henry W. Raguet. Raguet and his detachment of the Fourth Texas Mounted Volunteers had apparently been sent to dispatch a twenty-four pounder artillery piece that had been harassing the Confederate side. Just as Raguet's detachment approached within a hundred yards of the advancing Union skirmishers, Carson's entire column fired into the rebels, whom they had discovered moving forward diagonally in their front. Men fell. Horses wheeled. Those who could, sought refuge. Carson's New Mexico Volunteers sent Raguet's men reeling in confusion, creating a golden opportunity for Union arms to crush Sibley's invasion once and for all.³⁷

Just as it appeared that the massive advance along the federal right was about to carry the day, Colonel Tom Green commanding in place of the "ill" General Sibley ordered an all-out charge aimed at McRae's guns holding the center point of the Union line. Canby's wheeling maneuver had used these six guns as a pivot point, and that segment of the line had been weakened to provide troops for the right flank advance.

³⁶Canby to Adjutant General of the Army, 1 March 1862, OR ser. 1, vol. 9, 489-490.

³⁷Carson to Nicodemus, 26 Feb 1862, OR ser. 1, vol. 9, 502, 517; Frazier, *Blood and Treasure*, 173-175.

Canby ordered Carson's regiment to reverse course and retreat. After a daring seven hundred yard charge into artillery-fired canister (a projectile filled with dozens of small, anti-personnel balls that effectively turned field pieces into oversized shotguns), the Texans poured in and around McRae's guns, and desperate hand to hand fighting ensued. Artillery and rifle fire gave way to bayonets and whatever a man could swing. After a few moments of bloody struggle, rebels drove away the Union gun crews, captured McRae's guns, and turned them against the federals.³⁸

Selden's battalion provided covering fire as U.S. forces retreated to the west bank of the Rio Grande in various stages of order and haste. Carson claimed his unit followed orders to withdraw under good order and discipline, while exuberant rebels described a more chaotic scene in which fleeing troops looked more like a herd of wild mustangs plunging into the river than a retreating army.³⁹ In any case, no one on the Union side was pleased with the battlefield result. Although Confederate forces had indeed captured the ford and severed the line between Fort Craig and the rest of New Mexico their victory failed to prove much. Canby's men could have ended the threat to New Mexico by destroying Sibley's force when he had the opportunity, but the Confederates had not really improved the circumstances they had faced to start the battle. They still lacked enough livestock, food, and supplies to execute General Sibley's audacious plan to conquer New Mexico, let alone California or Colorado. In fact, during the course of the battle, the Texans had actually *lost* critical stock and supply wagons. So while the Battle of Valverde can reasonably be described as a Confederate tactical victory – they did after

³⁸Whitlock, *Distant Bugles, Distant Drums*, 134-135; Scurry to Jackson, 22 Feb 1862, OR ser. 1, vol. 9, 515; Carson to Nicodemus, 26 Feb 1862, OR ser. 1, vol. 9, 502; Frazier, *Blood and Treasure*, 173-175.

³⁹Carson to Nicodemus, 26 Feb 1862, OR ser. 1, vol. 9, 502; Noel, *A Campaign from Santa Fe to the Mississippi*, 19.

all achieve their objective of capturing the ford, as well as attaining that dubious standard of holding the field of battle at the end of the day – it was a hollow victory at best, and more realistically a pyrrhic victory. Other more pressing goals of capturing Union stocks of food and supplies, and winning local support were not achieved by Sibley's army.

Carson's regimental command at Valverde was significant, but he was a subordinate commander. As such, his responsibility at that battle did not include strategic decision-making. Regardless, he effectively demonstrated his ability to manage a unit of troops others believed less than reliable. Eleven troops of the First New Mexico Volunteer Infantry deserted during the Battle of Valverde, but Carson's command obeyed orders and performed respectably enough for its commander to receive accolades in General Canby's after action report. This recognition stands in contrast to the scourging Canby gave the Second New Mexico Volunteer Infantry in the same report.⁴⁰ Colonel Piño's name is noticeably absent from any commendations in the reports. Furthermore, once the immediate threat of Confederate invasion had passed, General Canby sought to consolidate the reliable officers and men of four New Mexico Volunteer Regiments into a single, effective force to use against the territory's hostile Indians. When pressed to choose one man from this pool most suited to command territorial volunteers, he chose Kit Carson. Canby saw Carson as the best man for a difficult command in which he would have far more autonomy than he exercised against the rebel invaders.⁴¹

We have little surviving evidence to shed light in Carson's personal interactions with his Volunteer Infantrymen, and only this one battle to testify to his conventional military command. After the Texans pushed the federals back into Fort Craig, they

⁴⁰Canby to Adjutant General of the Army, 1 March 1862, OR ser. 1, vol. 9, 491-3.

⁴¹Dunlay, *Kit Carson and the Indians*, 236.

continued northward, eventually occupying Albuquerque and Santa Fe. Most of the invasion force was met by U.S. troops and Colorado Volunteers in Glorieta Pass, near Fort Union, the most formidable Union post in the territory. Again, the Confederate forces won a tactical victory, pushing the blue coated troops out of the valley. But again, the victory came at disastrous cost. During the battle, a party of federals commanded by the fighting parson John M. Chivington and guided by Manuel Chaves found, captured, and destroyed the entire remaining rebel supply train, which had been left under a small guard of the infirm, incarcerated, and otherwise indisposed. Unable to meet all of their needs foraging, the rebel invaders were forced to slink back to Texas on a long, starving, forlorn march leaving a bitter feeling best encapsulated by Sibley's remark that other than blocking the path to California, the whole territory was not worth a quarter of the blood and treasure spent in attempting its conquest.⁴²

Canby intended to manage the remainder of the campaign from headquarters and assigned Carson to oversee the New Mexico Volunteers at Fort Craig. The overall performance of the New Mexico Volunteers at Valverde so disgusted and disappointed Canby that he determined to purge the volunteers of incompetent officers and men. In early May of 1862, Canby ordered the best men from the other New Mexico units transferred to the First New Mexico under the best leader: Colonel Kit Carson. Even in the midst of the Civil War and with known major Indian campaigns looming on the horizon, Canby ordered that all Volunteers and militia who had not been selected for transfer to Carson's unit be summarily discharged by the end of the month. Carson remained at Fort Craig, commanding the newly consolidated First New Mexico

⁴²Sibley to Cooper, 4 May 1862, OR ser. 1, vol. 9, 511-512.

Volunteers for the balance of the Confederate invasion.⁴³ In September of 1862, Brigadier General James H. Carleton arrived in the territory, marching volunteers from California, eager to drive the Confederates out of the West. Upon his arrival, he took command of the Department of New Mexico from Canby, who was transferred to the East. Carleton and Carson knew each other from fighting the Jicarilla Apache campaign together in 1854. As departmental commander, Carleton utilized the old frontiersman in the military role he was best suited for, fighting hostile Indians. Over the next three years, Colonel (and later Brigadier General) Christopher Carson would personally command major expeditions against the Mescalero Apaches, the Navajos, and the Comanches and Kiowas. Carleton trusted Carson and knew how to cajole the old mountain man into campaigns even when he was determined to retire to Taos and his wife, Josefa. Carleton trusted Carson, and Carson's extreme loyalty made the two brutally effective partners, in spite of their vast differences in personality, background, and education.

During his service under Carleton, Carson was effectively a field commander. By nature and necessity, this role gave him far more authority and autonomy than he had exercised as a regimental commander against the rebels. Carleton had a domineering reputation and often exasperated subordinates by constantly meddling in their affairs. The foremost expert on the U.S. Army and its role in Indian Wars, Robert M. Utley, argues that no frontier officer ever exhibited a more effective combination of ability, zeal, and deep insight into Indian warfare than did James H. Carleton.⁴⁴ The more-widely-

⁴³Lawrence C. Kelly, *Navajo Roundup: Selected Correspondence of Kit Carson's Expedition against the Navajo, 1863-1865* (Boulder, CO: The Pruett Publishing Company, 1970), 2-3.

⁴⁴Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 233-234.

held opinion among historians is that although Carleton may have been creative and intelligent, most contemporaries found his vanity, imperiousness, and complete lack of compassion quite abrasive.⁴⁵ Given the tactical shift toward resource destruction, and especially given the nature of Indian warfare, Carleton's deep understanding of the nature of that kind of warfare probably led him to his apparent lack of compassion, and that lack of compassion led to his effectiveness, however lethal and destructive.

Given Carleton's rigid approach to policy application and unwillingness to back away from those sometimes compassionless instructions, Kit Carson may have been the ideal field commander. Much has been made of Carson's loyalty and obedience to commanders to the point that he is sometimes seen as a stooge to genocidal policies at best, and a perhaps even a willing accomplice. Carson indeed valued loyalty greatly, but there are times when his loyalty was reflected more in executing the intent of his orders rather than the letter of those instructions. It is an Independence historians have often overlooked by focusing on his loyalty to and respect for his military superiors. When Carleton delivered unreasonably harsh orders, Carson's response was almost passive aggressive. Twice, he was given orders to kill all the men of a particular tribe. In both cases, Carson directly disobeyed Carleton's execution orders when he was able to achieve the strategic objectives without doing so. To Carleton's credit, so long as Carson applied the intent of his policies, Carson received no significant or known rebukes for sparing male Indian captives. Carleton often sought to micromanage Carson's campaigns, but so long as Carson accomplished the mission, he subtly deferred to Carson's methodological expertise.

⁴⁵Arrell Morgan Gibson, "James H. Carleton" in *Soldiers West*, ed. Paul A. Hutton (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 59-77.

Fighting the Mescaleros

Over the past several decades, there has been some argument about whether or not Indian raids or the Army's response to them changed and to what extent that may have occurred during the Civil War. It was first assumed that since the majority of Civil War strife took place in the East, an outflow of Union troops in that direction must have occurred during the Civil War. As is often the case, reexamination shows a more complex set of circumstances. While seasoned regular troops indeed marched East, the actual numbers of troops in frontier territories like New Mexico actually grew with the size of the Army. The Regular Army was minuscule and far from adequate for frontier duty in the 1850s.⁴⁶ The kind of soldier manning the frontier posts shifted greatly during the Civil War. Most of the Union volunteers who populated frontier army posts were themselves frontiersmen. They tended to have a far more black-and-white view of what they saw as the "Indian problem." Easterners who did not have personal, immediate, and painful experience with Indian depredations generally had far more compassion for frontier Indians than did pioneering white settlers. Volunteer units filled with settlers and homesteaders who had lost family members, homes, and livestock to Indian raiders could be far more aggressive than regular troops who lacked personal histories of conflict with Indians and the desire for vengeance. Nowhere was this more true than in New Mexico, where many Nuevo Mexicano Volunteers came from families with centuries-old histories of tit-for-tat thieving, slaving, and raiding with the Navajos and other regional tribes.

Conflict between Indians and settlers did not subside during the war. Indian raiding seemed to be either opportunistic or revenge driven. For the most part, raids did

⁴⁶Durwood Ball, *Army Regulars on the Western Frontier, 1848-1861*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), xix-xxxi.

not seem to be partisan. The Mescaleros, for example, were equal opportunity raiders, harassing Lieutenant Colonel Baylor's Arizona troops as well as federal units in southeastern New Mexico – whichever group was most readily available. Union authorities often saw these raids as political side-taking. Carleton nursed a more or less constant fear that Confederate agitators were working tirelessly to convince plains tribes to harass Union troops in New Mexico. If not directly instigated by Southern encouragement, he believed Indian attacks were at least intentionally launched while federal attention was diverted to the Confederacy.

Certainly Carleton felt this way, and this belief drove his Indian policy in New Mexico. Before turning over command of the department, General Canby had laid out plans to subdue the Mescalero Apaches and Navajos simultaneously. Carleton thought it unwise to take on two formidable tribes at once. In his view, the Mescaleros were weaker and closer, and should be dealt with first.⁴⁷ There had been a treaty between the Mescaleros and the U.S. government prior to the war, and Carleton believed that Mescalero attacks and abrogation of the treaty during time of war merited special punishment. These mitigating circumstances led Carleton to issue his infamous orders to Carson directing his command to kill all Mescalero men, wherever they might be found. As with nearly all treaties between the U.S. government and Indian peoples, the agreement was rife with problems and misunderstandings that effectively caused both sides to violate the treaty.

Over the winter of 1854-55, the theft of some twenty-five hundred sheep had inspired a two pronged assault into the Mescalero heartland. In truth, a spate of New

⁴⁷Dunlay, *Kit Carson and the Indians*, 241.

Mexico raids by the tribe led Brevet Brigadier General John Garland to attempt to militarily end the Mescalero Apaches' role in the back-and-forth raid and revenge that had plagued New Mexico for some 250 years. Captain Richard Ewell, who would find greater fame during the next decade as one of Robert E. Lee's chief lieutenants, led one column out of Fort Thorn, while Captain Henry Stanton led another party of about the same size from Los Lunas. Ewell marched out with about eighty men and chased the Mescaleros around the headwaters of the Peñasco in the middle of the winter. Ewell's party converged with Stanton in mid-January, and the combined force encountered stiff resistance near a couple of Mescalero villages. After their families escaped, the Indians were forced to fall back. In the process they lost most of their winter shelter and stores. In one of the dust-ups outside a Mescalero village, the well-liked, young Captain Stanton was killed.⁴⁸

Ewell's campaign felt dismal, burdensome, frigid, and futile to his troops.⁴⁹ But as forlorn as Fort Thorn must have seemed to these frontier soldiers and dragoons, the Mescaleros found their existence far more desperate. On the verge of starvation and exposure, several bands and headmen from the area around Sierra Blanca and the Upper Peñasco sought to capitulate and end hostilities. A large Army contingent of upwards of three hundred troops under Colonel Dixon S. Miles ran across most of the New Mexico Mescaleros, but by this point they were bending over backward to surrender. Miles had faith in the sincerity of those Natives he had subdued, though Garland questioned whether or not the U.S. had seen the last of the Mescalero raids. Miles told the

⁴⁸C. L. Sonnichsen, *The Mescalero Apaches*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 77-80; Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 150-151.

⁴⁹Sonnichsen, *The Mescalero Apaches*, 79.

Mescalero band he had encountered that he personally had no authority to make peace, and with the help of Mescalero Agent Michael Steck, he arranged a meeting at Fort Thorn between the defeated local Mescalero leaders and the New Mexico governor.⁵⁰

As a matter of practicality, Miles requested that the Mescaleros send their “head chief” to negotiate this treaty with New Mexico governor David Merriwether. In absence of anyone who met that description, Barranquito represented the tribe – or at least those several hundred who had capitulated at Log Cañon. Submission seems to have been a consensus among that group, and if anyone could have spoken for the entire party, it would have been Barranquito, who seems to have been the most-prominent Northern Mescalero leader of his time. But Miles mistakenly believed (or at least wanted to believe) that Barranquito spoke for “the whole nation” of Mescaleros. Even he knew that not all of the Mescaleros were present at Log Cañon. Bands roaming the Guadalupe and Davis Mountains in the Trans-Pecos region of Texas might not have even known of any treaty negotiations, let alone feeling bound to honor an agreement.⁵¹

Governor David Meriwether entered the United States into a flurry of treaties with New Mexico tribes during 1855, in an attempt to impose drastic limits on Indian claims to land. One of them was with the Mescaleros. None were ever ratified. The United States really only intended to ration the Mescaleros and other tribes like them as long as it took them to learn how to farm. This they attempted along the Rio Grande near Fort Thorn. This tenuous peace lasted through the end of the decade, influenced as much by the

⁵⁰Ibid., 80-81; Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 151; Miles to Steck 3 April 1855, Michael Steck Papers, MSS 134 BC, Center for Southwest Research (CSWR).

⁵¹Miles to Steck 3 April 1855, Steck Papers, CSWR.

presence of the forts – including a new Fort Stanton built right in the heart of Mescalero country – as it did Mescalero desire to farm or to receive government annuities.⁵²

Barranquito and the Mescaleros under his influence had agreed to cease their raiding. They understood the U.S. Army to have a reciprocal obligation to prevent their historical Nuevo Mexicano enemies from raiding and abusing them as well. When Miles received New Mexican reports of Mescalero livestock thefts that even he understood to be questionable, he pressured the Barranquito and the Mescalero leaders to help resolve the issue and return the livestock. Out of weakness, Barranquito complied. He noted to Miles, however, that he wished the army exercised the same diligence and sense of justice when Nuevo Mexicanos stole their livestock and tack, and even committed atrocities on their women.⁵³ From 1858 until the Confederate threat materialized in the early 1860s, particularly in Doña Ana County, there remained a near constant quarrel over stolen livestock and raids between the Mescaleros at Steck's agency near Fort Thorn and the Hispanic New Mexicans and their militia at Mesilla. Undoubtedly the local militia took pot shots and even organized attacks on the agency Indians near the fort. The culpability of at least some individual Mescaleros in the disappearance of the Mesilla livestock remains quite possible, but more difficult to prove now than it was then.⁵⁴

Fueled by hunger, a sense of betrayal, and a drive for vengeance against the Nuevo Mexicanos, both the Mescaleros and Navajos increased their raiding activity during the early years of the Civil War. Certainly, these tribes were aware of the new quarrel between the blue- and gray- clad American soldiers. Whether they saw that

⁵²Sonnichsen, *The Mescalero Apaches*, 81ff.; Utley *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 151-152.

⁵³Miles to Steck, 29 Oct 1855, Steck Papers, CSWR.

⁵⁴Sonnichsen, *The Mescalero Apaches*, 87-88.

quarrel as an opportunity to abrogate old treaties cannot be fully determined. As previously, most modern historians have concluded that troop strength in New Mexico increased rather than decreased during the Civil War, and have thus discounted the absence of troops as motivation for increased raiding. Whatever the motivation or justification, native raiding escalated. As soon as the Confederate threat had been turned back, outgoing Department of New Mexico commander Canby turned his attention to the next-most immediate threat, the local raiding Indians. Before he could undertake this next military challenge, he was sent east and replaced by Brigadier General James H. Carleton.⁵⁵

General Carleton understood that taking on the Mescaleros and Navajos simultaneously would be unwise, and further prioritized his military task. The Mescaleros were less numerous, lived in better-known territory, and would be easier to dispatch quickly. He sent three units comprised of a total of nine companies under Carson, and California captains McCleave and Roberts out after the Mescaleros. These units converged from Fort Stanton, Fort Fillmore, and Franklin (now El Paso), Texas. Events played out not all that dissimilar to the campaign in 1855. Incensed that these Indians would commence raiding after having signed a treaty, Carleton believed that they had forfeited any right to re-initiate peace talks. He ordered that all men be killed wherever found, and that women and children be captured and rounded up.⁵⁶

⁵⁵Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 233-235; Dunlay, *Kit Carson and the Indians*, 240-242; Sonnichsen, *The Mescalero Apaches*, 106-110.

⁵⁶Dunlay, *Kit Carson and the Indians*, 241; Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 234-235; Sonnichsen, *The Mescalero Apaches*, 109-110; Carleton to Carson, 12 October 1862, *Condition of the Indian Tribes: Report of the Joint Special Committee, Appointed Under Joint Resolution of March 3, 1865, with Appendix* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1867), (RCIT), 100. Carleton to Lorenzo Thomas 9 November 1862, RCIT, 101.

Several of the less cooperative Mescaleros headed south to the Guadalupe and Davis Mountains, areas as yet sparsely populated by whites. Others remained, believing a discussion of the matter would be more productive. Captain James “Paddy” Graydon (of Valverde fame) first encountered Manuelito and José Largo, some of the more senior chiefs of the group living near Sierra Blanca. Manuelito and José Largo appear to have been hailing him in an attempt to surrender, though Graydon later contested that assertion. If not attempting to surrender to Graydon, they were probably at least en route to Santa Fe to speak with Carleton for that purpose. Graydon apparently took Carleton’s instructions quite literally. He shot both men on sight rather than inquiring as to their intentions, and fired into their party before the rest could disperse. In the end, about a dozen Mescaleros were killed, and seventeen horses captured.⁵⁷

While at first the Graydon-Manuelito affair looked like a great victory to Carleton, Carson soon convinced him otherwise. On information apparently gathered from an acquaintance of Carson’s, a Dr. John M. Whitlock, it was learned that some of the captured livestock had changed hands, to the profit of a Monzano resident named Charles Beach. Carleton reprimanded Graydon, and a scathing letter decrying Graydon’s barbarity penned by Whitlock ran in one of the Santa Fe newspapers. One November morning in 1862, Graydon found Whitlock playing cards outside Fort Stanton. A shouting match escalated into a running gunfight, producing several wild shots. Both men took cover and exchanged gunfire until Graydon took a round in the chest that would prove mortal three days later. Graydon’s troopers chased down Whitlock,

⁵⁷Edward Sabin, *Kit Carson Days, 1809-1868*, vol. 2., (1935, reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 703-4; Sonnichsen, *The Mescalero Apaches*, 99-100; Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 236; Dunlay, *Kit Carson and the Indians*, 244; Carleton to Lorenzo Thomas, 9 November 1862, RCIT, 101; Paul A. Hutton, *The Apache Wars: The Hunt for Geronimo, the Apache Kid, and the Captive Boy Who Started the Longest War in American History* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2016), 80-83.

wounded already in the side and right hand. They gunned him down and threw his corpse in a ditch. As harsh as Carleton's orders had been, he adopted Carson's more skeptical view of the whole affair. Carleton had Beach arrested, and advised Carson to return any captured livestock to the surviving members of Manuelito's band if he determined Graydon's encounter with the Mescaleros had not been "fair and open."⁵⁸

In the meantime, McCleave's party skirmished with another band of Mescaleros in Dog Canyon, southwest of Fort Stanton. McCleave's fight, combined with the Graydon affair, proved enough to convince about three quarters of the Mescalero Apaches to proceed directly to Fort Stanton and surrender to Carson, whom they apparently trusted over McCleave and Graydon. Carson, in turn, sent a contingent of a few of the remaining chiefs to Santa Fe for peace talks with General Carleton, per Carleton's orders. Carleton instructed Carson to consolidate the pacified Mescaleros at Fort Stanton and then ship them northwest to his new project at Bosque Redondo, near Fort Sumner. He designed this plan to separate the Indians who had already capitulated from the still-hostile bands until the entire tribe had ceased hostilities. At least with respect to the Mescaleros, Carleton initially only intended to use Bosque Redondo as a means of isolating the recalcitrants and preventing recidivism among those who had surrendered. Carleton undoubtedly understood that one of the many problems with Indian treaties was that Indian political organization did not truly allow the leaders of one band to speak for an entire tribe. Once Carleton had the entire tribe corralled, only then could a true and meaningful peace be made.⁵⁹

⁵⁸Thompson, *Desert Tiger*, 49-63; Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, 704-705; Sonnichsen, *The Mescalero Apaches*, 100, Carleton to Carson, 25 November 1862, RCIT 101-102; Carleton to Carson 26 November 1862, RCIT 102-103. Hutton, *The Apache Wars*, 80-83.

⁵⁹Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, 704-5. Dunlay, *Kit Carson and the Indians*, 245. Carleton to Carson, 25 November 1862, RCIT 101-2. Sonnichsen, *The Mescalero Apaches*, 100.

The 1862 Mescalero campaign indeed ended far sooner than Carleton or Carson could have hoped. Carson had tried to beg off the mission to go spend time at home, but Carleton told him he could not depart before rounding up at least a hundred captives. By the spring of 1863, over four hundred Mescaleros had made the journey from Fort Stanton to Bosque Redondo. Carson and Carleton declared the job done, and the now-aging mountain man was finally allowed to pay his wife, Josefa, and their four children a visit in February of 1863. Carson once again attempted to resign. He insisted he had joined the army to fight rebels, not Indians. Carson dictated a polite, but clear resignation letter relaying his sincere, intense desire to go home to his family. Carson's trip home was only temporary, however, as Carleton rejected Carson's resignation. Likewise, the Mescalero pacification proved not as complete as Carleton might have wished. At least a hundred warriors either fled to join other bands, or roved the New Mexico mountains striking wagon trains and isolated military units as the opportunity presented itself. As early as March, the renegades struck a Nuevo Mexicano salt collecting party nearly right under the nose of Major Arthur Morrison, who had been left in charge at Fort Stanton. Up at Fort McRae (now submerged by Elephant Butte Reservoir) in June, Captain Albert Pfeiffer accompanied by his wife, two servant girls, and an armed escort, attempted to nurse a couple of Apache arrow wounds in a nearby hot spring. Mescaleros drove off his escort, and killed the women. Pfeiffer himself was riddled with arrows, but floated off in the water and escaped by crawling and stumbling the ten miles back to the fort. A private Nicolas Quintana was captured and burnt alive just a few days later on the way from Fort Stanton to Santa Fe. No one knew exactly which Indians perpetrated the last incident, but it took place right in the heart of Mescalero country. Incidents like these may have

been the impetus behind Carleton's delay and eventual change of heart about returning them to Sierra Blanca. He later decided to make farming pueblos out of the Mescaleros, and sent a priest to Fort Sumner to convert them to Christianity. Carleton left them at Bosque Redondo. The Mescaleros at the Bosque tried farming longer than most southwest tribes the government attempted to confine in the Nineteenth Century, but in the long run, they refused to voluntarily adopt a permanent agricultural lifestyle. Like most tribes, the Mescaleros came to rely on the government's dole, and got hungry when the unreliable delivery of rations began to falter. They left on their own terms a few years later. For the time being, however, Carleton considered the mission accomplished and consolidated his force for a more ambitious campaign, this time against the Navajo.⁶⁰

Even moreso than among the Mescaleros, warfare in New Mexico had grown to be a tradition Navajos shared with the local Hispanic population. The two groups perpetually led livestock and slaving raids on one another. From the time General Stephen Watts Kearny entered the then-Mexican village of Las Vegas, New Mexico in August 1846, Americans had been promising to "correct all of this" Indian raiding. The old quarrels between Nuevo Mexicanos and the Navajos had been mutually reinstigated for so long that no single event could be identified as the genesis of the conflict. Clearly, though, Kearny had made this promise to Nuevo Mexicanos on behalf of the United States. Keeping that promise meant putting an end to Navajo raiding. Ironically, the involvement of Hispanic New Mexicans with their long-ingrained culture-wide grievances in the government's operations against the Navajos became an obstacle to the

⁶⁰Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 236-7. Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, 705-6. Carleton to Lorenzo Thomas, 19 March 1863, RCIT 106; Dunlay, *Kit Carson and the Indians*, 246-7. Sonnichsen, *The Mescalero Apaches*, 102-3; Carson to Carleton 3 February 1863, in Kelly, *Navajo Roundup*, 15-16; Sides, *Blood and Thunder*, 382-383.

actual cessation of hostilities between the United States and the Navajos and other tribes. Nuevo Mexicanos serving the United States as New Mexico Volunteers often could not resist taking advantage of their recently vanquished foes by stealing livestock or even stealing children or raping the women of Indian bands either already cooped up like sitting ducks in confinement or marching defenselessly en route to such a place.⁶¹

General Carleton assigned Kit Carson to lead those New Mexico Volunteers on yet another, even more ambitious Indian campaign. This time, Carson's task was to make good General Kearny's old promise to "correct all this" Indian raiding – if not completely, to take the largest step in that direction. Carson had been home for just a few short weeks with his children and Josefa. Once again, when Carleton beckoned, Carson demurred. Once again, at the insistence of a ranking officer, Carson allowed himself to be convinced to leave home on another great adventure. Of course, Carleton did not send Carson against the Navajos on a whim. He knew long before he allowed Carson to return home after the defeat of the Mescaleros that Kit's time in Taos would be short. General Canby had concluded before the Civil War interrupted his plans that the Navajos would have to be decisively defeated or New Mexico would never see an end to the raiding. The army had been campaigning against the Navajo from Fort Defiance since 1858, and Canby began a fairly successful resource destruction campaign against the Navajos in 1861. Within just a few months, many of the leaders sued for peace.⁶²

As with negotiations between the United States government and other tribes, achieving a peace agreement with the Navajos as an entire group proved virtually

⁶¹Hampton Sides, *Blood and Thunder: An Epic of the American West* (New York: Random House, 2006), 74.

⁶²Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 168-173; Durwood Ball, "The U.S. Army in New Mexico, 1848-1886," *Telling New Mexico: A New History*, ed. Marta Weigle with Frances Levine and Louise Stiven (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2009), 180-182.

impossible. A primary problem in the government's negotiations with the Mescaleros had been that chiefs could at best only speak for a particular band, but were asked to make agreements binding the entire tribe. Agreements with the Navajos tended to break down on the basis of class and economic interests, rather than on intra-tribal clan jurisdictions. Wealthier Navajos, known as "*ricos*," tended to favor more peaceful intercourse with white Americans. Spanish-speaking New Mexicans referred to poorer Navajos as "*ladrones*," which literally means thieves. Navajo leaders tended to be *ricos*, and they made agreements with the government. The *ricos*, however, could not really control the actions, raids, or thefts of the *ladrones*. When U.S. officials or local *vigilantes* sought to retaliate, no one could find the thieves, who had little to lose anyhow. The possessions of the *ricos* made them lucrative, stationary targets. Thus, they bore the brunt of the retaliatory raids. This pattern tended to make *ladrones* out of *ricos*, which led to an ever-shrinking peace contingent, and an ever-strengthening warlike Navajo faction.⁶³

Tensions had been on the rise, anyhow, but there was a specific triggering event between the Navajos and the United States that seems to have elevated sporadic resistance into full-scale war. In a misguided effort to overawe the Indians with the presence of what was intended to seem an incredibly powerful force, the United States established a series of forts in the heart of Navajo country. The army opened Fort Fauntleroy in 1860, near Ojo del Oso, a place Navajo tribesmen visited regularly. As a consequence of a severe drought, the fort became a dispensary for rations, which drew even larger crowds to the area. Before long, some very raucous, high-stakes horse racing

⁶³Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 172, 237-8; Dunlay, *Kit Carson and the Indians*, 255; Testimony of Kit Carson, RCIT Appendix page 97.

emerged. The troopers at Fort Fauntleroy often wagered government supplies and even livestock that their horses could beat the swiftest of the Navajo ponies. Commanders apparently winked at these indulgences, which they must have seen as morale boosters, or even the seeds of a more amicable relationship with the Navajos. In a standing irony, people often look to sporting events as an avenue to peace, friendship, and understanding. Then, as now, a hotly contested affair was more likely to breed bad feelings than good.⁶⁴

One fall afternoon in 1861, one such horse race devolved into a real battle. A much anticipated, highly lubricated, and much wagered upon race pitted Dr. John Kavanaugh's fleet thoroughbred against a high strung little Navajo sorrel. The race had to be restarted three times when the Navajo jockey complained that both horses had not been started simultaneously. Horses finally made a clean start and the race ran even at first. Gradually, Dr. Kavanaugh's horse crept out to a lead. Some reports say that the little sorrel then cut in front of and under the thoroughbred, and then undeniably charged off the course altogether, leaving Kavanaugh's horse to prance across the finish line uncontested to a cheering blue-clad crowd. Most of the Indian spectators – on the losing side of large bets – believed someone had tampered with the sorrel's reins, rendering it uncontrollable. Their demands for a rematch were met with much celebratory derision, and the Navajos were left to angrily stalk back to camp. Shortly thereafter, some staggered to the fort and drunkenly demand the return of their lost wagers. Somewhere in the fracas and confusion, a firearm was discharged. Lieutenant Colonel Manuel Chaves later said he believed the fort to have been under attack by the Navajos (his testimony was refuted by a later witness, upon investigation). Chaves himself had a long history of

⁶⁴Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 238; Sides, *Blood and Thunder*, 270.

partisan warfare against the Navajos, had lost family members and very nearly his own life fighting them. Chaves ordered howitzers to blast into the Navajo crowd, and a slaughter ensued. The New Mexico Volunteers killed at least twenty Indians, with no accounting for how many of those were women or children.⁶⁵

Word leaked out about Chaves's escalation of the hostilities at Fort Fauntleroy, and the government sent Carson to investigate. World events soon swallowed up concerns over the Fort Fauntleroy affair, however, as the nation descended into Civil War. Chaves received only accolades for vanquishing the attacking Navajos. The entire event seemed to fade from memory – even Fort Fauntleroy itself was renamed Fort Lyon, after its namesake, Colonel Thomas T. Fauntleroy resigned his commission to fight for the Confederacy. Colonel Canby withdrew forces from the post to prepare his defenses for the oncoming Confederates. This only emboldened the Navajos, with Chaves's slaughter fresh on their minds. Their raiding and hostility increased until Carleton sent Carson to quell the tribe in May of 1863.⁶⁶

Many of James H. Carleton's contemporaries had good things to say about him. He was helpful, a Christian, kind, loyal, diligent, and above all energetic. Critics, of which there are more now than in Carleton's time, would point out that Carleton's great energy came with an unstoppable inertia: he would not reverse course or reconsider, and he could not admit a mistake and retrace steps. He was unbending, stern, zealous.⁶⁷ It may well have been this dogged steadfastness that allowed him to accomplish military victories over Indian tribes that his predecessors could only have dreamed of. It certainly

⁶⁵Sides, *Blood and Thunder*, 270-5.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Kelly, *Navajo Roundup*, 5.

must have made his adversaries feel boxed in a binary world. When several Navajos came to Santa Fe in December 1862 to learn what the government had in store for them, Carleton relayed his understanding of how a reservation-type policy would be implemented. Regardless of their previous individual cooperation, each man, family, and band was left with two alternatives: permanently move to Bosque Redondo, or fight.⁶⁸ Carleton apparently did not hear back from those Navajos and interpreted that silence – no doubt correctly – as their selection of the latter. The rigidity of these orders had a purpose. Just as he had with the Mescaleros, Carleton intended to conform the Navajos to his black-and-white world as he prosecuted the campaign against the hostiles. He believed he had to separate the peaceful Indians from the hostiles so there would be no doubt about who was who, and to prevent the perpetual recidivism that plagued U.S. government interactions with loose federations of Indians whose intentions were not homogeneous.

It is possible that Carson knew of his impending assignment earlier, but a letter penned by Carleton on 11 April 1863 left no doubts that the venerable frontiersman would be called upon to lead this prosecution of the Navajos. Carson hit the trail in early July with six mounted volunteer companies, three dismounted companies. Another four companies (one mounted, three dismounted) under his regimental second-in-command, Lieutenant Colonel J. Francisco Chaves,⁶⁹ stood at the ready, posted at Fort Wingate. This total of over a thousand strong comprised the largest force ever fielded against the Navajo nation.⁷⁰ Carleton further authorized Carson to employ a small number of Indian

⁶⁸Carleton to Lorenzo Thomas, 20 December 1862, and passim in *Navajo Roundup*, 17-19.

⁶⁹Cousin of Manuel Chaves

⁷⁰Kelly, *Navajo Roundup*, 19-20; Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, vol. 2, 708-709.

and “Mexican” guides, suggesting one man from Abiquiu by name. The general was exacting, as always, stating that their employment should not start until the date the campaign kicked off, and that only a few of the absolute best men ought to be engaged. Carson had a long standing friendship with the Utes, for whom he had been an for several years before the war. The Utes had been hereditary enemies of the Navajos even longer than the Nuevo Mexicanos had been, so it seemed natural, especially to Carson, that they would provide invaluable service on any expedition against the Navajos. Strong as the army contingent may have been, it was indeed the Utes who drew first blood, and captured the first Navajo stock. Kit Carson of course understood the motivations of the Utes better than anyone. In order to secure their most diligent services, he lobbied the general to grant them their traditional plunder: livestock and slaves. Carleton may not have understood the cultural importance of plundering as motivation for the Ute raiders. He encouraged their capture of livestock, but demanded it be turned over to the commissary. He authorized bounties on the captured livestock, however. He had ordered the Navajo men killed, and the women and children captured. Considering that the United States was in the midst of an anti-slavery war, one can see the wisdom in Carleton’s forbidding the Utes from enslaving their Navajo captives. Besides, the presence of captured family members at Bosque Redondo could also have played a role in encouraging the capitulation of hostiles separated from their loved ones.⁷¹

Carleton’s orders to “shoot the men,” proved difficult to bring to fruition, had Carson truly sought to implement them in the first place. As was nearly always the case in the army’s wars against Indians, the Navajos strategically avoided battle scenarios in

⁷¹Carson to Carleton, 24 July 1863, *Navajo Roundup*, 26-9; Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, 711-712; Carleton to Carson, 18 August 1863, *Navajo Roundup*, 31-32.

which they would be at a disadvantage. Most of the scrapes and scuffles of the latter fall of 1863 resulted in a casualty or two, with a much larger loss to the Navajos in livestock or supplies. Carson sent a report back to headquarters, in response to a scolding from Carleton on the 19 of August. Carson's results over the next few weeks: burned fifty acres of corn, captured two women and three children, burned twelve acres of wheat, burned five acres of corn, killed one Indian, burned ten acres of corn, captured five horses, burned fifteen acres of corn, captured a woman, two children and two horses, found some pumpkins and beans, one Navajo killed. In one of the small August skirmishes, Carson lost the only officer to fall during his campaign against the Navajos. A brash young major named Joseph Cummings charged up a canyon against orders in pursuit of a small Indian party, running into a small ambush. His body, however, had not been mutilated in any way by the time the rest of the troops reached him. Major Cummings inexplicably carried on his person over \$4,000 – all of which was still there. The speedy departure of Cummings' assailants likely reflects the increased state of concern for families and food stuffs brought on by the army's presence.⁷²

Carson made his final report on that first stage of scouting from Fort Canby on 31 August, 1863. Oddly, the recent events at Fort Canby and Carson's discovery of them may hold the key to understanding the entire course of the Navajo campaign. A few days before Carson arrived at Fort Canby, four suffering bedraggled Navajos stumbled into the fort under a flag of truce, apparently intending to surrender their entire band of 75-100 men, women, and children, to whatever fate General Carleton might have in store for

⁷²Sides, *Blood and Thunder*, 341-2; Carson to Carleton, 19 August 1863, in *Navajo Roundup*, 36-37; Carson to Cutler, 19 August 1863, in *Navajo Roundup*, 38-41; Carson to Carleton, 31 August 1863, in *Navajo Roundup*, 41-44.

them at Bosque Redondo. Major Thomas J. Blakeney, a recent arrival from the war back east, had requested assignment with Carson's command in order to gain experience fighting Indians under the master Indian fighter. Blakeney had a record of sowing discord everywhere he went, and that did not cease after his assignment to Carson. Blakeney's senior rank compelled Carson to leave him in command at Fort Canby, and there he was when these four surrendering Navajos arrived. Three of the four men were thrown into the guard house; the other did not enter the fort. By the end of the next day, at least two of the three Indians were dead. They were either murdered or killed while trying to escape after having been imprisoned and ordered to bury dead dogs and animal guts. In either case, this particular band of Navajos got the message that surrender was not an option. Carson attempted to convey the opposite message. He sent the one Navajo elder he encountered at Fort Canby, a seventy year old man named "Little Foot," back to his people. Little Foot claimed his band was starving and ready to capitulate. He had just come to the fort to make preparations for them and allow them time to prepare for the journey to Bosque Redondo. Carson released him to do as he said, giving him a twelve-day deadline to return. Little Foot never did return, but a woman captured in December indicated that the delegation of Navajos received so poorly by Blakeney had, in fact, represented a significant peace party, who then understandably felt compelled to continue their resistance and hiding at all costs.⁷³

Carson continued his harassment of the Navajos throughout the fall. He made another month-long scout in September. His party occasionally captured a few head of

⁷³Carson to Carleton, 31 August 1863, in *Navajo Roundup*, 41-44; Kelly, *Navajo Roundup*, 44-47; Carson to Culter, 5 October 1863 (53-56); Carson to Carleton, 1 November 1863 (68-9); Carleton to Carson, 5 December 1863 (p. 69-70); Carson to Cutler, 20 December 1863 (83-84) in *Navajo Roundup; Sides, Blood and Thunder*, 342-3.

livestock, and occasionally lost some to intrepid Navajos. He destroyed crops when he encountered the fields. He tired of the campaign, and asked in December to go be allowed leave to spend some time with Josefa and their children. Carson went on a third scout while awaiting Carleton's response to his leave request. Carleton refused the leave, insisting that Carson enter Canyon de Chelly and capture at least a hundred Navajos for deportation to the Bosque before he would be allowed to go home. Carson had to this point eschewed entry into the Navajo stronghold, arguing that there really were not many residing there. He correctly believed that the successful destruction of so many crops in the area near there rendered the Canyon unfit for overwintering. As it turned out, that did not prevent many Navajos from attempting to use the Canyon as a stronghold.

Meanwhile, several bands and even a few important chiefs had trickled in to surrender at Fort Wingate. Carleton may have interpreted the Fort Wingate capitulations as cracks in the dam of resistance, which he thought could be pushed to the breaking point. So Carleton ordered Carson's party into Canyon de Chelly. A winter march through the homeland could be the crushing blow he had been waiting for. Carleton left nothing to chance in the matter, and seems to have sent a trustworthy and likable quartermaster officer named Asa B. Carey to monitor the situation and report back independently as to Carson's enthusiasm and full compliance to Carleton's idea of marching through Canyon de Chelly in midwinter.⁷⁴

After final preparations and scouts by two other parties of fifty men each to the east of Canyon de Chelly, Carson finally embarked upon what has generally been

⁷⁴Sides, *Blood and Thunder*, 345-6. Carson to Culter, 5 October 1863 (53-56), Carson to Carleton, 14 November 1863 (p. 73-75); Carson to Carleton, 1 November 1863 (p. 68-9); Carleton to Carson, 5 December 1863 (p. 69-70); Carey to Carleton, 6 December 1863 (78-9); in *Navajo Roundup*.

regarded as the decisive military action in the Navajo campaign of 1863-1864. He took the army into the Navajo stronghold. Carson sent Captain Pfeiffer with thirty-three men of Company E, of the 1st New Mexico Volunteers to enter via the “East opening” of the canyon. Pfeiffer appears to have bungled into a different arm of the Canyon de Chelly complex known as Canyon del Muerto. Pfeiffer’s command pressed on through brutal winter conditions, enduring suffering surpassed only by that of the Navajos they pursued. The Indians after all had to live the entire winter short of food and afraid to light fires for fear of detection. Pfeiffer’s soldiers hacked through snow, often confined to traveling on the frozen stream bed that had formed the canyon. At last Pfeiffer’s party reached the confluence of three contributing branches of the canyon. There they passed under “Fortress Rock,” a thousand-foot-high tower of canyon wall Pfeiffer considered impossible to scale – for white men. Many Navajos, however, had chosen the spot to winter and harassed his party by screaming Spanish profanities and heaving rocks. Several Indians in smaller groups ventured closer, and were occasionally killed or captured. On January 13, a party of three Navajos approached under a white flag, expressing the desire to end their resistance. They brought with them nineteen refugees. The next day, Pfeiffer met Carson, who entered the canyon from the opposite direction. On the evening of the 11th, Carson had sent Sergeant Andres Herrera with fifty men of company “C” to guard the entrance of the canyon. In what was apparently the bloodiest direct combat of the entire operation, Herrera’s party captured 130 sheep and goats, two women, and two children. In the process they killed 11 Navajo warriors. Carson divided his main contingent into two units under Captains Berney and Asa Carey. Carson traveled with Carey’s group, which came across the eleven dead Navajos from the day

prior. They found a few wounded survivors and provided medical treatment. Soon after the parties all reunited, another party of three approached and negotiated the surrender of another three score Navajos. Carson, having more than met his quota of captured Navajos, proceeded back to Fort Canby to assess the situation and request the leave he had been promised by General Carleton. By the time Carson sat down to pen his report to Carleton on January 24, over 500 Navajos had surrendered at Fort Canby. Even more streamed into Fort Wingate. Kit Carson turned over command of the post to Captain Carey, and after helping to escort the first Navajo refugees as far as Los Pinos, he scurried up to Santa Fe and then off to Taos for eight long anticipated and highly cherished weeks with his family. The deluge of surrenders continued through the spring, and no further direct military action in the Navajo campaign took place for months.⁷⁵

While the psychological effects of an army combat unit marching right through the sacred stronghold of Canyon de Chelly must have contributed to the final surrender of the Navajos, Carson's reports indicate they were likely just the final straw that broke the back of Navajo resistance. On several occasions during this foray into the canyon, Carson's troops encountered the frozen corpses of Navajos. Many of the surrendering Navajos came in naked, or nearly so. They were clearly starving. Children sometimes died within a few days of entering the camp, already at the cusp of death from hunger and exposure. If canyon penetration had been decisive, Carson believed it had not been due to intimidation, show of military force, or "overawe" (as many previous commanders thought the army could do to Indians). The colonel insisted that his presence had erased the ill-will of the Blakeney affair – that he had convinced the surrendering Indians of the

⁷⁵Pfeiffer to Murphy, 20 January 1864 (102-5); Carson to Cutler, 24 January 1864 (98-101); in *Navajo Roundup*.

government's intent to save the Navajos rather than exterminate them.⁷⁶ While that may have been true by the time Carson interviewed his prisoners in January, talking to the Navajos about the benefits of moving to Bosque Redondo could not have been successful in a vacuum. The catalyst to the success of the entire mission (from the army's perspective) had been resource destruction. Starving people faced with death may not have been willing to give up, but starving people presented with the option of exile to a place they would not starve would and did. The catalyst was not the option, the catalyst was the starving. All those fall scouts which Carson, his own subordinates, and Carleton had considered not very successful, had indeed been the decisive blows. Canyon de Chelly was just the final straw, and the news that Blakeney's treatment did not represent the government's ultimate intention, the trigger.

Kit Carson's experience as a military commander can be broken into four distinct episodes: 1) the Battle of Valverde, 2) the Mescalero Campaign, 3) the Navajo Campaign, and 4) the Battle of Adobe Walls. How did Carson's previous experience as a military commander in the first three episodes prepare him for and inform his operations against the Comanches and Kiowas in the fall of 1864?

Although Carson's First New Mexico Volunteers performed well – one might even say better than General Canby expected – at the Battle of Valverde, this kind of conventional military action was not at all similar to the kind of campaign necessary to prosecute against the Plains Indians he would be called upon to strike. Carson's career as a trapper and subsequently as a guide to Frémont's expeditions probably did more to prepare him to command troops against Indians than did his service as a regimental

⁷⁶Carson to Cutler, 24 January 1864 (98-101), in *Navajo Roundup*.

commander at Valverde. If anything, one would hope that he would have learned a bit more from officers like Canby and Carleton about how to instill discipline in his command. Unfortunately, Carson's First New Mexico Volunteers suffered perpetual discipline lapses, even after Canby attempted to consolidate the "good officers" and men in one single outfit. In Carson's defense, the men assigned to his unit would have been difficult for anyone to manage, regardless of familiarity with West Point tactics or any other official manuals or instruction on the matter. Carson attempted on several occasions to prosecute or reprimand problem officers and troops. Others he sought to strategically place in positions where their damage would be minimized. He also took note of individuals he trusted and who performed well, and suggested them for promotion or more tellingly requested them by name on future expeditions. Most of the worst discipline problems seem to have occurred in Carson's absence. It is possible that obstinate but educated subordinates respected Carson's Indian fighting prowess, but sought to take advantage of his illiteracy or lack of formal military experience. These troubles that plagued Carson's unit *in absentia* at times greatly retarded the mission he sought to accomplish.

The Blakeney affair took place in Carson's absence, and after Carson left for Taos, many of the Nuevo Mexicanos and other less-than-impartial members of the 1st New Mexico entrusted with escorting the Navajos to Bosque Redondo may have turned a blind eye to historical enemies predatorially harassing the helpless refugees as they made their Long Walk.⁷⁷ Whether or not Carson could have better instituted traditional military

⁷⁷Accounts of Navajo treatment during the Long Walk vary greatly, no doubt reflecting the experiences of many different people and families. Some Navajo oral histories testify to kind treatment by the army, and helpful sympathetic captors aiding the Indians on what they knew must have been a difficult and mentally painful journey. Many others pass down recollections of hardships ranging from shortages of food to rape or murder of stragglers. It seems likely that all those accounts had their roots in truth, at least in the

discipline among this volunteer unit, it does not seem to have had a large impact on his prosecution of subsequent campaigns against Indians.

The Mescalero Apache tribe was so small, and capitulated so quickly that they truly seem to have been coerced to surrender by that dubious but often-tried army device of having been “overawed.” A version of the “converging columns” strategy, so often employed or at least attempted against tribes of the Plains and Mountain West, seems to have worked against the Mescaleros as well. Though considering the behavior of Paddy Graydon and other column commanders, the converging columns may have done little more than to present Carson as a clear, “lesser of evils” surrender recipient. The proximity of the Mescaleros to New Mexico and their interaction with other tribes would have made them far more likely to trust Kit Carson as a credible peace agent than would the Comanches and Kiowas later. Their proximity to Bosque Redondo – it was, after all, a Mescalero summer destination – also contributed to their swift submission.

Carson’s operations during 1863 further cemented his already-held notion that friendly Indians, especially the Utes, could at a minimum serve as excellent supplements to the force he brought into the field. As he saw it, they were probably better suited to this type of operation than most of the white troops or Nuevo Mexicanos under his command. He preferred to ride with them. Carson repeatedly praised them in his reports, asked General Carleton to allow more Native allies to come along, and encouraged the general to permit him to augment the rewards given to his Indian auxiliaries with the kinds of plunder they were used to capturing on raids. Unfortunately for Carson and his Ute friends, this ran contrary to Carleton’s idea of how to induce hostile tribes to warm to experience of some. Dunlay, *Kit Carson & the Indians*, 303-304.

the idea of his Bosque Reservation. The Utes taken along on the Navajo expedition grew frustrated by the lack of raiding booty, and left for home before the affair was over. Carson apparently sympathized with their desertion, or at least valued their fighting prowess over the risk of their departure from his next expedition. He successfully lobbied for their inclusion on his fall 1864 trek up the Canadian. Carleton had no pet reservation plan for the Comanches, so he allowed Carson to promise the Ute and Jicarilla warriors who joined that foray all the livestock and raiding prizes they could capture. The colonel was undoubtedly glad to have them along, given the odds he faced upon encountering his Plains adversaries.

The Navajo expedition almost certainly presented Colonel Carson the most pertinent information that could be put to use on the Adobe Walls campaign. As he had against the Mescaleros, Carson again employed a version of the converging columns idea. That tactical element of the operation against the Comanches and Kiowas in West Texas fell more in General Carleton's purview. He attempted to coordinate converging columns, but failed to generate support from commanders in neighboring departments who happened to be his peers rather than subordinates. Both Carleton and Carson knew long before the Navajo campaign that traditional infantry tactics were generally useless against mobile Indians. Carleton relayed what he had learned from Carson about Indian fighting in this one of a series of pedantic letters to Colonel Edwin A. Riggs of the California Volunteers, commanding at Fort Craig in 1863. Modern readers may find Carleton's hunting analogy unsavory, but his instructions to Riggs poignantly illustrate Carleton's clear understanding of the tactics necessary to find, engage, and subdue Indians in combat:

It is sincerely hoped, and expected, that you will be able to arrange some plan by which the predatory bands of Indians infesting your district may be destroyed. This is a subject that not only demands your attention, but your action. The troops must be kept after the Indians, not in big bodies, with military noises and smokes, and the gleam of arms by day, and fires, and talk, and comfortable sleeps by night; but in small parties moving stealthily to their haunts and lying patiently in wait for them; or by following their tracks day after day with a fixedness of purpose that never gives up. In this way, as large a command as that at Craig ought not to be run over or hooted at by a few naked Indians armed with bows and arrows. Some flour, bacon, a little coffee, and sugar, thrown on a pack-mule, with the men carrying, say, two or three days' ration in their haversacks, and it will surprise the country what a few resolute men can do. If a hunter goes after a deer, he tries all sorts of wiles to get within gunshot of it. An Indian is a more watchful and a more wary animal than a deer. He must be hunted with skill; he cannot be blundered upon; nor will he allow his pursuers to come upon him when he knows it, unless he is the stronger.

I have made these few remarks because I desire you to impress upon your officers and men the utter folly of going after Indians unless these rules are observed. I once, in this country, with some good trackers under Kit Carson, followed a trail of Apaches for over a fortnight. I caught them. Others can do as well.⁷⁸

Stock problems plagued Carson's efforts to track down the Navajos over the fall and winter of 1863-64. Time and again, Carson attempted to delay or reorganize his campaign efforts due either to broken down and worn out animals, or because they had been lost to Navajo raids. With that set of hobbles applied, Carleton's truism about the difficulty of creeping up on Indians manifested itself even on his and Carson's current efforts. While lack of ready access to fresh livestock may have been an impediment to the Carleton's overall strategy, Carson himself was never truly zealous for the combat in the first place. He regretted all of his communication coming from out of the barrels of his rifles.⁷⁹ As he searched for Navajos to communicate the government's intention – through walk-in captures if he could, through rifle barrels if had to – Kit Carson stumbled upon a far more effective and arguably less bloody way to cajole the Navajos out of the

⁷⁸Carleton to Rigg, 6 August 1863, RCIT, append., p. 124.

⁷⁹Carson to Cutler, 20 December 1863, in *Navajo Roundup*, 86-87.

mountains and into the Bosque. Carson himself did not fathom that resource destruction could be so brutally effective. His entire Navajo campaign amazingly resulted in just 23 Navajos killed in direct combat.⁸⁰ General Carleton opined that this kind of decisive action would be the more humane in the long run.⁸¹ He believed a swift, once-and-for-all victory preferable to the centuries long conflict that had plagued the area since it had been named “New Mexico.” Unfortunately, his vision of what Bosque Redondo would be turned out to be grossly optimistic. The Long Walk to the Pecos River and tenure at the Bosque turned out to be far more deadly than the military campaign had been, even factoring in starvation and exposure to the 1863-1864 winter. The military lesson to be learned here was that a prudent commander should never underestimate the power of resource destruction if direct combat becomes either impossible or undesirable as a primary course of action.

Through happenstance, resource destruction ultimately became the only remaining option for Carson during his 1864 Adobe Walls campaign. As the battle unfolded, it became clear to him that further pursuit of direct combat against the large force he encountered on the plains would be suicidal. At that point, all Carson could do was burn the lower Kiowa village. He must have learned that if a decisive blow could not be struck by arms, destroying all of those tepees, blankets, and winter supplies would inflict significant damage. Resource destruction against the plains tribes, however, proved more difficult. The Navajos’ agrarian tendencies, made destruction of their foodstuffs easier than it would be against the Plains tribes. By the nineteenth century, the livelihood of Plains tribes like the Comanches and Kiowas had shifted almost completely

⁸⁰Carson to Cutler, 24 January 1864, in *Navajo Roundup*, 98-101.

⁸¹Sides, *Blood and Thunder*, 327. Dunlay, *Kit Carson & the Indians*, 241.

to a reliance on raiding supplemented by hunting – or at least some combination of those two. Destruction of buffalo herds contributed to their defeat, but it was hard to remove all their access to resources since much of that supply came from preying on Texans, on wagon trains, occasionally on New Mexicans, and sometimes even the on Indians now at Bosque Redondo. The Navajos and Mescaleros must have looked like sitting ducks to the most effective mounted raiders on the prairie.

Kit Carson enjoyed a few weeks of downtime with his wife and children. A few short months later, he applied for and was assigned to an administrative position at the Bosque, for which he was ill-suited. He served as superintendent at the new reservation near Fort Sumner only from May through September of 1864. By the fall of 1864, General Carleton had an even bigger task to place before Kit Carson. Carleton called on him to use all of his accumulated knowledge of Indian fighting to put a stop to the plains tribes' incessant raiding and attacks on the Santa Fe Trail's thin supply line from the Eastern United States.

2. Relations Between the United States, New Mexico, and the Southern Plains Tribes

In the summer of 1864, the Civil War dominated the attention of most Americans. The war had worn on now for over three years. Doubts about the viability of the Union cause proved severe enough to weigh down Lincoln's chances of reelection that fall. Despite the expanse of geography separating New Mexico from the great campaigns in the East, the Civil War remained a major concern for New Mexicans with ties to the states. Turmoil had confronted New Mexicans from the outset of the war. Indian hostility had been a constant threat even before the war, and commanders worried about how those threats might synergize with Confederate activity. Just because the 1862 Confederate invasion had been beaten back did not mean a departmental commander could rest easy. Unlike General Canby, Carleton never was the type to sit back and react to situation, anyhow. He preferred to orchestrate events.

Surely in the summer of 1864, Brigadier General James H. Carleton remembered how the loss of a single supply train had crippled the Confederate invaders and utterly destroyed any chance of their even staying in New Mexico, let alone continuing to prosecute military operations. On paper, the rebels had won the only two battles of any significance. Logistics, rather than military Xs and Os, had doomed the gray-clad invaders just two years earlier. Now Carleton faced Indian threats to his own supply line with the states. The image of those starving Texans dragging themselves back to San Antonio through the deserts of New Mexico and West Texas helped convince Carleton to take action against the Indians of the Southern Plains when they began plundering his

supply trains on the Santa Fe Trail in 1864. Although it may not have been important to Carleton *why* the raiding increased, a host of factors drove Native raiders.

The possibility of a renewed invasion and questions about Nuevo Mexicano loyalty kept Union-sympathizing white New Mexicans on edge throughout the war. This uneasiness also affected the way American army and political leaders in New Mexico perceived their Indian neighbors. The constant worry dictated shifts in the interactions between New Mexicans and Indians in the Rio Grande Valley and on the Southern Plains during the Civil War.

New Mexico's Relationship with Comanches and Kiowas

Many long-time New Mexico residents considered the Comanches friendly. Comanches were a valuable link in the regional economy. Comanches had established an economic system fueled by frequent raiding on the Texas frontier to capture livestock, goods, and prisoners. Comancheros – Mexican traders – then made their way from New Mexico onto the plains to acquire the stolen goods. The Comancheros hauled the trappings back to New Mexico, where they profited by selling the relatively inexpensive merchandise and stock to Rio Grande Valley residents. New Mexicans benefited directly from the availability of the lower priced goods and livestock.¹ Of course, the Comanches gained most from the relationship. More recently, some scholars have even argued that through this powerful economic, political, and military empire the Comanches had established an imperial colony in reverse, with the tribe exploiting Euroamerican settlers.² While the Comanche position was clearly very strong, their radically egalitarian, loosely

¹For a detailed discussion of the relationship, see Kenner, *Comanchero Frontier*.

²Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 1-9.

organized band relationships seem to make comparisons to Western style imperial political and economic systems dubious. There can be no doubt, however, that they wielded great military strength, and that they reaped great economic benefits from that strength. But looking at the situation from New Mexico, all parties involved in the exchange benefited financially from the Comanche trade. The hated Texans were the only victims in the arrangement, and New Mexicans were fighting a war against them.

The relationship between New Mexicans and the Kiowas is not so clear. Kiowas were a comparatively tiny tribe that tended to keep to the plains. They interacted less with New Mexicans than did the Comanches. Far less historical evidence therefore remains to explain this tribe's relationship to New Mexicans. It is clear, however, that by the 1860s, they had developed an alliance with the Comanches that induced them to walk in near lockstep with the Comanches in terms of trade and warfare.

Government and the Indians

U.S. Indian policy underwent a shift in the mid-nineteenth century. In the 1820's, American statesmen believed the country had more land that it could ever fill with Euro-Americans. The administrations of James Monroe and John Quincy Adams adopted a policy placing Indians beyond a "permanent Indian frontier" on land they did not think whites would ever want or need. As the population grew, and Euro-Americans moved toward the Pacific, U.S. policy shifted to finding ways to eliminate Indian land claims. The United States at various times sought move Native peoples on to reservations, teach

them agriculture, and assimilate them into American culture. This obviously put the government at odds with Native peoples on a more regular basis.³

Shifting U.S. policies and administrations caused confusion. One of the most troublesome changes came just after the close of the U.S.-Mexican War. In 1849, Congress created a new cabinet-level department, the Department of the Interior. Prior to this, Indian affairs had been overseen by a bureau housed in the War Department. Now the new Interior Department took over the responsibility. At first, the change seemed benign. BIA officials simply reported to a different civilian cabinet official. The different chains of administrative authority would eventually cause seriously strained relationships within the government, and often resulted in dissonant policies applied by the army and federal Indian service.⁴ These problems would fester and eventually cause acute disagreements between the different arms of the United States government operating in New Mexico.

Of course, in times of war, manpower is manpower. Once the Civil War broke out in earnest, officials representing both the Union and Confederate sides initially approached Indians to enlist them in their causes. During the early stages of the war, neither side aggressively pursued alliances with entire Native American tribes. Both the Union and Confederate governments did seek mutual nonaggression agreements with tribes that might represent potential threats. Both saw Indians as a potential source of information about enemy movements and whereabouts.⁵Whereabouts were particularly

³Durwood Ball, *Army Regulars on the Western Frontier*, 13-15. For comprehensive history of U.S. Indian Policy, see Francis P. Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians* (1984; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

⁴Ball, *Army Regulars on the Western Frontier*, 13-15; Robert M. Utley, *The Indian Frontier, 1846-1890* rev. ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 27-64.

⁵Kenner, *Comanchero Frontier*, 138-9.

important to both eventual Union commanders in New Mexico. Canby and Carleton both knew that any potential invasion force from Texas would have to come along one of two routes. New Mexico and West Texas were always arid, and the 1860s were especially dry.⁶The Texans would have to follow a river, either invading along the Rio Grande as they did in 1862, or marching across the plains via the Pecos or Canadian River Valleys. Since posting troops in the Trans-Pecos or the Llano Estacado seemed impractical, the most likely source of troop movements – especially from the Plains – would almost certainly have to be Indians. With the anxious mood in New Mexico, Union military officials in that department looked to Indians on the region’s eastern frontier for intelligence about enemy activity along the Canadian and Pecos Rivers. Military leaders viewed Indians with caution but still wanted to exploit their ability to ride over the vast expanses Federal troops and territorial volunteers could not patrol.

Department of New Mexico commander Colonel Edward R. S. Canby sought to improve relations with the Kiowas for just that reason. In late 1861, troops near Hatch’s Ranch in eastern New Mexico apprehended a party of Kiowas. Colonel Canby ordered District of the Pecos commander Colonel J. G. Gallegos to release the captured Indians. According to Canby, Kiowas were considered friendly as a result of the 1861 Fort Wise Treaty. (The treaty was in fact between the United States and several Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho chiefs). Canby ordered Gallegos to instruct the Kiowas to steer clear of settlements unless they were invited by an army officer or Indian agent. The army advised against Kiowa participation in the war against the Texans, but entreated them to

⁶Elliott West, *The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 79-82.

communicate any information they gathered regarding Texan movements across the plains.⁷

There is no evidence that Plains tribes ever yielded any accurate information regarding Texas troop movements. Some Indians gave the appearance of cooperation. Indian contacts repeatedly reported Texan movements far onto the plains or up the river valleys.⁸ Confederate forces never mustered anything close to an invasion attempt along that route. But it remains plausible that Indians possibly fresh off a Texas raid being pursued or tailed by Texans could have mistaken such activity for small-scale Confederate troop movements. The historical record is unclear on whether Indians intentionally gave false information or simply misinterpreted Confederate activity. Either way, the relationship between Union troops in New Mexico and their Indian neighbors on the Southern Plains was not adversarial in the early years of the war.

In August 1862, Brigadier General James H. Carleton replaced Colonel Canby as commander of the Department of New Mexico. Carleton was one of the few pre – Civil War officers who received a commission without attending West Point. This lack of formal training did not retard his military effectiveness or deprive him of rigidity. New Mexicans initially lauded Carleton for his decisive pacification of the Mescalero Apaches and Navajos between 1862 and 1864. Many of them later deplored and repudiated his iron-fisted implementation of martial law, which had been declared and implemented by Canby but enforced more vigorously by Carleton. New Mexicans eventually formed an

⁷Lt. Hugh Nicodemus to Col. J.G. Gallegos, 19 December 1861, vol. 7, Letters Sent, Department of New Mexico, roll 2, microfilm, (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, 1979) *Letters Sent by the Ninth Military Department, the Department of New Mexico, and the District of New Mexico, 1849-1890*, Microcopy No. 1072, Records of the U.S. Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920, Record Group 393, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁸Kenner, *Comanchero Frontier*, 138-9.

angry letter-writing campaign to Washington, D.C., in protest. Carleton masterfully employed military force and logistics against the nation's enemies, but in doing so, he often garnered personal enemies of his own through his heavy-handed methods and a personality some found abrasive and uncompromising.⁹

Carleton enacted a strict, no-nonsense approach to command and discipline as well as Indian affairs, but this approach to command did not prevent him from initially maintaining Canby's policy of using Indians as potential spies or scouts along the eastern frontier of New Mexico. He still viewed the Comanches as peaceful – or at least not as enemies – as late as the summer of 1863. In June of that year, he authorized the quartermaster at Fort Union to send a shipment to Camp Easton, along the South bank of the Canadian River near present Tucumcari. This shipment contained numerous presents and good-will tokens to be dispensed to Comanches.¹⁰ Camp Easton, later renamed Fort Bascom, would become a jumping off point for operations against the Comanches and other neighboring tribes.

Just six months prior to Carson's attack on the Kiowa, Comanche, and Plains Apache villages on the Canadian River, Carleton still considered Comanche information potentially reliable and helpful. Texans had allegedly sacked a supply train on the Santa Fe Trail at the upper crossing of the Cimarron River, capturing eighty mules and about ten thousand dollars. In a report on the incident, General Carlton indicated that he was still more concerned about a Texan invasion over the plains than Indian trouble along the

⁹Gibson, "James H. Carleton," 59-60, 70-72. See also Adam Kane, "James H. Carlton," in *Soldiers West*, 2d ed., ed. Paul A. Hutton and L. Durwood Ball (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 122-143.

¹⁰Assistant Adjutant General for the Department of New Mexico Captain Ben Cutler to Captain Craig, Quartermaster at Fort Union, 28 June 1863, vol. 9, LS, DNM, r. 3, M1072, RG 393; Cutler to Superintendent of Indian Affairs Edgar, 28 June 1863, vol. 9, LS, DNM, r. 3, M1072, RG 393; Cutler to Edgar, 28 June 1863, second letter, vol. 9, LS, DNM, r. 3, M1072, RG 393.

Santa Fe Trail. The letter was dated June 4, 1864. Carleton still trusted the Comanches and regarded them as relatively friendly.¹¹ But that attitude was about to change.

Indian Trouble on the South Plains and Santa Fe Trail

The Fort Wise Treaty of 1861 confined the Cheyennes to the Sand Creek Reservation, where they struggled to survive. Some Cheyennes and Arapahos began to raid wagon trains in 1863. Reports indicated this outbreak would spread to a full-scale Indian war covering the entire South Plains. In the summer of 1863, Robert North was sent to the plains to ransom whites captured in various Indian raids. North had spent time living among Indians and had an Arapaho wife. Upon his return in November 1863, he reported that the Comanches, Plains Apaches, Kiowas, Arapahos, Cheyennes, and Sioux had all allied against whites and would launch a massive war as soon as they had attained enough weapons. North said they would remain friendly with whites until the spring of 1864, only raiding and plundering here and there to get arms and supplies. Then a massive prairie-wide conspiracy would take root.¹²

That all these tribes colluded is doubtful, but Indian raids increased in the Southwest and along the Santa Fe Trail in 1864. Indians mounted a pair of well coordinated attacks at Fort Larned and Walnut Creek on July 17 and 18. At Fort Larned, a group of about seventy Comanches, Kiowas, and a few Arapahos used an altercation between the Kiowa leader Satank and a sentry to run off the post stock. The post commander responded by sending a party under a Lieutenant Eayre to destroy the Kiowa lodges about three miles from the post. The Indian party anticipated Eayre's movement

¹¹Carleton to Lieutenant Colonel William McMullen, 4 June 1864, vol. 10, LS, DNM, r. 3, M1072, RG 393.

¹²Statement of Robert North, 10 November 1863, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* OR, ser. 1, vol. 34, pt. 4, p. 100.

and set a trap. About two hundred Indians appeared in front of his party, but six to seven hundred appeared to the side and behind them, in position to cut the party off from Fort Larned. Eayre wisely maneuvered his command back to the post. As a result of the affair, the army lost twenty-seven horses, forty-seven mules, and the entire post beef herd. The Indians also captured sixty sutler-owned horses and mules, and a few private cattle, all right under the noses of the troops, less than a quarter-mile of the fort.¹³

Plains Indians pulled off a similar raid the next day at Walnut Creek, about thirty miles east of Fort Larned. A group of about a hundred Indians, mostly boys, approached a wagon train at that location. The Indians appeared friendly, but several went to the rear of the train and began killing the teamsters. Captain O. T. Dunlap led a rescue party that temporarily drove off the raiders, saving a few men and some of the stock. Once again, a group of about three hundred Indians appeared in the woods along the creek in position to isolate Captain Dunlap's party, forcing him to return to his fortified encampment. Indians killed ten teamsters in the raid, wounded three, and scalped two teenagers alive. Whether the perpetrators were Arapahos, Comanches, Kiowas, or a mixed party remains unclear. It is clear, however, that well organized and thought out raiding along the trail was on the rise.¹⁴

Comanches and Kiowas combined to attack the Allison wagon train on August 1, 1864. About seventy Indians entered the camp of the Allison train near Lower Cimarron Springs, giving friendly indications. After a short period of time, they made a sudden attack, killing all five Americans in the group and capturing the train. The Kiowas and

¹³R. M. Fish, "An Indian War," *New York Times*, 7 August 1864.

¹⁴Ibid; Carleton to Superintendent of Indian Affairs Michael Steck, 29 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, pp. 319-322; Capt Nicholas Davis to Carleton, 30 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 212-213.

Comanches not only spared Mexican teamsters in the party but provided them a wagon and one yoke of oxen for their return trip to New Mexico. The Indians stated that they did not wish to harm the Mexicans but would kill any white man who attempted to make passage along the road.¹⁵ Carleton cited this particular incident repeatedly as evidence that something eventually had to be done about the Kiowa and Comanche depredations on the Southern Plains.

The Comanches and Kiowas added several other incidents to Carleton's mounting evidence. On August 6, a group of about thirty Indians attacked the Zuna and Armizo trains near Arroyo de los Plumas. Between them, Zuna and Armizo lost 135 mules. They reported seeing a larger party of Indians driving a large herd of stock southward toward the Canadian valley.¹⁶

About August 11, Indians attacked the George Bryant train near the upper crossing of the Cimarron. Bryant lost all his mules. Indians killed at least two more people while hitting a train near Cow Creek. On the twenty-first, a group of Kiowas and Comanches, estimated at sixty to seventy, raided a large train of eighty-four wagons near the west end of the dry branch of the Santa Fe Trail. Westbound travelers on the Santa Fe Trail had a choice to make once they got to West-Central Kansas. They could follow the Arkansas almost to the front range of the Rockies – generally considered to be a safer route with better water – or they could cut cross country and pick up the Cimarron Cutoff, traversing the present-day Oklahoma Panhandle and northeastern New Mexico. The two trails rejoined northeast of Las Vegas, New Mexico. The Indians netted 240 head of oxen

¹⁵Davis to Carleton, 30 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 212-213.

¹⁶Ibid; Carleton to Steck, 29 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, pp. 319-322.

and killed one wagon master. Again, witnesses from the train saw Indians driving the captured stock off toward the Canadian valley.¹⁷

The raiders did not selectively target Union personnel, citizens, and materiel. Kiowas and Comanches killed or captured dozens of Texans in attacks on Confederate Fort Murray and at settlements along Elm Creek in the vicinity of present-day Graham, Texas. Comanches struck as far south as Menard, Texas. One expert claimed Comanches stole as many as three hundred thousand Texas cattle during the Civil War. Although that estimate seems high, the problem was clearly severe.¹⁸

New Mexicans likely felt little sympathy over Indian raids in Texas. But all the raids combined to illustrate an extreme shift in Indian-white relations in the region during the summer of 1864. Fear was in the air in Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas.

One man remembered:

The summer of 1864 will long be remembered by our frontiersmen as a season when the Comanche, the Kiowa, the Arapahoe, the Cheyenne, and the Plains Apache held high carnival on our western plains. From early spring to late fall, not a week went by that they didn't commit their depredations. . . . No trains crossed the plains that season without being attacked, and none without strong military escorts escaped capture and destruction. Houses and barns on the frontier were fired, stock of all kinds was nowhere secure, large and small parties were attacked, men, women and children murdered.¹⁹

The situation on the Plains had changed dramatically, and Union military leaders decided that they had to take action to punish the raiders and stop the attacks.

Why the Increase in Raiding?

¹⁷Davis to Carleton, 30 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 212-213.

¹⁸Wilbur S. Nye, *Carbine and Lance: The Story of Old Fort Sill* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1937), 35; Ernest Wallace and E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Comanches: Lords of the South Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952), 268.

¹⁹George H. Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight with the Comanche and Kiowa Indians, at the Adobe Walls, on the Canadian River, November 25th, 1864* (Providence, R. I.: Providence Printing Company, 1878), 5-6.

Opinions diverged greatly over why raiding increased in 1864. A traditional argument suggests the Comanches had become agitated at the extension of white settlement into their domain.²⁰ This explanation seems overly simplistic. Comanches had more or less peaceably dealt with Spanish and Mexican encroachment for decades. They successfully established commerce with the Mexican population of New Mexico. Why fight the whites? Anglo settlement had been ongoing for some time. No massive influx in 1864 took place to trigger such a downturn in relations. In theory, population increases should have provided an even bigger market for the goods and stock Comanches captured in the Texas settlements. It has also been suggested that a “petty quarrel” between the army and Indian department over sending an agent and paying for Comanche presents at Fort Bascom could have helped trigger the deterioration.²¹ This event seems too small to have caused such a dramatic shift and so much damage.

General Carleton operated under a different assumption. He knew the troubles in 1863 had started with the Cheyennes and Arapahos. The government bribed these tribes with presents. Carleton believed that the Kiowas and Comanches became jealous over the gifts given by the government to the Cheyennes and Arapahos. The Kiowas and Comanches must have wondered why the government would reward their misbehavior, Carleton thought. He was of the opinion that the Kiowas and Comanches commenced depredations in an effort to convince the government to pay them off as it had the Cheyennes and Arapahos.²²

²⁰Kenner, *Comanchero Frontier*, 144.

²¹Ibid, 143-44.

²²Carleton to Steck, 29 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, pp. 319-322.

Michael Steck served as superintendent of Indian affairs for New Mexico Territory at the time. Steck had gone to medical school in Pennsylvania and then joined a wagon train bound for the West. He became agent to the Apaches in the early 1850s and was promoted to territorial superintendent in 1863. He often feuded with Carleton on everything from the general's enforcement of martial law in the territory to the wisdom of his Bosque Redondo Reservation project. The separation of leadership between the War and Interior Departments inflamed the matter. Carleton fought to get the federal Indian bureau to take over funding of the Bosque Redondo Reservation once he had populated it with Navajos and Mescaleros.²³ Based on the rearrangement of government agencies, which had placed the Indian Bureau under the Department of the Interior rather than the War Department, Carleton's argument seems legitimate. Steck refused to fund it, however, arguing to his superiors in Washington that Bosque Redondo's extravagant costs precluded the reservation from being funded by any entity other than the War Department. Crop disasters from 1864 on indeed multiplied the cost of Bosque Redondo. Carleton imagined a self-supporting reservation. But he had sent far too many Indians to the Bosque in the first place, and crop failures had left the refugees sent there utterly dependent upon government rations. None of that, however, had taken place at the time of Steck's refusal to support the operation financially. It appears that Steck's opposition must have been at least partially a personal matter. Indeed, Carleton had incarcerated both tribes at Bosque Redondo over Steck's opposition and on his own hook.

²³Steck to Commissioner of Indian Affairs William P. Dole, 25 June 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 2, pp. 901-902.

Steck's analysis of the rise in Kiowa and Comanche raiding came close to agreeing with Carleton's. Steck concurred with Carleton that the Indians were agitating for provisions. But Steck believed the depredations were only being committed by a few specific bands in the tribes. He argued that the U.S. government was responsible for the robberies and murders on the overland trails. If the government would just hand out more provisions and goods to Indians, there would be little if any trouble from them. Given the government's stinginess with provisions and presents, Steck was surprised the raiding had not been more intense, lethal, and destructive.²⁴ While Steck's position seems a bit naïve, some observers offered suggestions even less plausible. Retrospectively, George Pettis thought the Indians were somehow convinced that "the white man could be exterminated by concerted action, and by striking at different points to have fondly hoped they could once more roam and hunt at their pleasure, free and unmolested by white man's civilization."²⁵

Early Plains warfare historian Colonel W. S. Nye offers a more accurate explanation for the increased Indian raids in 1864. Nye had been commander at Fort Sill when many Indian survivors and first-hand witnesses to the events of the middle and late nineteenth century were still around to share their observations and opinions. In his study of what he called the "prairie war of 1863-64," he lumped together both the Comanche and Kiowa activity of that year and the Cheyenne and Arapaho uprising. He suggests Indian affinity for raiding, exacerbated by absence of regular troops during the Civil War, caused the increased unrest.²⁶ Nye was correct about Comanches' and Kiowas' desire to

²⁴Steck to Dole, 10 October 1864, Steck Papers.

²⁵Pettis, *Carson's Fight*, 5-6.

²⁶Nye, *Carbine and Lance*, 32.

raid. He was also right that there were not enough troops to protect traffic on the Santa Fe Trail. However, this circumstance was not unique to 1864 or the Civil War era. After the initial exodus of regular troops at the outset of the Civil War, the federal government eventually manned the frontier with ever larger contingents of troops – volunteers – than had been available during the preceding decades.²⁷

From the close of the U.S.-Mexican War on, the U.S. government struggled between two major frontier security strategies. It could scatter small posts throughout the West wherever settlers needed protection, or it could mass large forces for an occasional summer punitive march. Neither option fielded an agile, mobile force. The decision rested on whether authorities placed greater value on presence than on concentration of power. Both were tried; neither worked. The post – U.S.-Mexican War army had an on-paper strength of scarcely more than ten thousand, and it increased only slightly before 1861. Prior to the U.S.-Mexican War and the settlement of the Oregon question in the 1840s, the army had only to defend a “permanent Indian frontier,” along the western borders of Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, and Wisconsin. After the war, there were too many square miles to defend and too little manpower.²⁸

Emigration exacerbated the problem. Streams of pioneers raced across the Great Plains to destinations west in the 1840s and 1850s. Surprisingly, the Civil War did not stem that flow in the least. Even greater traffic through their traditional lands put additional pressure on the Southern Plains tribes. Pioneers and their stock utilized riparian wood and feed resources in an environment never meant to handle much traffic

²⁷Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 216; Dunlay, *Kit Carson and the Indians*, 229.

²⁸Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 2-6, 18-19.

at once. Immigrants naturally either shot or scared off game. And of course, with increased traffic came increased contact. Plains Indians were drawn to the trails and their travelers – whether to raid or trade. This increased pressure and contact made conflict more likely than ever.²⁹

Raiding was a cultural imperative for most able-bodied Plains Indian men. Any loss of family members, servants, or property was a matter of great personal shame that could only be satisfied by regaining the lost persons and property, raiding to replace that which was lost, or to cover the lost with the bodies of enemies.³⁰ By the mid nineteenth century, the entire Comanche economy had shifted to one that depended upon bursts of buffalo hunting and trading goods stolen from enemies. Opportunities to capitalize on both of these sources of gain came and went. With an entire Union army in New Mexico being supplied via the Santa Fe Trail, there had never been a more lucrative time to raid South Plains wagon traffic. Steck and Carleton were likely right that American goods were the cause of Comanche and Kiowa raiding. It seems unlikely, however, that any amount of presents doled out by the government could have come close to matching the bounty slowly creaking across the prairie right in front of them on an almost daily basis.

Supply and emigrant trains often made their way across the heart of the Southern Plains Indian territory along the most dangerous stretches of the Santa Fe Trail with little or no escort. The army attempted to man a few posts along the trail but lacked sufficient manpower to patrol its entire length. There were just too many wagon trains traveling along too much trail to escort them all adequately. Although none of these factors were

²⁹Ibid, 214; Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Immigrants, Gold Seekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 7, 88-89; Ball, *Army Regulars*, 14.

³⁰Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire*, 15-16.

unique to 1864, they do illustrate the vulnerability of Santa Fe Trail traffic during the period leading to Carleton's decision to strike. To the Plains tribes, the trains must have seemed like ripe, low-hanging fruit. These hereditary raiders needed no further motivation. The magnificent plunder to be had from razing freight wagons on the Santa Fe Trail in the early 1860s surely made any possible presents the government might offer seem like crumbs from the table of America.

The Carleton – Steck Feud

General Carleton really did not have much interest in determining the cause of the raids beyond what that information might do to help stop them. He just knew he had to put an end to the attacks. In order to respond, he first had to identify the culprits. Captain Nicholas Davis made a six-week scout from Fort Union between August 4 and September 15. His circuitous path took him first to the breaks of the Red River and then to Lone Mountain. The Davis party next visited the site of the Allison train, near Lower Cimarron Springs. Davis found the corpses of the deceased strewn about the prairie. After burying the bodies, the men visited the west end of the Dry Route.³¹ They then visited the site of the Walnut Creek assault, and saw where another train had been attacked at Cow Creek. En route back to Santa Fe, they camped along the Arkansas River.³²

At each stop on this scout, Davis collected evidence on most of the Indian attacks listed above. In his report to General Carlton, he stated that eyewitnesses had placed responsibility for each and every occurrence on the Comanches and Kiowas.³³ Some

³¹Robert M. Utley, "Kit Carson and the Adobe Walls Campaign," *The American West* 2 (1995): 8-9.

³²Davis to Carleton, 30 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 212-213.

³³Ibid.

other reports blamed the Walnut Creek raid on Arapahos, but the Comanches and Kiowas were clearly responsible for the majority of the incidents. Based on the testimony at hand, Carleton declared the Kiowas and Comanches hostile to the United States and ordered frontier posts to guard against surprise attack.³⁴

Soon afterward, Carleton ordered a punitive winter campaign against the Kiowas and Comanches. He selected Colonel Christopher “Kit” Carson, his primary field commander, to lead the expedition.³⁵ Carleton did not consult with Superintendent Steck before ordering the strike; Steck only learned of the operation by reading a copy of General Order No. 32, Carleton’s order to send Carson against the Plains tribes.³⁶ Carleton clearly rankled Steck by unilaterally deciding to attack the Kiowas and Comanches. Furthermore, Steck doubted the prudence of taking any military action against the Indians. First, he pointed out the long record of peaceful relations between New Mexicans and Comanches. Second, he argued that it was dangerous to pick a fight with a tribe as powerful as the Comanches. Third, he made an effort to distinguish between the Comanches and Kiowas. Steck claimed that his contacts in San Miguel County attributed any disturbances in the area to Kiowas, who had been avenging the death of a chief. Steck believed that with vengeance satisfied, the Kiowas now desired peace. Fourth, Steck conceded that Comanches had been involved in raids into Confederate Texas, but that raiding aided the Union cause. Comanches brought to New Mexico large herds of stock plundered from the hated Texans.³⁷ Steck opposed a campaign against the Kiowas and Comanches outright. But if he could not convince Carleton to cancel the operation

³⁴Kenner, *Comanchero Frontier*, 145.

³⁵Carleton to Blunt, 22 October 1864, Inclosure 1, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 198.

³⁶Steck to Carleton, 26 October 1864, box 2, folder 1, Steck Papers, CSWR, UNM.

³⁷Ibid.

altogether, he would do all he could to protect the Comanches and divert Carleton's wrath toward the Kiowas.

Carleton never liked Steck, whose determination to shield the Comanches aroused the general's suspicions. Every piece of evidence he had in his reports implicated the Comanches in the havoc of the summer of 1864. Comanches almost certainly perpetrated the most damaging attacks, such as the incident at Lower Cimarron Springs. Why would Steck try to deny their involvement? Carleton thought he had a pretty good idea. Steck's sources in San Miguel County profited from the Comanchero trade. Comanche raids provided them an inexpensive source of goods and especially livestock. They did not care whether the booty came from the Texas settlements or the Santa Fe Trail. If relations with the Comanches deteriorated, that stream of bargains would quickly run dry. Historians do not know whether Steck himself profited from the Comanchero trade, but Carleton certainly suspected Steck of operating with an ulterior motive.³⁸

Carleton's reservations went beyond a mere recognition of commercial interests. He suspected full-scale Nuevo Mexicano (Hispanic New Mexican) support of the mounting Indian war. Americans had been running New Mexico for only eighteen years in 1864. Many Nuevo Mexicanos held on to a latent animosity toward Americans. Carleton had reason to believe that resentment might bloom into outright rebellion. In 1863, when North reported the possibility of a great Indian alliance, he also testified that Comancheros were encouraging the Indians. Comancheros told the Indians that

³⁸Carleton to Steck, 29 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, pp. 319-322.

Mexicans would stream out of New Mexico to join the alliance of Comanches, Plains Apaches, Kiowas, Arapahos, Cheyennes, and Sioux against the Americans.³⁹

The details of the attack on the Allison train at Lower Cimarron Springs helped convince Carleton that Nuevo Mexicano information about the disposition of the Comanches could not be taken at face value. Comanches and Kiowas killed only the whites in the train. Carleton saw the fact that Kiowas and Comanches spared the Mexican teamsters and provided them means of transportation back to New Mexico as clear evidence that Nuevo Mexicanos and Comanches were in collusion and neither could be trusted.⁴⁰

Carleton may have had his own ulterior motives for driving the Comanches out of the region. The previous winter, he had sent Carson on a successful campaign to round up the Navajos. One of Carleton's principal projects while departmental commander in New Mexico was the establishment of a Navajo reservation called Bosque Redondo near Fort Sumner. This establishment, designed to assimilate Navajos and Mescaleros into an agricultural society, sat on the fringes of Comanchería. The Navajos and Mescalero Apaches – traditional enemies of the Comanches – confined at Bosque Redondo made a ripe target for Comanche raids.⁴¹

Carleton had a great deal of time, effort, resources, and – most vital to nearly every nineteenth century officer – his own reputation at stake at Bosque Redondo. He desperately wanted to see the project to a successful conclusion. However, it seems unlikely that Comanches could have made enough trouble at Bosque Redondo to have

³⁹Statement of Robert North, 10 November 1863 OR, ser. 1, vol. 34, pt. 4, p. 100.

⁴⁰Carleton to Steck, 29 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, pp. 319-322.

⁴¹Aurora Hunt, *Major General James Henry Carleton, 1814-1873: Western Frontier Dragoon* (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1958), 273-296.

motivated a punitive strike from Carleton solely on that basis. The Navajos had only been there a few months when Carleton ordered the strike against the Comanches and Kiowas. Anyhow, they were too busy pillaging the Texas settlements and the Santa Fe Trail to have bothered with the struggling, destitute Navajos and Mescaleros at Bosque Redondo. There was just not enough plunder there to steal.

In response to Steck's arguments, Carleton offered to differentiate between "good and bad" Comanches. He suggested that Steck send a representative along with Kit Carson on the campaign. This agent could then sort the guilty from the innocent bands of Comanches if such discrimination could be made.⁴² The impracticality of this suggestion suggests that Carleton may have been mocking Steck or pushing him to back down or to consent to the campaign. In spite of his personal dislike for Steck, Carleton did consider it important for both "branches of government" to share the same objectives.⁴³ On occasions when they could not agree, however, Carleton did not hesitate to invoke a moral trump card, his "duty to protect the citizens of New Mexico," to justify his course of action over Steck's.⁴⁴

General Carleton was in no mood to follow Superintendent Steck's military advice, particularly since he believed Steck's sources – and perhaps Steck himself – were deeply interested in protecting their age-old trade relationship with the Comanches. Throughout the first half of November, 1864 – even after Carson's party had embarked on the campaign – Steck still prosecuted his spirited effort to protect the Comanches. He and Carleton exchanged a series of letters during this time. Although they displayed the

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Carleton to Steck, 16 March 1865, box 2, folder 2, Steck Papers, CSWR, UNM. By "two branches of government," Carleton means the Army and Indian Affairs

⁴⁴Carleton to Steck, 8 November 1864, box 2, folder 1, Steck Papers, CSWR, UNM.

overtly congenial respect and deference typical of Victorian-era correspondence, their mutual dislike became more thinly veiled as the interchange continued.

Steck completely abandoned any attempt to relieve the Kiowas of responsibility. In fact, by his second letter to Carleton, he wrote, “The Kiowas I believe should be severely chastised and hope the Genl. will be able to inflict the punishment they so richly deserve.” He still favored excluding the Comanches. By this time, he admitted that some Comanches may have been involved but argued that the complicity of a few did not justify punishing the whole tribe. Further, Steck claimed that any Comanche participation must have been instigated by renegade whites or secessionists, although he offered no evidence to support this hypothesis. Steck was angry at being left out of Carleton’s investigations into culpability for the summer raids. Carleton’s use of Utes and Jicarilla Apaches in Carson’s punitive party without consulting Steck also offended him.⁴⁵ Even if General Carleton had been able to overcome his own personal dislike and distrust of Michael Steck, these arguments were almost certain to fall on deaf ears. It is evident from Carleton’s prosecution of the Mescaleros and Navajos that he clearly understood the heterogeneous nature of Indian tribes. As he saw it, the fact that they could not be dealt with as a monolithic unit or single political entity lay at the heart of the “Indian problem.” Leaders could never really control the disparate bands and individuals. From Carleton’s seat, the entire tribe had to be punished; fear had to be struck into the whole. If peace parties existed, they must be separated from the hostiles until such time as the entire tribe had been conquered and *could* be dealt with as a unit. He was not about to undertake a one-by-one examination of individual responsibility.

⁴⁵Steck to Carleton, 5 November 1864, box 2, folder 1, Steck Papers, CSWR, UNM.

After Steck's exchange with General Carleton had devolved into a hopeless and acrimonious exercise, the superintendent washed his hands of the matter.⁴⁶ He certainly did not feel inclined to assist in either funding or supporting any project that Carleton had anything to do with. He sent copies of the entire string of correspondence to U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs William Dole with a recommendation that the matter be brought before Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton.⁴⁷

The Decision to Act

In 1864, Secretary Stanton had larger problems and issues to resolve than a dispute over which Indians to punish for frontier raids. By the time Steck involved Dole and attempted to alert the secretary of war, the issue was moot. Colonel Carson and his battalion had embarked on their campaign. By November 10, the expedition was at Fort Bascom.⁴⁸

New Mexico could not support even a small army domestically in the 1860s. The Department of New Mexico relied on supplies imported from the states. These goods could only reach New Mexico by one route, the Santa Fe Trail. That road was the very lifeline of the department. All communications and supplies bound for New Mexico came over the trail. When the Confederates invaded in 1862, they were tactically successful on the battlefield. Only the loss of their supply train at Glorieta Pass turned them back. Even at a strength of only 2,590, Sibley's Texans had not been able to live off the land.⁴⁹ They practically starved on their long walk back to San Antonio. Perhaps

⁴⁶Steck to Carleton, 9 November 1864, box 2, folder 1, Steck Papers, CSWR, UNM; Steck to Dole, 16 November 1864, box 4, Steck Papers, CSWR, UNM.

⁴⁷Steck to Dole, 16 November 1864, box 4, Steck Papers, CSWR, UNM.

⁴⁸Carson to Captain Ben Cutler, Assistant Adjutant General, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 939-943.

⁴⁹Wilson, *When the Texans Came*, 3.

Carleton's knowledge of that incident helped make up his mind to protect his lines of supply and communication at nearly all costs.

So ultimately, Carleton's decision was easy. He used the term "avenge" in some of his correspondence with Steck. But revenge was not a necessity. Carleton felt that in order to keep his army – not to mention some eight thousand Mescalero and Navajo charges at Bosque Redondo⁵⁰ – well fed and supplied, he would have to punish the tribes and prevent future threats to the security of the Santa Fe Trail. "It is certainly understood that the interruption to our line of travel to the States is owing to the hostility of the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Comanches and Kiowas," Carleton told Steck.⁵¹ He could not permit that line to be endangered. Colorado and Kansas could take care of the Cheyennes and Arapahos, but if the Comanches and Kiowas were to be dealt with, Carleton would have to do it himself.

⁵⁰Kane, "James H. Carlton," in *Soldiers West*, 139-140; Carleton to Curtis, 24 January 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 1, pp. 635-636.

⁵¹Carleton to Steck, 29 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, pp. 319-322.

3. U.S. Military Participants in the Adobe Walls Campaign and Their Auxiliaries

The Problem of Finding Troops

Once General Carleton decided to strike the Kiowas and Comanches threatening his line of communication with the East, the real planning had to begin. Reliable military manpower in New Mexico was scarce. The Army had never manned its frontier regions adequately following the war with Mexico.¹ The Civil War placed an even greater premium on federal troops. Given the U.S. military situation at the time, Carleton probably knew that he would have to construct an unconventional military force for this punitive campaign. He may have anticipated this obstacle, but he did attempt to solicit regulars from outside the Department of New Mexico to strengthen his expeditionary party.

Carleton first sought additional manpower from the East. He may have felt that with hundreds of thousands of troops fighting for the Union in the eastern theaters, the War Department could spare a few hundred to keep New Mexico secure. Carleton wrote Major General Henry “Old Brains” Halleck for troops. By this time, Halleck had been relieved as commander in chief of Union Armies and was serving as chief of staff under Ulysses S. Grant. Halleck thought it preposterous that Carleton should ask for troops from the main theaters of war. Halleck considered the Indian trouble on the South Plains resolved as a result of U.S. military successes against the Cheyennes and Arapahoes in Kansas. That assumption illustrated Halleck’s lack of understanding of the military situation along the Santa Fe Trail. Even had he understood the difference between the Cheyenne-Arapaho affair and the Kiowa-Comanche activity, it is unlikely that he would

¹Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 2-6.

have authorized troop reinforcements for Carleton. As it was, Halleck indicated that he might actually be inclined to *remove* troops from the Southwest. After that threat-laced rejection, Carleton knew not to ask Washington again. He would have to look elsewhere for the additional manpower. Any potential benefit of attempting to explain the situation to the preoccupied Halleck came at the risk of reminding him that there were a few troops in New Mexico that could be removed for Civil War duty in the East.²

Carleton next looked to the Kansas and Missouri theater for support. He planned to stage a multipronged attack on the Kiowas and Comanches camped for the winter somewhere between his command and the posts in south-central Kansas. Carleton wrote Department of Kansas commander Major General Samuel R. Curtis in October of 1864 to outline his plan. Carleton proposed a cooperative action between his own troops moving up the Canadian and a large force under Major General James G. Blunt that would “make this the last war that it will be necessary to prosecute against these two most treacherous tribes of the plains.”³Curtis agreed to Carleton’s plan in principle and told him so in a response. But there was a lot of trail between Curtis and Blunt. Carleton promptly relayed that assent to Blunt in an effort to expedite his scheme.⁴ However, when it came to prioritizing military operations, Curtis, like Halleck, was more concerned with Confederates in Missouri and Arkansas than with Kiowas and Comanches on the Southern Plains.

²Major General Henry Halleck to Brigadier General James H. Carleton 2 October 1864, A/260, Letters Received, 1864, Department of New Mexico, roll 24, microfilm, (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, 1980) *Registers of Letters Received and Letters Received by Headquarters, Department of New Mexico, 1854-1865*, Microcopy No. 1120, National Archives Publications, Records of the U.S. Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920, Record Group 393, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

³Carleton to Curtis, 23 October 1864, 923, LS, 1864, vol. 11, LS, DNM, r. 3, M1072, RG 393.

⁴Carleton to Blunt, 22 October 1864, Inclosure 1, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 198.

In the fall of 1864, Confederate forces mounted their last serious challenge to Union troops in the Trans-Mississippi region. Major General Sterling Price led a force of about eighty-five hundred Confederate troops to liberate his home state of Missouri. Price advanced as far as Kansas City, where he was turned back by Curtis's command at the Battle of Westport on October 23, 1864. In the weeks leading up to Carleton's strike against the Kiowas and Comanches, Curtis was pondering how to deal with this threat from Price's advancing force. During the last week of September, Curtis directed Blunt to protect the Santa Fe Trail as best he could by stringing a few troops along his section of it. Blunt and the remainder of his troops were to rendezvous with Curtis's main force at Council Grove.⁵ This would allow Blunt and his troops to help Curtis check the Confederate advance in Missouri but prevent Blunt from participating in any meaningful action against the Kiowas and Comanches on the Southern Plains.

Although it appears Carleton sent Kit Carson into the field to strike the Comanches and Kiowas under the assumption that Carson's force would be cooperating with a significant body of troops from Blunt's command, the support from Blunt never materialized. Carson's battalion would fight at the Adobe Walls with only the military force that could be raised in New Mexico.

Carleton also proved diligent in his search for manpower in New Mexico. In his refusal to send Carleton troops from the East, Halleck did authorize him to call upon the territorial governor if he needed additional troops to replace those whose terms of service were expiring. Carleton could also call up additional territorial militia, but only if the

⁵Maj Gen Samuel R. Curtis to Maj Gen James G. Blunt, 22 September 1864, OR, vol. 41, ser. 1, pt. 3, pp. 314-315.

summons was deemed “absolutely necessary.”⁶ Like many military commanders of his day, Carleton considered every project he undertook “absolutely necessary.” Not surprisingly, Carleton immediately requested that Governor Connelly call out a portion of the New Mexico militia to participate in the campaign. Governor Connelly proved to be just another obstacle to Carleton’s plans. Connelly, a merchant and sheep rancher in the Rio Abajo, agreed with Steck on the Comanche question. Like Steck, he claimed that the Comanches were at peace with New Mexico.⁷ He, too, may have been influenced by players in the local economy of the Rio Grande Valley, which was heavily reliant on Comanchero trade. Whatever the reason, Connelly refused Carleton’s request to activate more territorial militia to support the campaign.

This absence of support from outside New Mexico left Carleton to prosecute the campaign with troops at his disposal. This meant the primary force would be composed of New Mexico, Colorado, and California volunteers. Some of these units were the remnants of those used to repel Sibley’s Confederate invasion in 1862. Others were part of the “California Column,” which had marched to New Mexico under Carleton to aid Canby in repelling Sibley’s invasion, but had not arrived in time to participate in the campaign. The Californians remained in New Mexico to protect it from future Confederate advances and to quell Indian disturbances if needed.⁸

Carleton’s meddling with Indian affairs in New Mexico did present him with another option. He could use Indian tribes on friendly terms with the federal government against others he considered hostile. General Carleton relied heavily on his field

⁶Halleck to Carleton, 2 October 1864, LR, 1864, DNM, r. 24, M1120, RG 393, NA.

⁷Steck to Dole, 16 November 1864, box 4, Steck Papers, CSWR, UNM.

⁸The military experience of the California Column is covered in Darlis Miller, *The California Column in New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 3-30.

commander, Kit Carson, to rally support from friendly tribes. As a former fur trapper and Indian agent, Carson had developed a good relationship with the Utes, who were enemies of the Comanches.⁹ In absence of an overwhelming force of federal troops, Carleton toyed with the idea of sending a force comprised solely of Utes and Jicarilla Apaches. Carson, however, argued that an all-Indian force would be impossible to control and that U.S. troops, even if they were volunteers, should make up the majority of the strike force.¹⁰ Carleton wisely took Carson's advice and ultimately used friendly Indians as an auxiliary force supplementing the California and New Mexico volunteers launched against the Comanches and Kiowas.

In spite of any difficulties anticipated in controlling Indian auxiliaries, they were a tempting source of manpower for several reasons. First and perhaps most importantly, they were readily available and not preoccupied with fighting Rebels. New Mexico military authorities believed some tribes would be willing allies. The Utes and Jicarilla Apaches were "mountain Indians." They bore a traditional animosity toward Plains tribes such as the Comanches and Kiowas. Carleton believed that this feud, combined with Carson's established relationship with the Utes, would make it easier for federal forces in New Mexico to recruit from the ranks of some tribes.¹¹

Carleton expressed another belief commonly held by federal authorities in frontier regions. He thought there would be a political advantage in creating and maintaining alliances with some tribes against others considered belligerent by federal authorities. By allying with friendlier tribes, Carleton hoped to prevent the outbreak of a general Indian

⁹Dunlay, *Kit Carson and the Indians* discusses Carson's diverse relationships with Indians at length.

¹⁰Carson to Carleton, 21 September 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 3, pp. 295-296.

¹¹Carleton to Steck, 8 November 1864, box 2, folder 1, Steck Papers, CSWR, UNM.

war pitting all Indians against the white Americans in New Mexico.¹² This line of thinking implied a divide-and-conquer strategy. Carleton did not necessarily think that the Utes and Jicarillas would be an indispensable addition to his force. He was hell-bent on sending Carson out to punish the Comanches and Kiowas with or without them. But he believed that in addition to the extra manpower they brought, the employment of Indian auxiliaries would help keep Indians as a whole divided and therefore weak and incapable of massive, unified, organized resistance to U.S. authority.

Carleton queried one other Indian source for assistance. Prior to the Navajos' arrival at Bosque Redondo, Carson had subdued the Mescalero Apaches, who had become Bosque Redondo's first occupants. When the Mescaleros at Bosque Redondo asked Carleton for horses and food, he told them he had no horses to give away. He did indicate, however, that horses would be available to those who joined Carson's punitive expedition onto the plains. Carleton added that there were plenty of rations at Fort Bascom, the jumping off point for the Adobe Walls Campaign.¹³ In spite of these enticements, though, Carleton was unsuccessful in recruiting any manpower from the relocated Mescaleros.

Composition of the Federal Force

Field Commander. In addition to finding manpower, General Carleton had to appoint someone to command the expedition. As department commander, he directed military operations in New Mexico from his headquarters in Santa Fe. Like most departmental commanders, Carleton needed a field commander to direct military actions

¹²Ibid.

¹³Carleton to Buckner 22 October 1864, 925, vol. 11, LS, DNM, r. 3, M1072, RG 393.

in person. Finding manpower may have been difficult for Carleton, but choosing a field commander was easy: Colonel Carson was the obvious choice.

Kit Carson had dealt with Indians in every phase of his life.¹⁴ He grew up in a Missouri-frontier settlement constantly threatened with Indian attack. As a mountain man in the West, Carson learned to trade and interact with some Indians, and to fight others effectively. He fought and negotiated with Indians while guiding John C. Frémont's explorations of the West in the early to mid 1840s. As an Indian agent in New Mexico, he labored diligently to improve federal treatment of certain tribes. Biographer Edward Sabin called Carson's attitude toward Indians during his agency as "hopeless compassion."¹⁵

Carleton certainly would have wanted to leverage Carson's experience as an agent to the Utes to garner support from the "mountain Indians." But he did not select Carson to lead the expedition for primarily diplomatic reasons. Carson was a well-known and highly successful Indian fighter – a true legend in his own time. His campaign against the Navajos had devastated them. Carson was in his mid-fifties by 1864. He brought exceptional experience to the task of punishing the Comanches and Kiowas.

Carleton himself was no stranger to Indian Wars. It was, in fact, Kit Carson who introduced Carleton to Indian fighting. They served together against the Mescaleros in 1854. In that conflict, Carleton learned the basic difficulties Indian fighting presented and gained an appreciation for the differences between Indian campaigns and conventional warfare. Much of this he learned from Kit Carson, the master practitioner.¹⁶

¹⁴For a detailed discussion of Carson's varied relationships with Indians during his life, see Tom Dunlay, *Kit Carson and the Indians*.

¹⁵Ibid, 226.

¹⁶Ibid, 236; Kane, "James H. Carleton," 128.

General Carleton had placed Carson in command of previous expeditions against the Mescalero Apaches and the Navajos. Once entrusted with these missions, Carson carried them out effectively. Both tribes were subdued and sent to Bosque Redondo. Kit Carson executed these campaigns over the course of one winter apiece. Particularly against the Navajo during the winter of 1863-1864, Carson's winter campaigning techniques brought a rapid end to the conflict. His men went about destroying Navajo foodstuffs and cornfields. The resulting lack of food forced the Navajos to capitulate and begin their "Long Walk" east to Fort Sumner.

This effectiveness displayed by Carson against the Mescaleros and the Navajos compelled Carleton to order Carson to command the Comanche-Kiowa expedition. There is no evidence that Carleton ever considered anyone else. Carson's successes on previous missions against Indians made him the best fit officer to wage the campaign. He was indispensable in the general's eyes.

Infantry. Lieutenant Colonel Francisco P. Abreu commanded the infantry contingent assigned to the expedition. Abreu had recently commanded Fort Union and would serve another stint as commander of that post in early 1865, not long after his return from Adobe Walls. He held a commission in the First Infantry of the New Mexico Volunteers. A resident of San Miguel County, Abreu lived out his life there after completing his military service.¹⁷ Abreu's infantry contingent was small. Portions of two California Volunteer Infantry companies were attached to the force, and at least a dozen

¹⁷1870 Federal Census San Miguel County, New Mexico Territory (Index: File 1 of 29); 1910 Federal Census San Miguel County, New Mexico Territory (Index: File 1 of 44).

were assigned as the gun crew with Lieutenant Pettis. In all, Abreu had under his command no more than about seventy men.¹⁸

Cavalry. Cavalry comprised the majority of the U.S. military contingent on the Adobe Walls campaign. Carson had at his disposal four full cavalry companies and a detachment from a fifth, for a total of over 240 officers and men. Two companies came from the First Cavalry of New Mexico Volunteers, while the other two and another fraction had been part of the First Cavalry of California Volunteers.¹⁹ Major William McCleave was selected to command the cavalry arm. Like most of the accompanying cavalry, McCleave had made the trek to California in the column with General Carleton. He seems to have been well qualified for the job, and the best equipped in terms of manpower of the component commanders.²⁰

Carleton placed special trust in McCleave. The general was often able to overlook faults in subordinates whom he thought were generally upstanding and competent. McCleave, an Irish immigrant, had enlisted in the regular dragoons in 1850. Early in his career, he was arrested after a drunken tirade in which he threatened an officer. He was made to walk bound behind a wagon from Las Vegas to Santa Fe. Carleton thought enough of him to appoint him first sergeant in his dragoon company. He left the regular army in 1860, but joined the volunteer First California Cavalry as a captain once the war broke out. He played a pivotal role in Carleton's and Carson's roundup of the Mescalero Apaches in 1862, for which he later received a brevet

¹⁸Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 939-943.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid; Dunlay, *Kit Carson & the Indians*, 239.

promotion to Lieutenant Colonel. McCleave continued his service in the regular army's officer corps until his retirement in 1879.²¹

Artillery. Lieutenant George H. Pettis took charge of the artillery. U.S. troops on Indian campaigns often did not take along artillery. Fortunately, Carson's command did. Pettis commanded an element of one company of infantry totaling twenty-seven men.²² He had two mountain howitzers at his disposal. These infantrymen had all been assigned to him before he left Fort Union. General Carleton - always a stickler for details - instructed that twelve infantrymen be selected for the task of firing the howitzers. The infantrymen had no training with the new weapon, so Carleton ordered that they be assigned to Pettis immediately. Pettis drilled them every morning and evening until they became completely proficient on their new weapon. It is possible that the remaining infantry under Pettis had been assigned as a guard, or possibly a guard that could also serve as backup crew.²³

Mountain howitzers in particular were a type of pack howitzer. Mountain howitzers were designed to be highly mobile and transportable over difficult terrain. Military crew members could disassemble them into just a few relatively small parts, each of which could be borne by a single pack animal. Carson originally intended to bring a train of pack animals on the trip. When only one hundred pack saddles could be found, he opted instead to bring a wagon train.²⁴ Even with a wagon train rather than

²¹Dunlay, *Kit Carson & the Indians*, 239; Francis P. Heitman, *Historical Record and Dictionary of the United States Army From Its Origination, September 29, 1789, to March 2, 1903*, vol. 1, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1903), 655; Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 234-237.

²²Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 939-943.

²³Carleton to Selden, 14 October 1864, Arrott's Fort Union Collection, New Mexico Highlands University, NA RG 98, Dept of New Mexico Letters, v. 15 (11a), 211-212.

²⁴Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 939-943.

pack animals, mountain howitzers would have been the only field artillery that could have been brought on the trip. These small field guns would prove an essential psychological and tactical weapon at the Battle of Adobe Walls.

Auxiliaries. More than once General Carleton toyed with the idea of supplementing his uniformed manpower with Indian auxiliaries. As early as 1862, he discussed with Carson the possibility of seeking Ute cooperation against Confederate invaders. Although that plan never came to fruition, he believed that finding Indian auxiliaries to join Carson's strike on the Comanches and Kiowas ought to be easier than convincing them to fight Rebels.²⁵ Mountain tribes had been hereditary enemies of Plains tribes like the Comanches and Kiowas for over a century. Carleton believed that Carson could easily use his influence with the mountain Indians of northern New Mexico to garner a good deal of manpower from these tribes.

Attaining that support proved harder than expected. Carson went to Cimarron, New Mexico, to recruit Utes and Jicarillas for the expedition. He departed Cimarron with a sizable Indian auxiliary force from those tribes, but he had great difficulty convincing them to participate. Carson ended up enticing some Utes and Jicarillas to join the expedition by promising them extra rations, a pound and a half of extra meat and flour. Even at that, Carson did not get the hearty response Carleton had expected, at least in part because the rations were not present. They were just a promise, albeit a promise from Carson, a trusted source. Carson wrote General Carleton to request the extra provisions be sent to Lucien B. Maxwell, and to warn him that keeping the agreement would be important in preserving Ute and Jicarilla cooperation. It would not only keep those tribes

²⁵Dunlay, *Kit Carson & the Indians*, 230.

friendly to whites, but also keep them on terms for use in future campaigns should they become necessary.²⁶

Carson initially left Cimarron with sixty-five Utes and Jicarilla Apaches. He later amended the number to eighty-two in a postscript to the letter he sent to Carleton requesting provisions. In his after-action report, Carson reported that seventy-five Indians made the entire trip. Once along, these Utes and Apaches proved to be enthusiastic warriors, chomping at the bit for a chance to wreak havoc on their enemies from the plains.²⁷

A Force Evaluation

In spite of all General Carleton's searching for additional troops for this punitive expedition, he believed this force of 321 officers and men with 75 Indian auxiliaries would be sufficient to accomplish his tactical goals. At least that is what he told Kit Carson. Carleton said he gave Carson "more than he requested" because he intended Carson to give these Indians, especially the Kiowas, "a severe drubbing."²⁸

But would a force of about four hundred men be adequate to subdue two powerful tribes likely concentrated in their winter encampments? Some early historians have argued emphatically that Carson's force was far too small for the task at hand.²⁹ That retrospective assessment happens to be true, but that may be a bit of armchair generaling. Should Carleton have known this force was too small? It certainly had been difficult, to that point, to find Plains Indians concentrated in large aggregates. Carleton may have thought a force of four hundred would be more than adequate to punish whatever

²⁶Carson to Carleton, 3 November 1864, LR, 1864, DNM, r. 23, M1120, RG 393, NA.

²⁷Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 939-943.

²⁸Carleton to Carson, 23 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, pp. 213-214.

²⁹Kenner, *Comanchero Frontier*, 148.

individual bands Carson would encounter on the South Plains. Carleton anticipated a cooperating force under Blunt to march toward the Canadian from Fort Larned to the east. Carleton's expectation of a two-pronged attack may have left him with the impression that the mission could be accomplished with a small force raised from the New Mexico theater.

Even if Carleton somehow knew he would get no help from Blunt and the Kansas units, past experience may have led him to believe that only a limited force was necessary to operate against and chastise the Indians. Carson had perfected winter campaigning techniques against the Navajos during the winter of 1863-1864. By concentrating on destroying food stuffs and the Navajo means of survival, Carson had forced them to surrender without ever fighting a major battle. These tactics allowed him to subdue the Navajos – a tribe arguably as powerful as the Comanches, and certainly more numerous – with a force of only 389 men.³⁰ Why should a winter campaign against the Comanches and Kiowas require any more personnel or firepower?

The Plains Indians often scattered at the first sign of an enemy attack – a tactic they employed for several reasons. Obviously, a surprise cavalry attack would first and foremost put families and noncombatants in jeopardy. Additionally, Plains tribes seldom lingered to give battle unless victory was practically certain. They would only fight with a distinct and massive advantage, unless cornered. Knowing these tendencies, Carleton may have been content to deploy a small force. Even if they would not be able to round-up and capture all Comanches and Kiowas (this was never the objective in the first place), Carson's battalion would be in little jeopardy. Once engaged, the Indians would

³⁰Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 242.

likely not enjoy a decisive advantage and would thus be inclined to break off any engagements that might put Carson's party at risk for severe casualties.

In retrospect, Carleton erred in sending such a small strike force against the two powerful South Plains tribes. But for the several reasons listed above, he expressed contentment with the force he fielded. He had a sound, experienced field commander in Carson. He had done his due diligence to secure more troops – they were simply not available. The force seemed large enough, and the winter-campaign tactics had proven successful in the past. General Carleton was confident of a favorable outcome.³¹

³¹Carleton to Carson, 23 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, pp. 213-214.

4. U.S. Officer Biographical Sketches

Lieutenant Colonel Francisco Abreu

Francisco P. Abreu was born in Santa Fe in 1831. He had deeper roots in New Mexico than any other officer on the campaign. Abreu's father Santiago had been governor of New Mexico during the Mexican period. He was later captured during a revolt against Santa Anna, supporting governor Albino Prez (whom the elder Abreu had defended). A day after being imprisoned, Santiago Abreu's feet and hands were cut off and waved in front of his face. His captors carved out his tongue and eyes before he mercifully perished. Young Francisco's uncle lost his life in the same uprising.¹

Francisco Abreu was distantly related to Lucien Maxwell. Abreu seems to have been a lifelong bachelor. He became a store keeper in Santa Fe in the years prior to the war. He raised an infantry company for the Union cause, and through good service, climbed in rank from captain to colonel commanding the First New Mexico Volunteer Infantry and Fort Union by the end of the war. He impressed campaign mate George Pettis enough that Pettis named a son after him. Abreu lived out his later years once again as a store keeper, but now in the village of Chaparito in San Miguel County. The respect his fellow soldiers and countrymen had in him continued to bring Francisco Abreu success in the public sector. He rose to the position of Speaker of the New Mexico Territorial Legislature. Francisco Abreu died in Anton Chico in 1879, at the age of forty-eight.²

¹David J. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier 1821-1846, The American Southwest Under Mexico*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 262; Jerry D. Thompson, *A Civil War History of the New Mexico Volunteers and Militia*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2015), 26.

²Thompson, *A Civil War History of the New Mexico Volunteers and Militia*, 26, 466; 1870 Census Record: Territory of New Mexico; San Miguel County Chaparito (Under: Abrew); *Report of the Secretary of the Territory, 1909-1910, and Legislative Manual, 1911* (Santa Fe: New Mexican Printing Company, 1911),

Major William McCleave

William McCleave entered this world in 1823 from northern Ireland. His ancestors came to that country during England's infamous Protestant colonization project where thousands of Scottish Lowlanders were foisted upon Ireland in an effort to break up the solid Catholic hold on the Emerald Isle. William McCleave was reluctant to talk of his life in Ireland, apparently because the potato famines had claimed his first wife and a young child. When he set foot on Manhattan in 1850, he vowed that Ireland would be relegated to the dust bins of his mind. Gold drew him across the country to California, but by October he decided to cast his lot with the dragoons.³

As an enlistee in the First United States Dragoons, McCleave served under Captain James H. Carleton. Although close to thirty, McCleave did not yet have the maturity to avoid the problems associated with strong drink. On one drunken spree in 1853 near Las Vegas, New Mexico, McCleave responded to an order from Carleton by drawing his sword and pointing it at the captain in his refusal. Carleton promptly had McCleave bound and pulled him behind the wagon all the way back to Fort Union. McCleave continued to mature as a soldier, and his better qualities endeared him to the commander he once threatened. By the time McCleave left the dragoons in 1860, he was the unit's first sergeant. For one brief stint, he was assigned to babysit the remaining animals from the army's defunct camel experiment.⁴

William McCleave reentered the service of the United States in 1861 at the outbreak of hostilities. McCleave received with a commission as the captain of Company

319.

³*Daily Planet* (Berkeley), 24 July 2008.

⁴Dunlay, *Kit Carson and the Indians*, 239.

A, First Cavalry, California Volunteers. He led an advance party of Carleton's California Column, and while searching for Carleton's dispatcher was surprised and captured by Captain Sherod Hunter and a party of the Texas Mounted Rifles. McCleave was held prisoner from March to July of 1862, when he was exchanged for two captive Confederate lieutenants. His shame at having been captured drove him to return to the government \$582.50 in back pay, insisting that he had not earned it in captivity.⁵

Just three days after being liberated, McCleave was with a supply wagon that was attacked by several dozen Navajos. He soon received a promotion to major of volunteers, and spent the next year and a half fighting Navajos and Apaches before commanding the cavalry arm of Kit Carson's Kiowa and Comanche Campaign. In the later years of the war, McCleave was breveted lieutenant colonel and briefly commanded Fort Sumner. Although the army restructured and greatly reduced the officer corps shortly after the end of the Civil War, nearly every officer who served during the period later claimed to have been offered a regular commission and turned it down.⁶ In McCleave's case, it was true. McCleave accepted a regular Second Lieutenant's commission. Though that may seem like a demotion, being asked to remain in an officer's billet amidst such a massive reduction in force was a tremendous honor, and reflects great credit on William McCleave's wartime service. He was promoted twice more in the next four years, and served until 1879 before retiring and settling in Berkeley, California.⁷

⁵*Daily Planet* (Berkeley), 24 July 2008.

⁶Deus, Fritz, and Witham all made this doubtful claim. It seems especially unlikely that Witham, whose resignation was accepted in February 1865 – long before anyone was being mustered out – would have been offered a regular commission.

⁷*Daily Planet* (Berkeley), 24 July 2008.

In 1872, at the age of nearly fifty, McCleave married a twenty-eight year old Irish immigrant named Mary Crooke. She bore him six children, four prior to his retirement and two in California. In retirement, he flirted with real estate, and ultimately purchased some rental property. He erected two rental houses, which as of this date still stand. He served as commandant of the local veterans home, and passed away in 1904. Most of his sons had careers as distinguished military officers, and a daughter married into a military family. After William McCleave's passing, Mary spent the remainder of her years on a semi-permanent rotation, living with one or another of her children's families at their various assigned duty stations.⁸

Captain Emil Fritz

Emil Fritz lived a relatively short life defined by wanderlust. Emil was the second of ten children, born in 1833. His father worked as a steward at a very large estate near Stuttgart, Germany. Emil came to California in his late teens, about the same time so many others flocked to the Golden State, probably for the same reason. He apparently did not have much luck or long-term interest in mining, however. Emil followed another well-worn path for nineteenth century immigrants to America: he joined the army. In 1851, he enlisted in the 1st United States Dragoons, perhaps the most glamorous army unit of the era. Fritz served most of the decade as a dragoon – some of that time under James Carleton – before mustering out at Fort Tejon on New Year's Day, 1861. He briefly dabbled in mining again, but upon the outbreak of the Civil War, he jumped at the chance to hold a commission in the First Cavalry, California Volunteers.

⁸Ibid.

Fritz received a captain's commission in August and commanded Company B, mustered in at Camp Merritt near Oakland in the fall of 1861.⁹

Company B seems to have been involved in a couple of errands after Confederate sympathizers, of which there were a surprising number in San Bernardino County California. Shortly thereafter, Fritz's company pressed on to California with General Carleton and the California Column. Ten companies of Californians marched through the deserts of the Southwest under drier than usual conditions to help drive the Confederate invaders out of New Mexico. For the most part, they followed the route of the old Butterfield Overland mail. The Butterfield Overland was stage coach route through the Southwest which for a time had a contract to deliver United States mail across the gargantuan distances of the West. It was, at the time, the fastest commercial land transportation to the West Coast. Confederate troopers and partisans harassed the Union column here and there along the way, but the Californians fought their largest enroute engagement at Apache Pass against Indians. Captain Fritz at times pursued Confederate detachments, and on one occasion was sent to exchange a couple of captured rebel Lieutenants for then-captain William McCleave. By the time Carleton's contingent reached New Mexico, the rebels were long gone. There remained, however, plenty of Indian duty.¹⁰

General Carleton at times needed Captain Fritz for not rounding up enough raiders when he was assigned to chase them down. Surprising Indians on the run, especially when they were expecting pursuers after a raid, was no easy task. While

⁹Frederick Nolan, *The Lincoln County War: A Documentary History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 462.

¹⁰Eyre to Culter, 8 July 1862, OR, ser. 1, vol. 9, 589-591.

Fritz's command did not have the best record of actually apprehending the perpetrating Indians, he very often succeeded in overrunning their camps with little enough notice so as to capture all of their equipment and trappings.¹¹

Another incident from early in Emil Fritz's command helps shed light on why he remained at the rank of captain as long as he did. It also shows that while General Carleton could be demanding, zealous, and often meddling, he did not hold grudges. A young Lieutenant Baldwin serving under Captain Fritz had been charged with transporting \$700 in government cash. Lieutenant Baldwin was later ordered to detached service. Not having a safe or other secure container, the lieutenant asked Captain Fritz if he would look after the money. As the main party under Captain Fritz traveled along, they came to a crossing on the Rio Grande. The trunk Fritz had been using to transport the money under Lieutenant Baldwin's care was for some reason laid on the bank of the river and left unattended. Captain Fritz later discovered that the container had been broken open and the money stolen. Fritz did everything in his power to investigate the crime and learn the identity of the culprit, to no avail. He ultimately had to report the loss to General Carleton, and swear an affidavit as to all he knew about the incident. He made no attempt to lay blame on the lieutenant, and while apologetic, was insistent that he not be required to repay the money. He asked for a court of inquiry to investigate whether or not he had done everything reasonable to protect the money and investigate the crime. Carleton declined ordering the inquiry, sarcastically remarking that it would be impossible for a court to determine whether Fritz was guilty of gross and criminal

¹¹General Orders No. 3, 24 February 1864, OR Ser. 1, Vol. 26, Chap. 38, Part 2, 23-32; Carleton to McMullen, 19 December 1863, NA, RG 98, Dept of New Mexico letters, v. 14 pg. 244.

neglectin “leaving upon the bank of the Rio Grande a valise with seven hundred dollars of public coin funds in it which had been entrusted to him by a brother officer for safe keeping” (emphasis Carleton’s). Although Fritz was not prosecuted for any intentional wrongdoing, the army ultimately had his pay stopped until half of the \$700 had been recovered. The other \$350 was charged to Lieutenant Baldwin. Carleton then allowed Emil Fritz to sit in a Captain’s billet for over three years. After the Kiowa and Comanche campaign, Carleton reconsidered Fritz’s merits and accomplishment. He cited Fritz for gallantry and recommended him for a brevet, noting that he had “been a Captain for a long time.”¹²

Fritz and Company B served at Fort Wingate during the 1863 Navajo campaign, and then were ordered to Fort Sumner. The Californians had signed up for three year enlistments which ended in 1864, as General Carleton was so fond of reminding others when asking for more troops. Fritz's company mustered out at Fort Sumner in the spring of 1864, but enough men wanted to remain in the service that Company B was simply reorganized, with Emil Fritz retaining command. It was Fritz's reorganized Company B that joined Colonel Carson against the Comanches and Kiowas a few months later. Fritz was soon promoted to major, largely on the strength of a good recommendation from Carleton in the wake of the Carson expedition. In the waning months of the war, Fritz was breveted Lieutenant Colonel and for a time commanded Fort Sumner before everyone who signed up with him in California mustered out in 1866. It was apparent that something was amiss with Fritz’s health long before he left the army. He had at least

¹²Testimony to E.E. Wood, 22 September 1862, Fritz to McCleave 16 March 1863, Civil War Service Records – Union – California, Emil Fritz RG94-CMSR-CA-1CAV-Bx32

two long stints when he reported absent for duty, sick. In nineteenth century medical records, that signified something more serious than taking a sick day.¹³

After the Civil War, Emil Fritz moved to Lincoln County, New Mexico, where he went into the ranching business and became a partner in the infamous L. G. Murphy & Co. store in that county. In the early 1870s, Fritz – now only in his early forties – began to have major health problems. He visited a doctor in Santa Fe to see if anything could be done to cure his ailment. The doctor told Emil it would be best if he "got his affairs in order." In the many exciting years since Fritz had come to America, his mother had passed and he had not seen his father. He decided he wanted to go home to Germany to die. Fritz had never married, and had no offspring. He had, however, accumulated considerable wealth in his ranching and government contracting enterprises in the years after he left the army. He also had a huge \$10,000 life insurance policy. The dying rich man smelled like carrion to the many vultures then circling Lincoln County, new Mexico. Perhaps fortunately, Emil Fritz never knew the true cost in carnage triggered by the argument over how to disperse his insurance policy. Fritz died in Germany in 1874 from heart and kidney disease.¹⁴

As it turned out, Alexander McSween was hired to disperse the proceeds of Fritz's insurance policy. Murphy, now partners with Dolan, claimed Fritz had large debts to the store, and that as such, Murphy & Dolan were entitled to first dibs at the huge cache of estate and insurance money. Whether or not Fritz's estate actually owed any money to Murphy, Alexander McSween was not the attorney to release it to him, and he never did.

¹³Murphy to DeForrest, 16 April 1866, Willis to DeForrest, 10 June 1866, Civil War Service Records – Union – California, Emil Fritz RG94-CMSR-CA-1CAV-Bx32.

¹⁴Nolan, *The Lincoln County War*, passim.

Murphy and Dolan later convinced their in-the-pocket sheriff, William Brady (Fritz, Murphy, and Brady had all served together as officers in New Mexico during the Civil War), to attach all of McSween's assets. For some reason, Englishman John Tunstall's assets were attached as well. When Brady led a posse out to assess the judgment against Tunstall, the latter was murdered, thus sparking the Lincoln County War.¹⁵

Captain Richard Charles Deus

Richard Charles Dues was also born in Prussia, but a few years earlier – August 12, 1822. When Charles was about six years old, his family moved first to Washington, Missouri where they operated a winery and a grist mill. Deus shared several experiences from his early life similar to those of his later commander, Kit Carson. Like Carson, Deus grew up in a time and place where there was still an ever present threat of Indian attack. Like Carson, Deus found himself stuck in a distasteful apprenticeship as a teenager. In 1840, when Deus was sixteen years old, he was apprenticed to a tanner. Unlike Carson, Deus stuck out the apprenticeship and worked as a tanner's apprentice until 1845. He then hired on as a herder for a wagon train under the direction of a Charles Blimner, going to Santa Fe for the first time. He later hauled furs back from Bent's Fort to St. Louis.¹⁶

When the U.S.-Mexican War broke out in 1846, Deus joined an all-German Missouri Volunteer unit. He served as a private in Fischer's battery of Hassendeubel's light artillery. He made the trek to New Mexico with Kearny and Doniphan. Deus's artillery unit was left with Doniphan in Santa Fe while Kearny proceeded to California,

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Costello, *Life of Captain Deus*, 1-2.

after the bloodless and rapid capitulation of New Mexico. The German artillerists accompanied Doniphan through El Paso and all the way to the Battle of the Sacramento River, where, with less than a thousand troops, they set flight to an army of over four thousand Mexicans. According to Doniphan, the victory was largely attributable to his superior artillery. This victory led to U.S. occupation of Ciudad Chihuahua. After Sacramento, Deus was dispatched as a courier to relay news of the victory back to Santa Fe. Back in Santa Fe, the army had run short on supplies and needed a vinegar manufacturer to help combat scurvy. Deus took up the contract and served in that capacity before making one more trip into Mexico with Sterling Price before the war came to an end.¹⁷

He then settled in Santa Fe where he set up his own grist mill and the first brewery in the Rocky Mountains (according to him). Between the mill, brewery and a pool hall and saloon, Deus began to prosper financially. He attempted to enter the Santa Fe trade, purchasing some wagons, stock, and goods in Missouri for sale in New Mexico, but the enterprise was not a complete success, as Deus's mill was destroyed in a flood while he was gone. Nonetheless, the young German had indeed amassed a valuable stock of capital as a trader. Deus meandered in and out of several businesses over the next few years, staking claims, building mills, and trading livestock, among other things.¹⁸

In the mid 1850s, a series of Indian raids led the New Mexico governor to raise a volunteer cavalry unit under the old trader Ceran St. Vrain to assist Colonel Fauntleroy against – ironically – the Ute and Jicarilla Apache tribes. This expedition included

¹⁷Ibid, 3-5.

¹⁸Ibid, 6, 9-14, 18-22.

Pfieffer and Chaves, who would make names for themselves fighting Indians in New Mexico. Deus raised a company of volunteers and helped equip them, in exchange for generous compensation for the feed and use of all the horses. After the Utes and Jicarillas were quelled, Deus returned and made another run at the milling and distilling business before trying his hand at ranching. Throughout much of the middle of his life, Deus marched back and forth between Culebra, near Taos, and the Huerfano country. He claims to have planted the first potato crop in New Mexico at Culebra from stock he had picked up at Fort Union in 1856. In 1857, Deus drove a herd of cattle to the Huerfano, and staked a claim at the confluence of the Muddy and Huerfano Rivers, near present-day Gardner, Colorado, an area he had greatly admired on the Ute expedition. The year 1857 was significant for Deus in more ways than one. He married Juana Marie Gallegos the same year.¹⁹

Once he heard news that there was a war about to break out, Deus claims he immediately set out raising men for the cause of Union preservation. Charles sold off the items from his ranch that were not infrastructure in his patriotic fervor. He kept the real estate and breeding stock and tools. He let out the use of his ranch and breeding stock to a John Bailey, who would keep a percentage of their offspring in exchange for maintaining the place. According to Deus, the man cleaned him out while he was away. Deus raised an entire company, and apparently fitted out those who were unable to provide their own equipment. This, however, was not a completely altruistic maneuver. While very few New Mexicans of Deus's era would have been able to provide such a large stock herd out-of-pocket, Deus did stand to receive compensation from the

¹⁹Ibid, 7-9, 14, 32, *passim*.

government for the use of all those horses, and compensation for feeding them, when provisions were not provided.²⁰

Deus participated in all the major New Mexico Civil War operations other than Glorieta Pass. He fought with Canby at Valverde, where he was highly critical General Canby's abilities and loyalties as commander. As we will see later, Deus could be a difficult subordinate when he disagreed with or misunderstood his military superiors. Deus was loudly critical of Canby's caution toward attacking Sibley in the days leading up to Valverde, interpreting caution as cowardice or even disloyalty. Deus made a display of folding his arms when Canby was cheered upon reaching the battlefield at Valverde, and repeatedly criticized Canby's handling of the battle. Shortly after the Battle of Valverde, Canby reorganized the New Mexico Volunteers, keeping only those he believed reliable and trustworthy. Deus was not one of those. Deus believed that the hundreds of desertions among the New Mexican militias and volunteers were the result of their belief that Canby was on the verge of surrendering Fort Craig to Sibley, and then with it. Whatever the reason, Deus was without a company and about to be released from service, before Carson spoke up on his account and preserved for him a commission.²¹

Charles Deus then went on to serve temporarily at Fort Garland, but was soon back in New Mexico and fought under Carson against the Navajos, Kiowas, and Comanches. He helped escort the Navajos to Bosque Redondo and guarded wagon trains as part of Carleton's plan following Carson's campaign.²²

²⁰Ibid, 21-22.

²¹Ibid, 21-25.

²²Ibid, 22-25. Some of Deus's claims in his dictated memoir seem exaggerated. Others still are downright incorrect. He occasionally got names wrong, but more troubling, he remembered Carson as being the direct successor to General Canby. He also remembered Carson to have been passive during the Adobe Walls battle, essentially turning command over to William McCleave. Nevertheless, I rely on Deus where I have

During his time in the service, General Canby was not the only officer Charles Deus fell afoul of. He found some of his fellow Germans as dislikeable as Canby. Just a few months after the battle at Adobe Walls, Deus's company was given the less-than-glamorous duty of manning Fort Bascom. Major Bergmann was in command at the time, and a colorful dispute followed. Bergmann apparently cohabitated for several months with the wife of one of his enlisted men while in that command. After several profanity-laced public shouting matches with Deus, he accused Deus of cheating the government out of some money and stores. Several fellow officers backed Bergmann's allegations, and Deus was officially charged. Deus responded by pointing out Bergmann's extramarital escapades and exploitation of his subordinate's family. Bergmann's only defense was that he could not be expected to live that long at a place like Fort Bascom without a woman. Other troops at Fort Bascom testified that although Bergmann did in fact take up with the private's wife, Deus had himself attempted to lure her away, arguing that he was "a lot richer" than Bergmann.²³ The whole affair resulted in Deus proffering his resignation. Deus claims to have mustered out with his company in October of 1865.²⁴

Charles Deus left the army in 1865 and returned home to a financial shambles.

Bailey had cleaned him out. With what money he had remaining, he backed another no other sources. Deus correctly identifies major items and correctly remembers the general flow of events whenever there is corroborating evidence. Some of his forgetfulness over time is understandable. Deus fought with Canby in the field at Valverde. It is reasonable that an older Deus may have believed Carson to have been his successor because he never actually saw James Carleton in the field. As far as was visible, it did seem as if Carson had taken over as field commander. Further, it is plausible that Deus understood McCleave to have been doing most of the commanding at Adobe Walls, since Deus was ordered on a cavalry charge against the upper Kiowa village. McCleave let that effort. Carson remained behind with Pettis and the canyons. To Deus, this may have made it appear that Carson had delegated much if the leadership to McCleave.

²³Jerry D. Thompson, *A Civil War History of the New Mexico Volunteers and Militia*, 374-375.

²⁴Costello, *Life of Captain Deus*, 26.

young man in a store-keeping venture, and lost it all, ruining his credit in the process. He went back to Gardner and found that a squatter had taken over that ranch. So he moved upriver and started fresh with another claim. After planting a crop, he trekked up to Wyoming and worked on construction of the Central Pacific Railroad in an effort to raise more revenue. While in Wyoming, he convinced a few other railroad workers to move with him down to Huerfano County. They followed him there, laid claim to their own lands in the valley, and proceeded to help Deus improve the area with more mills and further development. Charles Deus continued to operate profitable businesses and lived into his eighties. He died in Colorado in 1904.²⁵

Captain Gilbert T. Witham

Gilbert Witham was born in 1831 at Albert, Maine, near Kennebunkport. He worked briefly at a general store in Portland after completing school. At the tender age of seventeen, Gilbert hired on to superintend a load of timber on the ship, *Carlomarand*, which sailed from Boston in November of 1849 for California via Cape Horn and San Juan Fernandez. He unloaded his cargo in San Francisco on 6 May 1850. Like his future brother-in-arms, Emil Fritz, Witham came to California with gold fever.²⁶

Gilbert began as a miner and teamster, but soon went into business with fellow Maineiac, John Milliken. The two mined together and later opened a store in the boomtown of Michigan Bar. After a couple of years as retailers, the two sold out and ran a boarding house in Sacramento, until a fire destroyed over 85 percent of the city in 1852. He bought and ran his own hack (a kind of horse drawn bus) from the Orleans hotel in

²⁵Ibid, 26-28.

²⁶Tom Gregory, et al, *History of Yolo County, California: Biographical Sketches* (Los Angeles: Historic Record Company, 1913), 480-483.

Sacramento. In 1857, he married his wife, Jemima, with whom he had five children. Both before and after the war, he worked stints shipping produce for Doughty & Company.²⁷

Witham only signed up for military service in mid-1863, and was initially part of the same company with Sullivan Heath. He did not get to New Mexico until May 1864, and by the end of the following February he was on the way back home. The hierarchy and organization of the army and its bureaucracy never seemed to agree with him. Carleton's headquarters constantly chastised him for late and inaccurate reports. He offered his resignation just a month after arriving in the territory. Colonel Brown, the regiment commander recommended acceptance, saying that Witham did not have much idea about how to run a company or interact with enlisted troops in his charge. Major McCleave, in his comment on the resignation, tepidly replied that Witham was about the same quality officer as other commanders of volunteers. The request had to be forwarded to the adjutant general of the Union Army and thus was not approved until early February, with an effective date of the twenty-eighth of that month. Witham wrote a letter asking the resignation be revoked, but it was too late for that.²⁸

So Gilbert Witham went home early and began running a steamship up and down the Sacramento for the Doughty Company. He was one of the first conductors for the Central Pacific Railroad and claimed to have personally watched Leland Stanford break ground on that end of the transcontinental line. He retired from the railroad after his forty-one year old son was killed in a train wreck, and went into the insurance business in

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Civil War Service Records – Union – California; Gilbert T. Witham. NARA RG94-CMSR-CA-1CAV-Bx96

a small neighboring town. He proudly claimed to have placed the first Republican vote in the town of Washington (now Broderick), California. He lived out his final years watching the Sacramento River roll by and died in 1913, past eighty years of age.²⁹

Joseph Berney

Joseph L. Berney entered the service of the United States at the age of twenty-three in May of 1862. He originally enlisted in the Fifth New Mexico, but was later made commander of Company D, First Cavalry, New Mexico Volunteers. He served in various administrative capacities. For instance, he served a short stint as a commissary officer. He served with enough efficiency to merit favorable comment, even from a stickler like General Carleton, who called him a “dedicated officer who applies zeal and attention to his duties, whose conduct gives me entire satisfaction.” Berney battled health problems though, and sometimes suffered from consumption. It turned out his worst health problems were self-inflicted.³⁰

Venereal diseases were a constant problem for soldiers who succumbed to the temptations of camp followers, or more often poor Indian girls on reservations. Apparently, Navajo traditions did not apply all of the same sexual taboos and views of chastity that Western culture claimed (but all too often did not follow). Exacerbating that problem were men on the frontier, far from their sweethearts or very many good prospects for a traditional relationship. Most tragically, however, the poverty many families at Bosque Redondo experienced after the failed crops, compounded by sparse government rations intended to feed far fewer Indians than actually ended up there, drove

²⁹Gregory *History of Yolo County*, 480-483.

³⁰Jerry D. Thompson (ed.), *New Mexico Territory During the Civil War: Wallen and Evans Inspection Reports, 1862-1863*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 265.

many Navajo families to encourage their young female family members to trade sexual favors for meal vouchers. This environment led to units stationed near Bosque Redondo having the highest rate of venereal disease of any in the Civil War.³¹

Captain Berney began to turn up sick often in 1865. He was periodically sent out to Fort Bascom to keep watch and pressure on the Comanches. His ailments frequently forced him back to Forts Union and Sumner. Berney died at Fort Sumner on October 7, 1865, at the age of only twenty-six years from the effects of consumption that may have been complicated by a “very bad case of syphilis.” Oddly, Captain Berney left all of his effects to Lawrence G. Murphy, with whom he had served.³²

Captain George Pettis

George Pettis was born on Saint Patrick’s Day of 1834 in Rhode Island, but grew up in New York. After going to school in Cohoes, he took a job at the local newspaper quite ironically named the “Cataract.” He returned to Providence to work in the newspaper trade for five years before hopping a steamer for California via Nicaragua in 1854. He skipped back and forth between mining and printing while in California, until the call went out for volunteers in 1861. George Pettis signed on as a second lieutenant, Company B, First Infantry, California Volunteers. He later commanded company K of the same unit in the rank of first lieutenant. He briefly served as adjutant before being mustered out of the service in the summer of 1866.³³

³¹Sides, *Blood and Thunder*, 368.

³²Thompson, *New Mexico Territory During the Civil War*, 265.

³³George H. Pettis, Historical Society of New Mexico, No. 11, *The California Column: Its Campaigns in New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas, during the Civil War, with Sketches of Brigadier General James H. Carleton, its Commander, and Other Officers and Soldiers* (Santa Fe: New Mexico Printing Company, 1908), 30-32.

Pettis remained in New Mexico for a few years after the war. He set up a business at Algodones, between Santa Fe and Albuquerque. He served as forage agent and later postmaster. In 1868, however, he moved back to Rhode Island. He held various editing positions, and also served in the Rhode Island state legislature for a time. Pettis was the most vocal and zealous booster and spokesperson for Kit Carson's unit that had ventured out onto the plains to battle the Comanches and Kiowas in 1864. He was active in several veterans associations, including the Grand Army of the Republic and The Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States. He wrote autobiographical accounts of both the Kiowa and Comanche Campaign of 1864, and the march of the California Column under General Carleton. He spoke on these topics for veterans clubs and historical societies in his old age, as well.³⁴

George Courtright, Assistant Surgeon

George Courtright is one of the few participants in the 1864 Battle of Adobe Walls who provided a first hand account, along with Pettis, Deus, and Colonel Carson, who of course, had to file a report. Courtright was born in Walnut Township, Ohio, in 1840. He went to school in the local community and continued his education in the medical field ultimately at the Medical College of Ohio in 1862. Late that year, he entered the army where he served as a contract surgeon until appointed assistant surgeon in the Ohio Volunteers in 1863, where he briefly served before being transferred to the Department of New Mexico.³⁵

³⁴Pettis, *The California Column*, 30-32; census.

³⁵Charles C. Miller, *History of Fairfield County, Ohio and Representative Citizens* (Chicago: Richmond-Arnold Publishing Co., 1912), 584-588.

Courtright had to make his way to New Mexico via the standard thoroughfares of the day. He took rail only a little way past St. Louis, after which he boated along the Missouri River to Kansas City, and then rode mail coaches to Santa Fe. Shortly thereafter, he went to Fort Sumner, where he served as post surgeon for the entirety of the Bosque Redondo experiment, excepting the stint he spent with Carson's Kiowa and Comanche campaign. Courtright exited the army on good terms in December of 1865.³⁶

George Courtright immediately went back to Ohio after being mustered out of the service. He briefly taught at a medical school in Cincinnati, and helped the community in that city survive a horrendous malaria outbreak in 1867. The following year, he moved to the tiny community of Lithopolis, Ohio. He married the same year. He practiced medicine continually in Lithopolis for forty-five years, and garnered many awards in that field. He served in various lodges, community service organizations, and lower level community political offices, such as school board president for most of his adult life. He died in Lithopolis in 1915.³⁷

Charles Haberkorn

Charles Haberkorn, yet another German, was born in Bavaria in 1823. In his early forties at the time of the Adobe Walls Battle, Haberkorn was nominally placed in charge of the Indian auxiliaries.

On September 8, 1866, Haberkorn had some kind of accident at Fort Stanton that left him paralyzed to the point that he could hardly move, even with crutches. He lived out the remainder of his years at a veterans home in Dayton, Ohio, and died in 1879.³⁸

³⁶Pettis, *The California Column*, 36; Miller, *History of Fairfield County*, 584-588.

³⁷Miller, *History of Fairfield County*, 584-588.

³⁸NARA, U.S. Homes for Veteran and Disabled Soldiers, 1866-1938, Dayton, Register R.

Sullivan Heath

Sullivan Heath was born in Illinois in about 1830. He entered the service at Sacramento in August of 1861. He was assigned to Company H, Second Cavalry, California Volunteers, and promoted to corporal in the first few months of his service. He was over six feet tall, with blonde hair and green eyes. For the first two years of the war, Heath worked various “home” jobs in California – at the provost marshal’s office in San Francisco for a while, later on recruiting duty. His break came in the summer of 1863 when new units were being formed. Heath was appointed second lieutenant in Company M of the First Cavalry, California Volunteers, and later shuffled companies. When he was moved to Company K, he received a promotion via another vacancy, and remained in that rank for the duration of the war. He did not leave for New Mexico until February of 1864. It appears his first major action was Carson’s campaign to Adobe Walls.³⁹

Lieutenant Heath never felt comfortable with his commission. His superiors praised his amicable nature and geniality, but when Lieutenant Heath submitted his resignation – and he did several times – his company commander always recommended it be accepted. Captain Johnson of Company K intimated that Heath was unable to read or write any correspondence, and that he had no head for the kinds of bean counting that army bureaucracy often demanded of junior officers. As such, Johnson said Heath was more of a hindrance than a help. Heath had three brothers serving, and his father died while he was away, leaving an ailing mother home alone. The lieutenant cited “personal business” as his reason for resigning, which likely pointed to his mother’s ailment or some combination of family matters and embarrassment over his illiteracy. Carleton was

³⁹Heath Service Record: RG94-CMSR-CA-1CAV-Bx40

not about to let anyone go home before a major campaign, however. He could leave after the Kiowa and Comanche campaign. By then, Heath was the company commander and apparently that cured him of his homesickness and humility. He either gave up asking or decided to serve out his term.⁴⁰

For most of 1865 and 1866, Heath commanded the undersized Company K and pulled escort duty in accordance with General Carleton's post-Adobe Walls plan for protecting trains. He went on a couple of scouts, and was then mustered out in the summer of 1866.⁴¹ Sullivan Heath apparently lived a quiet life after his time in the service. He married Ella, 25 years his junior, in 1879. The couple had three children, but only one son survived to adulthood. At the turn of the century, Heath, his wife, and nineteen year old son lived in a rented house in St. Louis.⁴²

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²1900 Census Record: Missouri, St. Louis (Independent City); St. Louis Ward 18; District 0283

5. Kiowas, Comanches, and Kiowa-Apaches

The Southern Plains are a hard place. They boast a unique beauty, but the very elements that make the Plains beautiful make them a difficult place to live. Massive summer storms seem to rise from nowhere. Endless prairies wave in wind that blows incessantly. Extreme weather fronts sweep across the smooth terrain. The same day can be hot and cold. Sometimes the day's high temperature is set at 12:01 a.m., and it just gets colder all day. West of the hundredth meridian, mother nature often fails to produce enough water to grow much more than a good crop of grass. Then water comes, but when it does, it can fall in a massive downpour or a destructive hail storm.

Life on the plains demands adaptability, and a certain toughness. This is true today, and was even more so before the age of modern technology and conveniences. Tools, however, often help humans to adapt to harsh environments. They allow humankind to overcome difficult circumstances. A few Indians lived on the Southern Plains prior to contact with Europeans. But the tribes that occupied the Southern Plains by the mid nineteenth century had utilized tools acquired from Europeans to populate the arid plains in greater numbers and more effectively exploit them than had their predecessors.

It was not so much contact with Europeans that so profoundly changed the plains lifestyle as the material and animal culture introduced by outsiders. Europeans brought with them tools that utterly transformed life on the plains. With them came, among other

things, the horse and the firearm. Historian Elliott West says that horses and guns were essentially the cotton gins and steamboats of the Indians and the Great Plains.¹

Before horses, Plains tribes used dogs for work and aid in transportation. The horse allowed Plains Indians to shift from a society that occasionally hunted buffalo to a truly nomadic, hunt-centered existence. Plains Indians hunted buffalo before acquiring the horse. The horse culture allowed remarkable hunting efficiency not otherwise possible.² Firearms were less important than horses in this shift toward reliance on the buffalo. Indians hunting on horseback preferred the more mobile traditional bow and arrow for the task at hand. Firearms did, however, prove useful in another aspect of this cultural change. Many different tribes had the same designs on the newly viable buffalo hunting lifestyle. They converged on the now highly desirable hunting grounds of the High Plains. The situation spelled conflict. The firearm, combined with the horse, made Plains warriors decisively more mobile and deadly than they had been. Plains tribes' masterful application of the horse and firearm arguably made them the world's finest light cavalry.³

Horses and guns gave Plains Indians a new identity. These tools ushered in a completely new way of life. They gave the Indians power, mobility, freedom, and responsibility. But horses also required additional resources and care. They sparked changes in geography among tribes as well as lifestyle. They allowed greater access to

¹West, *Contested Plains*, 55; Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (1931; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 52-67.

²West, *Contested Plains*, 70-71.

³Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 7.

resources, and caused conflict.⁴ Acquisition of the horse simultaneously brought great power and caused unforeseen strife.

Tribes like the Kiowas and Comanches had not always been on the Great Plains, nor had they always been horse cultures. But by the mid nineteenth century, they were clearly defined by both the animal upon which they depended, and the environment in which they lived.

Kiowas

The Kiowas were one of these groups that converged on the Plains as they adapted to the horse culture. According to tradition and oral history, they emerged from the area around the headwaters of the Yellowstone River. Some traditional stories allude to the famous geysers of that region. Kiowas spoke a dialect most closely related to the Tanoan languages of the Pueblo tribes. This linguistic difference separates them from the Comanches and Kiowa-Apaches (or Plains Apaches), the tribes with whom they became most closely associated.⁵

While living in the mountains, the Kiowas hunted buffalo but used dogs and travois for transportation. They surrounded bands of bison on foot and drove them over cliffs. After some ancient disagreement, the Kiowas divided into two groups and left the Yellowstone area. One group traveled northward and became disaffiliated with the tribe. The party we now call Kiowas moved out onto the plains. Their oral history from this period seems to refer to geographical features such as Devil's Tower and the Black Hills.⁶

⁴West, *Contested Plains*, 55-58.

⁵Mildred Mayhall, *The Kiowas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 3; Wilbur S. Nye, *Bad Medicine and Good: Tales of the Kiowas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), vii; Candace S. Greene, *One Hundred Summers: A Kiowa Calendar Record* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 6-8.

⁶Mayhall, *The Kiowas*, 8-11. Nye, *Bad Medicine & Good*, viii.

Upon arriving on the Northern Plains, Kiowas soon ran into the Crows and Arikaras. The Kiowas made an alliance with the Crows sometime in the very early eighteenth century. From this interaction with other plains peoples, Kiowas evolved into the horse-based raiding culture that came to define them. During this period, they adopted buffalo-hide lodges, the Sun Dance, and the use of horses. Kiowas may not have even known about the existence of the horse before their rendezvous with the Crows. Ethnologist James Mooney visited the Kiowas in 1898 as part of an effort to collect what knowledge he could about the tribe before it disappeared. (The perception of the Indian as a “vanishing American” was prevalent in Mooney’s time). Several of the eldest members of the tribe claimed at that time to remember this affiliation with the Crows and Arikaras. Although Crow tradition does not corroborate the Kiowa version of a close relationship, they were likely in some contact, and Kiowas probably acquired the skills and culture associated with the plains life from observing or associating with either the Crows or some similar tribe.⁷

At first, horses did not come easily to the Kiowas. They were able to acquire them a few at a time in raids on their future allies, the Comanches, whom they pressured toward the south with their occupation of the area near the Crows. This dearth of horses did not last long. In 1682, LaSalle said the Plains tribes he encountered had “plenty of horses, probably stolen from Mexico.” He was most likely referring to the Kiowas, Kiowa-Apaches, and other tribes of that area. While this acquisition of horses certainly helped make the Kiowas more efficient hunters, it also gained them prowess and renown

⁷Mayhall, *The Kiowas*, 7, 11-12; Nye, *Bad Medicine & Good*, viii; W.W. Newcomb Jr., *The Indians of Texas: From Prehistoric to Modern Times* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1961), 194.

as raiders. By the 1730s, they had already been condemned by the Spaniards, who labeled Kiowas among the hostile tribes.⁸

Lakota and Cheyenne pressure pushed the Kiowas south toward the end of the eighteenth century. The Kiowas collided with northern bands of Comanches and pushed them south. Comanches and Kiowas had an adversarial relationship as this migratory pressure mounted. Kiowas passed through the region of the upper Platte and Republican Rivers, eventually coming to the region they controlled during recorded history.

Although their raids covered a vast area including Sinaloa, Chihuahua, and even the coastal bend area of Texas, Kiowa territory was generally thought to have included parts of western Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle, as well as bits of northeastern New Mexico, southeastern Colorado, and southwestern Kansas.⁹

Kiowa-Apaches or Plains Apaches

Kiowa-Apaches were a small, Athapascan tribe occupying the Great Plains in the mid-nineteenth century. Several bands of Apaches gained horses very soon after the Spanish arrival in the Rio Grande Valley in 1598. These bands, with the advantage of their mounts, charged onto the plains, lances in hand, and drove Caddoan fixed-agriculture societies off the high prairies eastward in the sixteenth or early seventeenth century. After their arrival on the plains, they settled in the river valleys and planted crops such as maize, beans, squash, and tobacco. They based their economy on both sedentary agriculture and the buffalo hunt. Sometime after their arrival, these Plains Apaches broke into several bands – what were later known as Jicarillas, Lipans, and

⁸Nye, *Bad Medicine & Good*, viii; Mayhall, *The Kiowas*, 12.

⁹Nye, *Bad Medicine & Good*, viii; Mayhall, *The Kiowas*, 3; Greene, *One Hundred Summers*, 6; Newcomb, *Indians of Texas*, 194-195.

Kiowa-Apaches.¹⁰ It was the northernmost of these three bands that later came to be known as Kiowa-Apaches. They appear to have occupied parts of western Kansas and dwelt along the Canadian River for a time during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Early European travelers found them to be reliant on the buffalo but short on horses.¹¹

As the Comanches flooded onto the plains in the early eighteenth century, they forced these bands of Plains Apaches to scatter. While other groups headed south or west, the “proto” Kiowa-Apaches fled north and ran into the Kiowas. Thus began an enduring relationship that so clearly stamped the Kiowa-Apaches that it became their identifying feature. The Kiowas took in this Plains Apache tribe. By this time, they numbered only a few hundred. Kiowa-Apaches remained autonomous in language, internal politics, and social structure. They even retained some of their unique cultural attributes. They did, however, borrow many aspects of Plains Indian culture from the Kiowas. They maintained representation at Kiowa tribal councils.¹² This alliance saved the Kiowa-Apaches from oblivion, and allowed them to return to the part of the plains they identified as their homeland. They would later find themselves in a much larger, more powerful alliance as a result.¹³

Comanches

Like the Kiowas, the Comanches emerged from the mountains. Crow tradition has their origins in the Snake River region. These early people were not, however, the

¹⁰Henry F. Dobyns, “Lipan Apache,” in *Encyclopedia of North American Indians*, ed. Frederick F. Hoxie (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 337; Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 161.

¹¹Dobyns, “Lipan Apache,” 337; Mayhall, *The Kiowas*, 4-5.

¹²Dobyns, “Lipan Apache,” 337; Mayhall, *The Kiowas*, 11-12; Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 161.

¹³Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 161.

Comanches known to history on their exodus to the plains. In their earlier history, the Comanches were an indistinguishable part of the Shoshones from whence they came. Lewis and Clark knew only of the Shoshones. Like many other peoples that became the plains warriors of the nineteenth century, the component of the Shoshone that became the Comanches made their way onto the plains either due to a change in climate, pressure from other tribes, or perhaps attraction to the bison-hunting life.¹⁴

By the mid-seventeenth century, a distinct group of Plains Shoshone had emerged. They were a dog-based culture, taking to the horseless version of the buffalo hunt. Pedestrian stalkers carefully planned means of stampeding the animals over a cliff or into an area of deep snow or melting ice where they could be more easily dispatched with the tools at hand.¹⁵ Late in the seventeenth century, these Plains Shoshones split. One component headed north. The others – one author calls them “proto-Comanches” – moved south, apparently into the Ute country that is now northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. They may have relocated due to pressure from other tribes. Maybe Plains tribes from farther east shared European diseases with these early Comanches, prompting the move. By this time, they had also been exposed to the horse and may very well have moved south to gain better access to the horse supply in Spanish New Mexico.¹⁶

Whatever their reason for moving, the Comanches established a relationship with the Utes, with whom they had linguistic ties. This may have been a basis for early interaction. Although the Utes were not purely a Plains tribe, they had access to horses

¹⁴Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 6; Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 22; Mayhall, *The Kiowas*, 4.

¹⁵Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 22.

¹⁶Ibid, 22-23; Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 11.

and introduced the Comanches to many methods and customs that would come to define their prominence on the plains. For a time, they even shared territory with the Utes, who seem to have shared horsemanship skills with the Comanches. They also introduced the Comanches to the nuances of Spanish borderland interactions. Comanches thus learned the advantages of trade with the New Mexico settlements.¹⁷

They may have still occupied some Ute territory, but by the turn of the eighteenth century, Comanches had moved into the headwaters of the Arkansas, where the Spanish encountered them. Some bands still relied on dogs for transportation as late as 1726. But by the 1710s, mounted Comanches raided New Mexico villages often enough for the Spanish to call them “fierce but elusive raiders.”¹⁸

The Spanish and Jicarilla Apaches entered an alliance in 1719 in a futile attempt to check Comanche military and political incursions on the Southern Plains. The Comanches had already gained the upper hand on the Jicarillas, and they were too fast and too far from Spanish centers of power for the alliance to be effective. A Spanish punitive expedition set out in 1719 to crush the Comanches, but met with only frustration, burnt fields of Apache maize, and Jicarillas running the other direction.¹⁹

At midcentury, Comanches had not yet reached the height of their power, but they had established the limits of what territory they would control. Comanches swept the Jicarilla Apaches from the New Mexico and Texas plains, and drove the Lipans off the southern reaches of Texas grassland. Their domain, known as “Comanchería,” now stretched from the Arkansas River to the Balcones Escarpment in Texas, and from the

¹⁷Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 24-25.

¹⁸Ibid, 20, 25; Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 7-8; West, *Contested Plains*, 64.

¹⁹Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 28, 33-34; Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 8, 288.

Pecos River to the Cross Timbers area in central Texas and Oklahoma. They had massive herds of horses and were the most feared horsemen on the plains.²⁰

Comanchería suited its occupants well. It was close enough to Spanish New Mexico to make raids convenient, yet far enough to make Spanish reprisals difficult. Comanche retreat onto the Llano Estacado made life difficult, if not dangerous, for foreign pursuers. A Spanish party on the caprock had to contend with a well-mounted, adroit enemy, long supply lines in relatively barren territory, and a landscape almost completely devoid of landmarks. One of the best defensive aspects of the Llano Estacado was its ability to geographically baffle outsiders. These plains also suited Comanche horses well. The horses they acquired from the Spanish originated in North African Barb/Iberian crosses bred to survive desert conditions and live strictly off grass.²¹

For a time, other tribes formed a barrier between Comanches and most European colonial powers. Lipans and Tonkawas stood between Comanches and the Texas settlements. Cheyennes and Arapahoes sat between the Comanches and the English and French. Comanchería bordered only New Spain, which by the mid-eighteenth century was not the power it had once been. Indeed, Comanchería offered the Comanches and their future allies an ideal locale from which they could build a position of impressive power.²²

Beginning in 1752, the Spanish government in New Mexico took a different tack on Comanche relations – at least part of the time. Governor Tomás Vélez Cachupín saw Comanches as a potential trade partner, as well as a barrier to French and Anglo

²⁰Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 55; West, *Contested Plains*, 64; Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 12; Mayhall, *The Kiowas*, 4.

²¹Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 28-29; Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 13-14.

²²Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 13-15.

expansion in the continental interior. He adopted a policy of peace toward the Comanches and allowed them into the New Mexico trade fairs. Although the peace between Spanish New Mexico and the Comanches proved to be only temporary, it was the beginning of several important developments. It opened the door to meaningful trade between the two peoples, ended serious Spanish challenges to Comanche control of the area between the Arkansas and the Red Rivers, and essentially ended the now-obsolete Ute-Comanche alliance.²³

As often happened with agreements between Indians and Europeans or Americans, changes in political leadership muddled Comanche relations with New Mexico. When Cachupín rotated out of New Mexico, relations soured and the raids recommenced. Cachupín returned to the governor's office in 1762, and the trade reopened and amicable interaction resumed. Comanche raiding patterns may also have been driven by a careful evaluation of which course of action, raiding or trading, was more profitable at the time. This cycle continued until a more lasting agreement with the Spanish was reached in 1786. From that point forward, the Comanches primarily traded with New Mexico and, with a few exceptions, turned their horses toward the Texas frontier and Mexico proper for raiding opportunities.²⁴

Comanches had become arguably the most dominant force in the region by the end of the eighteenth century. They controlled a large territory. They ran a profitable trade operation. They had mastered the Plains Indian horse culture. For all of their benefits, these accomplishments also earned the Comanches enemies. The Utes gave the

²³Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 47-49; Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 289.

²⁴Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 289; Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 51-55.

Comanches more than just an introduction to the horse. They also named the Comanches. The word Comanche is a Spanish derivative of the Ute word for “enemy,” which literally translated means, “anyone who wants to fight me all the time.” This name reflected Comanche power and their neighbors’ perception of them. Their list of traditional enemies by this time included Pawnees, Osages, Tonkawas, Navajos, Jicarilla Apaches, and their old friends, the Utes. They occasionally scrapped with Cheyennes and Arapahoes who had been driven south by the Sioux as well. The Comanches may have been strong enough militarily to deal with any of these foes alone, but a combination might pose a threat. The Comanches showed a diplomatic skill that complemented their renowned trading and raiding prowess by forming a helpful and powerful alliance.²⁵

Native Alliance

Sometime in the very late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, members of the Kiowa and Comanche tribes met by accident in the community of San Miguel del Vado. A Spanish settler friendly to both sides helped the tribes negotiate a peace that proved exceptionally durable. From this period on, the Kiowas, Kiowa-Apaches, and Comanches occupied common territory (although some Comanche bands ranged much further south than the Kiowas or Kiowa-Apaches) and shared many customs.²⁶

The Comanches were clearly the dominant force in this alliance. At the time, the Kiowas numbered only about twelve hundred, and the Kiowa-Apaches as few as three

²⁵Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 3-4.

²⁶Mayhall, *The Kiowas*, 15-16; Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 161, 172.

hundred. The smaller tribes offered political, military, and economic aid without greatly taxing the resources of Comanchería.²⁷

The business aspect of this relationship should not be overlooked. The Comanches by this time ran a thriving trade with the New Mexico settlements. Kiowas and Kiowa-Apaches formed a conduit with their northern allies. The Mandans and Hidatsas had better access to English firearms due to their contact with the East. The Kiowas often transported horses up to the Mandan and Hidatsa villages on the Missouri, where they traded for better quality firearms than were available in the Rio Grande Valley. Kiowas likely often had a role in acquiring the horses and probably distributed the European firearms among their Comanche allies.²⁸

Although it has been suggested that commerce was the most important factor in the Comanche – Kiowa – Kiowa-Apache alliance, this aspect of the relationship cannot be differentiated from the alliance's military benefits. Raiding was a fundamental part of the Comanche alliance's commerce. Comanches stole massive numbers of horses from Spanish colonies and later Texas settlements. Without these raids, they would not have had anything to sell. They literally put into effect the Bedouin proverb, "Raiding is our agriculture." Raiding by this alliance drove their commercial ventures.²⁹

For all these tribes of the Plains culture, raiding was the genesis of nearly everything important in a male's life. These tribes cultivated and maintained a martial society. Status followed from raiding and warfare exploits. Honor came from raiding, as did material possessions, which could then be traded for other, rarer goods found only on

²⁷Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 161.

²⁸Ibid, 161-162.

²⁹West, *Contested Plains*, 65, 68.

the periphery of Comanchería. Status, honor, and material possessions all derived from raiding and military success. So this three-way alliance was beneficial to the three tribes militarily and commercially, but those elements were one and the same.³⁰

This culture of raiding depended almost completely on the horse. Horses not only were much larger and stronger than dogs, their previous source of transportation and animal labor, but they more efficiently utilized the resources available on the plains. People had to share food sources with their dogs. Horses, on the other hand, ate the one thing found in great quantity on the plains – grass. Horses made the Comanche world smaller. They made warfare bloodier. They provided both a means and a reason for conducting raids.³¹

The Comanche alliance had plenty of targets to raid. One was the Santa Fe Trail. In 1838, Comanches attackers hit Pecos, New Mexico, so hard that the town depopulated. Its residents moved back to the relative safety of the Rio Grande Valley. Comanches frequently raided deeply into Mexico as well. As time went on, Texas became their favorite target. After they made peace with New Mexico, Texas became the most likely raiding field. Texas sat on the southern fringe of Comanchería. Its settlements were dispersed and lightly defended. Neither the Mexican government nor the fledgling Republic of Texas, created in 1836, could adequately defend the outlying livestock operations. Farmers and ranchers on the Texas frontier offered a prime selection of horses and cattle that could be had with little risk.³²

³⁰Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 39; Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches* 245.

³¹Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 25; Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 245.

³²Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches* 3, 292.

Comanches often raided for revenge and retribution as well. The Texas government only exacerbated that aspect of Comanche violence during its short tenure. Republic of Texas president Sam Houston, who served from 22 October 1836 to 10 December 1838 and again from 12 December 1841 to 9 December 1844, lived among Indians for a time during his youth. He was generally sympathetic toward them and implemented more pacific policies. Mirabeau Lamar, whose term was from 10 December 1838 to 12 December 1841, took a far more aggressive tack during his term. No one in Texas (except maybe Houston) understood that no single Comanche leader controlled all bands in the tribe, let alone the entire alliance. These inconsistent policies caused nothing but confusion and strained relations. They served to fuel the Plains tribes' motivations for raiding the Texas settlements.³³

The onset of the Civil War did nothing to alleviate Comanche raiding in Texas. Initially, the Confederate administration in Texas was able to provide a level of protection similar to what the U.S. government had offered in the 1850s. But as time went on Confederate resources dwindled much faster than federal resources. The frontier of Confederate Texas became even more vulnerable. From the early to mid nineteenth century, the Comanche alliance evolved toward an almost complete reliance on the pilfering of Texas to sell to New Mexico. This shifted somewhat in the 1850s and 1860s when settlers began streaming across the Kansas plains in greater numbers, providing improved opportunities for looting farther north. Commercial and military shipments on

³³Ibid, 245, 292-296; Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 52.

the Santa Fe Trail during the Civil War increased as well, providing lucrative raiding targets.³⁴

Kiowa Leaders

Since the primary village assaulted by Kit Carson's force was Kiowa, most of the Indian leaders known to have been present and active at the Battle of Adobe Walls were members of that tribe. One-Eyed Bear reportedly led the band of Comanches during the battle.³⁵

Dohasan. Also known as Sierrito or Little Mountain, he served as principle chief of the Kiowa tribe from 1833-1866. He succeeded A'date (Islandman) following a Kiowa massacre at the hands of the Osages. Dohasan was in the upper village at the time of Carson's attack and led the defense of the village. He was an old man at the time of the battle.³⁶

Dohasan was one of a few older chiefs arguing for peace with whites when Colonel Edwin V. Sumner met with him in 1858. Kiowa chiefs struggled to keep younger warriors off the warpath. Dohasan's peaceful position in no way reflected a sense of defeatism or inferiority to U.S. power. As agent Robert Miller distributed Kiowa annuity gifts that same year, he warned the Kiowas that if they did not cease their depredations, the government would not only withhold presents but would send troops to punish the tribe. Dohasan reportedly leapt to his feet and replied:

The white chief is a fool. He is a coward. His heart is small – not larger than a pebble stone. His men are not strong – too few to contend against my warriors. They are women. There are three chiefs – the white chief,

³⁴Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 305-306.

³⁵George Bent, quoted in Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, 747.

³⁶Mayhall, *The Kiowas*, 16.

the Spanish chief, and myself. The Spanish chief and myself are men. We do bad toward each other sometimes, stealing horses and taking scalps, but we do not get mad and act the fool. The white chief is a child, and like a child gets mad quick. When my young men, to keep their women and children from starving, take from the white men passing through our country, killing and driving away our buffalo, a cup of sugar or coffee, the white chief is angry and threatens to send his soldiers. I have looked for them a long time, but they have not come. His heart is a woman's. I have spoken. Tell the great white chief what I have said.³⁷

Dohasan was the most powerful Kiowa chief in remembered history. In a radically democratic and politically eclectic society, he was one of the few Plains chiefs who truly was a “principle chief” – the kind of a single, powerful tribal leader that the United States government expected to be able to negotiate with. He retained this venerated status until his death in 1866.³⁸

Satanta (White Bear). He was born sometime around 1820. For his prowess in battle during his early life, he achieved the rank of subchief. A doctor visiting the Kiowa camps to vaccinate the tribe for small pox in 1864 described him as “a fine-looking Indian, very energetic and as sharp as a brier.” Satanta put on quite a show for the doctor, who ate three meals a day with the chief. He had carpets for guests to sit on and used painted fireboards decorated with brass tacks for a table. He sounded a brass “French horn” to summon diners at mealtime. Most historians believe Satanta blew a bugle at the First Battle of Adobe Walls. The horn referenced by the doctor may be the same instrument.³⁹

No overall chief of the Kiowas succeeded Dohasan. Satanta was probably the most influential of the subchiefs. He became known as an orator for lengthy speeches he

³⁷Ibid, 216-217.

³⁸Ibid, 16.

³⁹Ibid, 227.

made while treating for peace. Satanta agreed to both the Little Arkansas and Medicine Lodge Treaties of 1865 and 1867 respectively. Neither agreement led to permanent peace.⁴⁰

Following George Custer's Washita Campaign in the late fall of 1868, Satanta and Lone Wolf (another important subchief) came in to discuss peace terms with Custer, who promptly took both chiefs hostage and held them until the Kiowas as a whole surrendered to reservation life. After his release, Satanta led several major raids, including the Warren Wagon Train raid in 1871. General William T. Sherman himself arrested Satanta and Big Tree not long after that raid. A Texas court tried, convicted, and sentenced them to hang. The Texas governor reduced the sentence to life in prison under pressure from a group of Quakers whom President Grant had placed in charge of Indian policy. The convicted Kiowas were released after just two years.⁴¹

Satanta's presence at the Second Battle of Adobe Walls violated his parole. He was again thrown in prison and subjected to forced labor. He lost hope of escaping and became increasingly sullen. He committed suicide by throwing himself out of an upstairs prison hospital window on October 11, 1878.⁴²

Satank (Sitting Bear). He was another Kiowa subchief. Satank instigated (perhaps inadvertently) one of the raids on Fort Larned that drew General Carleton's military response in 1864. Like Satanta, he signed the Medicine Lodge Treaty. He participated with Satanta in the Warren Wagon Train Massacre. However, after he was

⁴⁰Ibid, 227, 238-241.

⁴¹Ibid, 250-252, 267-273; Nye, *Carbine & Lance*, 95.

⁴²Mayhall, *The Kiowas*, 288, 300.

arrested, he freed himself from his bonds and launched a suicide attack on the guards. He was shot to death by his army guards on June 8, 1871.⁴³

Military Tactics

Many Plains tribes were well armed by the mid 1860s. Comanches and Kiowas had excellent access to firearms based on their long-running and prolific trade with New Mexico, and to a lesser extent with the Mandan and Hidatsa villages to the north. Carson reported that every Indian he fought at Adobe Walls was armed with a rifle. He was nearly certain that the Indians he fought had acquired their weapons and ammunition from Comanchero traders within the preceding week and a half. This angered Carson and Carleton. The general had ordered a halt to all trading passes following the summer raids. Superintendent Steck had apparently ignored the edict and allowed traders to pass into the Southern Plains. They armed the Kiowas and Comanches whom Carson fought.⁴⁴

Firearms played a key role in Plains Indian warfare, but in many situations Indian tactics favored the bow. Muskets provided an advantage in range over the bow when fired from a fixed defensive position, but the bow and arrow provided a much faster rate of fire and were exponentially easier to fire from horseback. Indian warfare relied heavily on mobility, and firearms often did not fit well into their tactics. Firearms undoubtedly increased the effectiveness of the Indian skirmishers at Adobe Walls, but the mounted warriors probably used a combination of the two weapons.⁴⁵

⁴³Ibid, 187, 242, 270-274; R. M. Fish, "An Indian War," *New York Times*, 7 August 1864.

⁴⁴Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 939-943; Carson to Carleton, 16 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 943; General Orders No. 2, 31 January 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 1, pp. 699-700.

⁴⁵Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 258.

In addition to firearms and bows, the Indian combatants at Adobe Walls would also have carried decorated shields crafted from several layers of buffalo hide from the shoulder of the animal, the toughest part of the hide. They carried lances designed to be thrust from under the arm. They also generally carried flint war clubs or battle axes. These weapons weighed about two pounds, were a little over a foot long, and had a six-inch-long head that tapered from about three inches to one inch in width from front to back. Although it had little long-range use, the war club could be a deadly short-range weapon.⁴⁶

In war or battle, Plains Indians depended heavily upon maintaining the initiative to achieve military success. They carefully chose their fights and usually waged an offensive battle. Comanches and Kiowas raided on moonlit nights. If they struck during the day, it was to surprise outmanned parties or widely scattered settlements unlikely to mount adequate resistance. They relied on surprise and shock, and tended to fight only when facing extremely favorable conditions. They seldom fought pitched battles like those the army preferred, unless they held some significant tactical advantage.⁴⁷

When unable to surprise an enemy, they might send forth a small party, mounted on their fastest horses, in an attempt to draw the enemy into an ambush. They would shout with a fierce cry and make a sudden, ferocious charge with the goal of scaring the enemy into flight and turning the odds drastically in their favor.⁴⁸

The Comanches and Kiowas did not always surprise or run off foes. When forced to fight a formidable, alert foe, or stage a defense as they did at Adobe Walls, they drew

⁴⁶Ibid, 106-11.

⁴⁷Ibid, 257.

⁴⁸Ibid.

upon a different set of tactics. They would initially form a mounted wedge, charging toward the enemy. Once within relatively close range, the riders would shift to a wheeling circle sometimes more than one rider deep. Each revolution came closer to the enemy, and warriors ducked under the necks of their horses to fire their guns or bows as their side of the wheel neared the desired target. They used the leeward side of the circle to reload.⁴⁹

Defensive tactics did not escape the Comanches and Kiowas. At Adobe Walls, they likely utilized the above wheeling tactic while in close contact with Carson's troops. After abandoning the upper village, they employed a slow fighting retreat, exchanging ground for time. Plains Indians seldom stood their ground against a concerted charge. They sought to retain freedom of movement and keep losses at a sustainable level. When charged, their skirmish line would drift away and reform farther back or on a flank either to press an enemy there or to bide time and reform at a further defensible position.⁵⁰ Exchanging territory for time and mobility would have been the most logical Indian response to Carson's advance.

Camp positioning also figured into Plains Indian defensive tactics. Camp placement varied from tribe to tribe. Comanches and Kiowas uniquely preferred their campsites near running water and in open timber where available. They sought areas protected by a canyon, arroyo, or some kind of escarpment. This allowed some wind protection, access to feed and game, wood, and a reasonable opportunity to avoid being

⁴⁹Ibid, 258.

⁵⁰Ibid.

surprised by an enemy. All these elements factored into the selection of this site on the Canadian for the winter camps in late 1864.⁵¹

Pressures on the Comanches and Kiowas

Plains tribes all felt a pinch on their resources by the late 1850s. Their adaptation to the horse culture brought more tribes to the plains and demanded more horses than the area had seen or supported before. Plains tribes' collective harvesting of the buffalo herds had already diminished the size of the herds. Emigrants flooding westward further depleted resources – not just grass and game but also wood along streams. Possession of land was important, but it was outside threats to the resources tied to the land they controlled that pressured Plains Indians most.⁵²

Kiowa and Comanche leaders certainly gave off no impression that they were intimidated by U.S. military might on the plains, but they must have begun to feel pressure from U.S. military presence by the late 1850s. Perhaps they only begrudged the army the resources consumed by its men and horses. More likely, though, U.S. cavalry threatened their security.⁵³

By 1858, the army had placed more effective leadership on the frontier. Cavalry effectively struck the Comanches north of the Red River an unprecedented three times that year. This combined with the strain on resources began to split Indian parties up into smaller groups, making it more difficult for older chiefs favoring peace to control younger, more militant warriors. Most importantly, though, these army missions in 1858 provided the first hints that the army was willing to penetrate previously uncontested

⁵¹Ruff to Maury, 30 July 1860, R/21 LR, 1860, DNM, r. 12, M1120, RG 393, NA; Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 14-15.

⁵²West, *Contested Plains*, 51-53, 68, 88-90.

⁵³Mayhall, *The Kiowas*, 216-217.

Comanche territory. The Llano Estacado remained a safe haven, but the army showed it could and would march deeply into Comanche country. The 1858 campaigns neither conquered nor showed mastery. But they must have made Indians in the region feel pressured and uneasy, and may have driven them toward more aggressive responses.⁵⁴

For decades, European presence on the periphery of Comanche and Kiowa territory had provided a lucrative raiding and trading market. But never before had such volumes of people paraded through and around their territory. The increased presence and traffic presented more opportunities for raiding, but also challenged their access to resources and in the long term threatened their way of life. These latter threats only gave further motivation to raid. Raiding served many functions – honor, profit, retribution, and warning. It is no wonder raiding increased in the period leading up to 1864.

⁵⁴Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 302; Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 128-141; Ball, *Army Regulars*, 48-51.

6. Weapons

By assembling the ordnance records from the New Mexico and California Cavalry Volunteer units and comparing those with the archaeological records from the battle and camp sites, we have a very clear picture of what weapons the United States army and its auxiliaries took into battle on that November day in 1864. The Kiowas and their allies did not maintain the same types of records, but the archaeological evidence can help us understand what weapons they took to the fight.¹

Army: Mountain Howitzer

As Colonel Carson himself suggests, the most important weapons at the 1864 Adobe Walls fight were the two mountain howitzers he requested on October 10.² The idea of using mountain howitzers in the Indian Wars had been around since the Jackson administration, when then-Secretary of War Lewis Cass ordered them for the Seminole War. The War Department contracted out the manufacture of these guns to Cyrus Alger, who began delivering them to the army in 1837. They did not see heavy use on the great battlefields of the East, where firepower, range, and accuracy were often more important than mobility and off-road capability.³ If any artillery piece can be said to have iconic ties to the West, it would be the mountain howitzer. These smaller guns made many trips to the West. One was famously abandoned by John C. Frémont near the Walker River on the east side of the Sierra Nevada on his second expedition over the winter of 1843-

¹Summary Statements of Quarterly Returns of Ordnance and Ordnance Stores on Hand in Regular and Volunteer Army Organizations, 1862-1867, 1870-1876 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M1281); Lynn, *Kit Carson and the First Battle of Adobe Walls*, 84 and *passim*.

²Carson to Carleton, 10 October 1864, OR, Vol 41, Part 3, p. 770-1.

³James C. Hazlett, Edwin Olmstead, and M. Hume Parks, *Field Artillery Weapons of the Civil War* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 134.

1844.⁴ The search for that little gun became legendary in Nevada lore, rekindled in the last few years when parts of the cannon, but not the barrel, were located in Deep Creek. Other howitzers of the light variety made appearances in battles against Indians, or at least came along as deterrents. When Carson picked up his two copies, they had just returned from an excursion with Capt Nicholas Davis. Carleton ordered them along on the Navajo campaign as well.⁵

Mountain howitzers were small twelve-pounder guns. They were shorter than average cannon. The barrel was scarcely longer than three feet. At only 220 pounds, the barrels weighed only about one third as much as their more traditional counterparts. For comparison, the highly mobile “flying artillery” that Samuel Ringgold made famous at the Battle of Palo Alto during the U.S.-Mexican War were sixty-six inches long and weighed 884 pounds – and they were six pounders!⁶ The mountain howitzer’s resulting decreased stability meant they could not be loaded with charges as large as their bigger brothers, and thus could not fire as far. Additionally, they had to be fired at a higher angle. Deploying mountain howitzers meant accepting these limitations on performance in exchange for mobility. Mountain howitzers had a shorter tongue. When on their carriages, they could be pulled by a single mule or horse using a two wheeled cart and a thill. In a pinch, they could even be relatively easily disassembled and packed on the

⁴John Charles Frémont, *Memoirs of My Life*, (1887; reprint, New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001), 324-325.

⁵Carleton to Selden, 14 October 1864, NA, RG 98, Dept. of New Mexico Letters, v. 15 (11A), p. 211-212.

⁶Charles M. Haecker and Jeffrey G. Mauck, *On the Prairie of Palo Alto: Historical Archeology of the U.S. – Mexican War Battlefield* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 84; Alfred S. Mordecai, *Artillery for the United States Land Service* (Washington, D.C.: J. and G. S. Gideon, Printers, 1849), 6-8; Harold L. Peterson, *Round Shot and Rammers: An Introduction to Muzzle-loading Land Artillery in the United States* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1969), 89-91; Warren Ripley, *Artillery and Ammunition of the Civil War* (New York: Von Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1970), 48-49.

backs of two mules. A third pack animal would be needed to haul ammunition. The pack saddles equipped to transport the components of the piece and its undercarriage were creatively designed both to interchange, and to double as tack for pulling the unit fully mounted on the carriage.⁷

It took some training to operate a mountain howitzer, as evidenced by General Carleton's insistence that Pettis repeatedly drill the reassigned infantrymen. The smoothbore cannons were capable of firing shell, spherical case, or canister. Pettis's guns at Adobe Walls either fired shell, or a combination of shell and spherical case.

Shells externally looked like solid shot. The projectile itself was much lighter, and its resulting range was shorter than that of solid round shot. Shells were hollow iron balls filled with black powder, which comprised about ninety percent of the projectile's volume. Both shell and spherical case had to be attached to a wooden sabot which held fast the initial firing charge and served as a kind of spacer to keep the main munition centered and the gas from the explosion trapped behind the projectile. The sabot was affixed to the projectile with four tin strips, and the whole mechanism was destroyed in the firing process. These munitions were most effective when fired from higher trajectory pieces such as howitzers and mortars. The physical pressure placed on a shell as it was fired from a gun required the outer metallic layer to remain fairly thick. This casing occupied approximately one-sixth of the thickness of a shell. This thick outer layer prevented shells from fragmenting as much as would have been desired by artillerists. Shells from a middle-sized gun such as a twelve pounder would sometimes

⁷Hazlett, *Field Artillery Weapons of the Civil War*, 134, 218; Ripley, *Artillery and Ammunition of the Civil War*, 48-49.

only fragment into four to five pieces. It was possible under perfect conditions to get as many as twelve to fifteen fragments that could travel as far as three hundred yards from the secondary explosion.

The charge inside each shell had to be ignited by a fuse, greatly complicating the calculations involved in producing the desired effects. The main charge from the cannon ignited the fuse as the gun was fired. If cannoneers desired an airborne detonation, they used a short fuse. If they wanted the round to explode on the ground, they went with a longer one. The shell trajectory and fuse length had to be carefully matched. A perfect trajectory with a fuse that was a bit too short would fragment in the air prior to reaching the target area. A perfectly timed fuse with a high trajectory could cause the explosion to occur beyond the target. The rewards for a well executed shell shot were great. In addition to the physical damage inflicted by the flying hunks of metal, shells produced a great psychological terrorizing effect.⁸

Spherical case resembled shells in some ways. The spherical case concept was developed by General Henry Shrapnel of Great Britain, and as such was sometimes referred to as “shrapnel shell.” Spherical case differed from shell in a few critical ways. Case shot had thinner outer walls than shell. The outer layer could be as thin as half an inch. Each round contained an ounce of black powder explosive, a paper fuse, and a conglomerate mass of melted sulfur and a quantity of lead balls corresponding to the size of the gun. A 12 pounder spherical case round would carry seventy-eight .69 caliber

⁸Haecker, *On the Prairie of Palo Alto*, 81; Mordecai, *Artillery for the Land Service*, part 11; John Gibbon, *The Artillerist's Manual: Compiled from Various Sources and Adapted for the Service of the United States* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1860), 268; Mordecai, *Ordnance Manual for the Use of the Officers of the United States Army*, 2nd ed., (Washington: Gideon & Company, 1850).

balls. The paper fuses were color coded for length to prevent artillerists from having to measure and cut lengths of fuse on the field.

Spherical case had a limited firing range, but it was a good anti-personnel weapon. Spherical case suffered several employment problems, however. Firing these rounds without accurate or reliable fusing (or fuse calculations) could be dangerous. When they did go off over the enemy, the small lead balls dissipated energy quickly. Although a spherical case ball might strike a soldier over 200 yards from the secondary explosion, by then the impact would likely produce only a painful annoyance. A properly aimed round, however, could be devastating. As with shell, the psychological and secondary effects of spherical case were often greater than the physical damage they inflicted. These rounds terrorized troops and could often be used to startle and disorient horses. It seems that psychological effect would only be multiplied on an enemy completely unfamiliar with artillery.⁹

Army Rifles

The quality of firearms delivered to troops throughout the Civil War varied greatly. Although the Union provided far better weapons to their troops than did the Confederacy, there was still great variation in quality. Technology had only recently made rifled shoulder arms feasible as infantry weapons, and manufacturers had begun producing weapons that could be loaded in faster and more practical ways than shoving powder and ball down the muzzle. Amazingly, many commanders and even more logicians and quartermasters objected to troops using rifles that were easier to load

⁹Haecker, *On the Prairie of Palo Alto*, 81-82; Peterson, *Round Shot and Rammers*, 80,107; Mordecai, *Artillery for the Land Service*, Part 11.

quickly on the grounds that their soldiers would aim carelessly and waste ammunition. Fortunately, there were enough forward-thinking Union leaders to nudge along the employment of modern small arms.

The Union troops who marched out onto the Texas High Plains to battle the Kiowas and Comanches were all Volunteer units, but they were from different parts of the country. As has been the case throughout the history of the West, New Mexico lagged behind California even in the matter of weapon distribution. The California Cavalry Volunteers were all equipped with Sharps carbines, weapons well suited to the task at hand. The New Mexico units deployed with muzzle loading rifles that had been state-of-the-art during the war with Mexico.¹⁰

M1841 “Mississippi Rifle”

The New Mexico cavalymen were issued .54 caliber M1841 pattern rifles. Government armorers developed the prototype at the Harper’s Ferry Arsenal, and it was the first mass-produced percussion rifle ever made at the U.S. armories. All of the M1841’s predecessors that were produced in any quantity had been smooth bore muskets, the parts of which were not interchangeable. When the Mexican War began, using percussion rifles as a primary combat weapon was still a novelty. Congressman Jefferson Davis – later president of the Confederacy – resigned his seat in the House of Representatives and raised a volunteer regiment of Mississippians. Davis ensured that his unit was equipped with these new rifles. Davis’s unit garnered heroic status when he arranged his unit in a “V” formation and used these beautiful rifles to hold off a very

¹⁰Quarterly Ordnance Returns, 3rd Quarter 1864, 1st Cavalry, California Volunteers, 1st Cavalry, New Mexico Volunteers.

large force under Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna at the Battle of Buena Vista. His unit was known thereafter as the “Mississippi Rifles,” and the rifle also carried that name. For obvious reasons, Unionists eschewed that name during the Civil War.¹¹

During the 19th century, the United States government frequently contracted out the manufacture of arms, even when a government armory had in fact created the patterns. U.S. armories built over 28,000 M1841s over the years, but a potpourri of contractors made many more. Over 30,000 were made by Remington, with significant numbers supplied by Robbins & Lawrence, Tryon, and E. Whitney – the latter being run by Eli Whitney Jr., the son of the inventor famous for concocting the industry transforming cotton gin.¹²

Before the Civil War, armies shunned the use of rifles for most combat operations. Rifled barrels put a spin on the exiting bullet, allowing the shooter to accurately aim fire at targets hundreds of yards away. A problem arose, however, due to the extremely long barrels on early rifles and their use of black powder. In order to take advantage of the rifling and resulting accuracy, a bullet needed to fit snugly against the grooves inside the barrel. But the black powder left so much residue that the long barrels would quickly be fouled rendering the firearm useless in an engagement that required rapid reloading. This problem was partially alleviated by the relatively short thirty-three inch barrel of the M1841. The shorter barrel reduced fouling somewhat, but also compromised long range accuracy a bit. The sealing problem was completely eliminated with the invention of the Minie ball in 1848 – a conical projectile with a hollowed out bowl at the rear which

¹¹Arcadi Gluckman, *United States Rifles, Muskets, and Carbines* (Buffalo, NY: Otto Ulbrich Co., Inc., 1949), 215-216.

¹²Gluckman, *United States Rifles, Muskets and Carbines*, 215-220.

sealed itself against the barrel's rifling when the weapon fired. By 1864, the army had tested and approved a similar style bullet in the M1841. Carson's New Mexico Volunteer cavalry units had these modern bullets. The issue of fouling created by black powder use continued to plague the New Mexico Volunteers on Carson's expedition, however. One of Carson's reasons for returning home rather than engaging the lower villages was that many of the New Mexicans' weapons were so badly fouled by the end of the day that they could scarcely fire.¹³

Shorter barrels made these rifles a better fit for cavalry operations than most muzzle loaders. Many a rebel soldier stuck with a .69 smoothbore musket would have gladly traded for a Mississippi rifle. Union units fighting back east had mostly phased out the M1841 by Gettysburg, but such rifles as could be found in the South were used by marksmen and specialty rifle companies right through the end of the war. They were beautiful firearms, with brass components and a great swinging patch box. They were made without bayonets, which were largely made obsolete by rifling. They were heavy though, at nearly 10 pounds, and it is hard to imagine how any cavalry unit was expected to carry out a battle on horseback with a muzzle loader.¹⁴

Sharps Carbine

The California Volunteers who went with Carson had rifles designed for cavalry service. They were equipped with breech loading Sharps .52 caliber carbines. These were still single-shot weapons, but they could be loaded with a pre-made paper cartridge

¹³Gluckman, *United States Rifles, Muskets and Carbines*, 213-214; Lynn, *Kit Carson and the First Battle of Adobe Walls*, 217-221. George Courtright, *An Expedition against the Indians in 1864: A True and Historical Account of an Indian Expedition under the Command of Col. Christopher (Kit) Carson, Reminiscences by Dr. George Courtright* (Lithopolis, OH: Canal Winchester Times Press, 1911), 23.

¹⁴Gluckman, *United States Rifles, Muskets and Carbines*, 213-215; Quarterly Ordnance Returns, 3rd Quarter 1864, 1st Cavalry, California Volunteers, 1st Cavalry, New Mexico Volunteers.

rather than having to ram components down the barrel, greatly increased reloading speed. Muzzle loading rifles were nearly impossible to reload from a prone position, let alone from horseback, but these Sharps carbines opened with a lever to accept the cartridge from the back of the barrel. Sharps also made a tape feeding primer system that seems like it would have made priming less hazardous from horseback. The Sharps carbines were only slightly lighter than the M1841s, but they were shorter and definitely more user friendly. By the end of the war, Spencer seven-shot repeaters would again improve on the combat capability of the compact percussion rifle. But for the time being, the Sharps was about the best rifle one could hope to bring along on an Indian campaign. For decades after the Civil War, some variant or another of single-shot Sharps breech loader continued to be the weapon of choice for life on the Plains, in the West, or on the hunt. While these carbines certainly had a distinct range advantage over the string, bow, and arrow weapons, whether or not they were more effective in Plains warfare remains arguable. Many army leaders – even Carson – tended to use Indian access to firearms as a sort of disclaimer in their after-action reports. But their assumptions about the superiority of powder and ball weapons for the style of warfare in which they were engaged may have been based more on assumptions of cultural superiority or their own troops' greater familiarity with the weapons of Western Civilization than practical battlefield use. Many Comanches and Kiowas continued to prefer the firing rate and fire-on-the-run capability of their traditional weapons – modified with specially crafted

metallic heads – to the range and shock power of the white man’s guns. (See Kiowa/Comanche weapon section below for more details).¹⁵

Army Pistols

Colt Army Revolver, .44 Caliber

All of the cavalry units in Carson’s command except for Emil Fritz’s company carried some version of Colt Army revolver in .44 caliber. Ordnance returns do not differentiate between “old” and “new” models, so it is impossible to say for certain whether Carson’s cavalymen carried Colt Model 1848 Percussion Revolvers (commonly called the Colt Dragoon), or Colt Army Model 1860 “new army” .44s. In early correspondence, General Carleton requested Colt Navy .36s in lieu of the heavy “Dragoon” revolvers generally issued to cavalry, but only Fritz’s company received those. Dr. Courtright, the surgeon who accompanied the expedition, somehow retained his weapons after the war ended. He had been issued model 1860 “new army” revolvers, but one had been stolen and later replaced with a similar model 1858 Remington .44 Army Percussion Revolver. So it seems as a compromise between Carleton’s request for Navies and the cumbersome older Dragoons, the California units equipped with .44 caliber army revolvers were probably issued Colt “new model” Army Percussion Revolvers. The New Mexicans may have ridden with dragoons.¹⁶

¹⁵Gluckman, *United States Muskets, Rifles, and Carbines*, 395-398. Wallace & Hoebel, *The Comanches: Lords of the South Plains*, 105-106, 258.

¹⁶Quarterly Ordnance Returns, 3rd Quarter 1864, 1st Cavalry, California Volunteers, 1st Cavalry, New Mexico Volunteers; William A. Keleher, *Turmoil in New Mexico, 1846-1868: facsimile of the 1952 edition, with New Forward by Marc Simmons and New Preface by Michael L. Keleher*, (Santa Fe, NM: Sunstone Press, 2008), 232. The request for the Colt Navies apparently came from a 15 March 1862 order from Carleton to Captain Pishon, a company commander. Arcadi Gluckman, *United States Martial Pistols and Revolvers* (Harrisburg, PA: The Stackpole Company, 1939), 182-183; Courtright, *An Expedition Against the Indians in 1864*, frontispiece.

The Colt Dragoon was conceived as an improvement on the older “Walker Colt,” which was the result of a collaboration between Texas Ranger Captain Samuel H. Walker and Samuel Colt. The Walker Colt, Captain Walker said, needed to be big enough to dispatch a horse as well as a man. It had a monstrous nine inch barrel and had to be carried in a saddle holster, because it weighed over four and a half pounds. The Walker version had very large chambers for rounds and black powder, and through carelessness or zeal, troops and rangers had a tendency to overfill them with powder. Other times, soldiers loaded the new conical bullets backwards assuming the pointed end needed to enter the chamber first. Although probably less than 100 were sent back to the factory with exploded chambers, the trend was disturbing enough to warrant further refinement. The Walker Colt did pack a punch, though. Another Texas Ranger fighting in Mexico – R.I.P. Ford – claims to have seen a Mexican soldier knocked down by one at a range of over 100 yards.¹⁷

Shortly after the end of the Mexican War which claimed the life of Captain Walker, the Colt he helped to design underwent several important modifications. The chambers were reduced in size to accept only 50 grains of powder, and the barrel was shortened to 7 ½ inches (some models had 8 inch barrels). Colt continued to tinker with other, less apparent internal aspects of the pistols, so it would be difficult to discern exactly which iteration of dragoon revolvers the troopers may have carried in 1864. These pistols still carried a huge wallop, with the knockdown power of most era rifles. Regardless of the changes, these were still cumbersome hand guns at over four pounds,

¹⁷Arcadi Gluckman, *United States Martial Pistols and Revolvers*, 170-174; Robert M. Utley, *Lone Star Justice: The First Century of the Texas Rangers*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 74-75; Mike Cumpston and Johnny Bates, *Percussion Revolvers: A Guide to Their History, Performance, and Use*, (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2014), 50.

and likely had to be carried along in saddle holsters like their Walker predecessors. It was for this reason that Carleton requested the lighter Navy models.¹⁸

Colt's 1860 .44 caliber revolver, known as the "new army," was the most prolific Union Civil War sidearm. Colt made over 100,000 for the United States government. The New Army flashed a more streamlined look, with smoother transitions where the barrel lug and loading levers hinged. The barrel remained at eight inches, but the overall weight of the pistol came in under three pounds. Samuel Colt died in 1862, and most of his original patents had expired in 1856, resulting in a flurry of competing products ranging from creative variants to downright copies of Colt's revolver technology. The New Army and a New Navy model of 1861 were Colt's final entries into the military market for percussion revolvers, but the recognition accorded to Colt as the progenator of the six gun in America is well deserved. The 1860 represents the culmination of his efforts in the .44 caliber weapon.¹⁹

Colt Navy Caliber .36

Only a single company under the command of Captain Emil Fritz carried Carleton's sidearm weapon of choice, the Colt Navy Revolver. The Colt Navy evolved from the same family of revolvers as the Army and Dragoon models. It was for the most part a response to the demand for a lighter weight revolver that could be carried on a man's belt. Colt used the nomenclature "Navy" as a tip of the hat to the Republic of Texas Navy, who gave him his first major contract. The .36 caliber round still had capability roughly equivalent to modern ammunition of .380 caliber. Dispensing with the

¹⁸Gluckman, *United States Martial Pistols and Revolvers*, 174-178; Keleher, *Turmoil in New Mexico*, 232.

¹⁹Gluckman, *United States Martial Pistols and Revolvers*, 154-161, 182-183.

saddle holsters and ease of aiming would have been desirable. At less than 2 ½ pounds, the difference in weight would have been very noticeable. Colt Navy revolvers seem to have been well worth trading off knock down power for portability. They became a staple of the American West, and were likely the most popular hand gun, civilian or military, prior to the era of metal cartridges. Gunfighters such as Bill Hickcock and Doc Holliday famously carried the Colt Navy, as did Civil War Generals Robert E. Lee and Nathan Bedford Forrest. Quantrill's infamous raiders and nearly all of the 1850s Texas Rangers packed the Colt Navy.²⁰

All of Colt's army and navy model pistols of the day were single action revolvers, which meant that they had to be cocked prior to firing each round, regardless of the gun's six round capacity. Loading these guns was initially a tedious process, involving measuring out powder, stuffing a bullet in each chamber, pressing the lead ball down with a hinged lever, and then using some kind of sealant (modern reenactors and enthusiasts often use Crisco) to keep the powder in its place until the weapon is fired. By the Civil War era, that process was simplified by the advent of paper cartridges. Paper cartridges prepackaged the charge with the projectile in a wrapper that was consumed by the explosion when the weapon was fired. This was also true of the long arms. A percussion cap had to be placed on a nipple before snapping the trigger and dropping the hammer which would cause the primer to ignite the main charge, firing the weapon. After firing that first six rounds that had been preloaded, even these six shooter revolvers would had to be reloaded. Reloading under fire would have been difficult at best, even with the newer paper cartridges. This would account for the significant number of unfired rounds

²⁰Ibid,178-180.

found at the battle site. All things being considered, the Sharps seems like it would have been the most effective army small arm at the fight.²¹

Nearly all of the troopers on Carson's mission had been issued Light Cavalry Sabers as well, as opposed to the infamous older "wrist breaker" cavalry swords, which were deemed too heavy. It seems unlikely that Carson's men carried these sabers with them on the trek (due to lack of archaeological evidence), and if they had, it is likely they would have been of little use in the type of battle that ensued. Carson's Indian auxiliaries were issued .58 caliber muskets, at Carson's behest. There were so many different types of .58 caliber rifles available to the army during the Civil War that identifying the specific model would be problematic. It is unclear whether the Utes and Jicarillas assisting Carson brought along any traditional weapons.²²

Kiowa and Comanche Weapons

Indian Firearms

It is difficult to know what kind of firearms the Kiowas and Comanches took into the battle at Adobe Walls in 1864. Carson claimed in his after-action report that every Indian he fought had a gun. While that was probably an exaggeration, there were clearly plenty of guns in the villages on the Canadian when Carson and his troops got there. They must have certainly acquired some of their guns in raids. It is possible they procured some firearms through their trading network with the Mandans and Hidatsas on the Northern Plains. The Northern Plains Indians needed horses just as much as the Comanches did. They too relied upon horses both for hunting and for raiding. But

²¹Lynn, *Kit Carson and the First Battle of Adobe Walls*, 217-224. Gluckman, *United States Martial Pistols and Revolvers*, 160-161, 178-180.

²²Quarterly Ordnance Returns, 3rd Quarter 1864, 1st Cavalry, California Volunteers, 1st Cavalry, New Mexico Volunteers, Lynn, *Kit Carson and the First Battle of Adobe Walls*, 84.

breeding horses so far north proved difficult for environmental reasons, leaving the tribes there perpetually short of horses. They historically had access to better firearms than the Comanches did, however. Some of the Kiowa and Comanche guns used at Adobe Walls were likely English and French weapons that had filtered down through the trading network, meandering from Canada across the Northern Great Plains and down to Comanchería. Kit Carson was probably quite right, however, in his accusation that the Comanches and Kiowas had continued to purchase firearms from *comancheros* right up to the weeks immediately preceding the battle at the old adobe fort.²³

Based on recency and *comanchero* access, it seems doubtful that the Indians would have had access to the latest long-gun technology. Considering that rifled muskets only came into wide military use during the Civil War, and many units fighting back east had some difficulty acquiring them, it seems unlikely they would have been traded off to Indians. This would be all the more true of the breech loading carbines. Likewise, the Indians' suppliers, the *comancheros* were not known to trade in the highest quality, most expensive goods. Revolvers, on the other hand, had been in use on the frontier since at least the 1830s. It seems plausible that at least a few of these found their way into the Canadian River camps by November 1864. Almost certainly, a lack of uniformity would have plagued Native American firearm use. Piecemeal trading and raiding would have resulted in a mishmash of various calibers and classes of weapons. It was not unusual for Indians to improvise projectiles to fit in whatever caliber gun they had. Archaeological evidence suggests this happened at Adobe Walls. Several bullets have been found with tooth marks where an Indian warrior chewed a bullet into a slightly different shape so it

²³Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 70-73; West, *The Contested Plains*, 70-71.

would fit into the available weapon. Most of the projectiles attributed to the Plains Indians appear to have been spherical lead balls, indicating weapons a bit further down the road to obsolescence.²⁴

Indian Archery

Bows and arrows were still highly viable Indian weapons for Plains warfare. They usually did not have access to the latest rifles or anything other than muzzle loaders. European armies with smooth bores were forced to resort to firing a single volley to have any real effect. Certainly from horseback, a bow would have been a better option than a muzzle loader of any sort, let alone an old smooth bore flintlock. It was not uncommon for Plains warriors to select a good bow and arrow over a musket to take into battle.²⁵

Most of the crafting and manufacturing tasks among Plains tribes were accomplished by women. Men, however, took on the task of crafting weapons. Often this work fell to men too old to go to battle. Weapon manufacturing was indeed a craft, and it took great attention and weeks of on-and-off labor to make a good bow. An average bow could be worth about one pony in trade. Most Comanche bows were about three feet in length and made of wood from the Osage orange tree, with hickory being the best substitute. The craftsman would find a knot-free outer section of a large tree or a sapling that was perfectly straight and work it down to the appropriate size while still green, then allow it to cure without warping. The wood was then scraped down to size, rubbed with brains or fat and put in a warm place for several more days before rubbing and working the wood again until it shined. The maker then glued fresh sinew from the

²⁴Lynn, *Kit Carson and the First Battle of Adobe Walls*, 217.

²⁵T. R. Fehrenbach, *Comanches: The History of a People*, (New York: Random House, 1974), 122-123; Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 105-106, 258.

back of a buffalo over the whole surface and coated it again with glue before laying it aside to completely dry. The glue came from buffalo hide shavings, hooves, or horns. This process shrink wrapped the sinew to the bow, providing a durable, flexible end product likely to last several years. To ensure constant availability of backup bows, some wood had to be kept available in every stage of the process.²⁶

The highest quality, most carefully crafted bows were made from sinew-backed animal horn, but their construction was even more tedious. To make these compound bows, the craftsman put bighorn sheep, buffalo, or elk horns into boiling water until they softened. They then carved out strips of the desired width, which they scraped down until they would lay flat against one another. The craftsman then glued a few of these strips together with the tips overlapping, and glued another piece of horn at the grip. The maker filed the glued frame down until it was proportional and smooth, at which point the joints were all reinforced with sinew wraps. This entire process required several weeks, and the finished product could command as much as twenty horses in trade.²⁷

Either type of bow could be strung several different ways, but each required precision. They could be made of horse hair or bear gut, but the most common method was to select a special piece of tendon from the buffalo's back and strip it down to a small group of fibers. This slice was soaked in watered down glue, and twisted with other strands until it was perfectly round. The final product was allowed to dry, with knots tied in either end.²⁸

²⁶Ibid, 98-100.

²⁷Ibid , 98-99.

²⁸Ibid, 101.

Arrow makers had to find dogwood or aged ash to make arrow shafts. The straightest possible sections were found, cut to length and hung in bundles to cure near the fire for a couple of weeks. Any contours were worked out using grease and heat, combined with bone shaping tools. Two facing rocks with grooves placed over the arrow and rubbed together to round the shaft, and grooves were then carved into the arrow shaft itself. This grooving process may have been to prevent warping, but the exact purpose remains unknown. The craftsman then attached turkey feathers to the decorated arrow, if they were available. If not, they substituted owl or buzzard feathers, but never those of an eagle or hawk whose feathers were ruined by blood. They split the feather's stems, dipped the tips in glue, and tied them into the shaft grooves with sinew string. A three feather arrangement was most common. The maker created a small cleft in the shaft for the arrowhead. Although originally heads were made of flint, bone, or other stones, by 1864 nearly all arrowheads were metal. Barrel bands could easily be bisected and sharpened into effective points. Barbless heads were used on hunting arrows for easy extraction, but a special barbed combat head that would rip, tear, or break off on extraction was used for warfare. The maker glued the head to the shaft, wrapped it with narrow, wet tendon, and rubbed the finished product smooth.²⁹

This combination could be quite lethal in the hands of an experienced warrior. A good Indian archer could put eighty percent of his arrows in a two inch group from fifteen yards. A well constructed arrow might retain a true path for as many as three hundred yards, and when shot by a reasonably accurate marksman could consistently hit a

²⁹Fehrenbach, *Comanches*, 124-125; Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 101-104; Lynn, *Kit Carson and the First Battle of Adobe Walls*, 199-201.

human-sized target at fifty. Warriors in battle wore a skin quiver strapped over their right shoulders and a protective band on the left wrist to prevent injury from the string when firing. In rainy weather, warriors had to protect their bowstrings under their armpits, unless they had the horsetail hair strings.³⁰

Shields

Plains warriors brought shields with them into battle that were fairly effective against premodern weapons, including most low muzzle velocity firearms. These shields tended to be two or more feet in diameter, and had in addition to their careful construction process gone through a testing procedure. Before use, a shield would be set up as a target at about fifty yards and fired at with arrows and whatever musketry was available. A shield that did not pass muster was summarily discarded. A directly perpendicular shot from an older firearm might penetrate it, but the convex shape of the shield's exterior made a direct hit unlikely. A shield was thus a surprisingly effective piece of armor, at least against older weapons.³¹

Plains warriors achieved this durability by starting with a section from the toughest part of a buffalo's hide, the shoulder. After defleshing the hide, they steamed and heated it to shrink and thicken the animal skin. The contracted hide was rubbed smooth with a stone and stretched flesh-side out over a wooden hoop. More than one layer was thus alternately applied and sewn together with thongs of hide, creating a cavity between the layers that was filled with hair, feathers, or later paper. Since paper stopped bullets better than the wooden hoop, sometimes the hoop was even replaced.

³⁰Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 104-106; Fehrenbach, *Comanches*, 124-125.

³¹Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 106-7.

The hide was stretched into its familiar concave shape, and a final layer of buckskin drawn over the top with a cord through eyes under the back side of the shield. The maker attached a handle and decorated the piece with special adornments or painted patterns reflecting the owner's trademark accomplishments, be that stealing livestock, killing enemies, or displaying general courage. Nearly all Comanche shields contained an even numbered pattern of feathers, usually four. A shield provided physical as well as spiritual protection, with some thought to have significant power that could be damaged by the touch of greasy hands or a menstruating woman.³²

Other Plains Weapons

Comanches carried two different kinds of spears, and a lethal battle axe. The straight spear, like the arrow, evolved from a stone tipped weapon to a metal head. It was never meant to be a projectile weapon, however. It was thrust from under the shoulder, not heaved like a javelin. A curved spear in the likeness of a shepherd's crook could also be used. The battle club was a little larger than the biggest conventional hammer. It had a handle of about sixteen inches and a head six inches long that was three inches high on one side, tapering to two inches, with beveled down surfaces in the front and rear. It was attached with sinews and pegs to the wooden handle. All of these were meant for hand to hand combat, and thus probably were not extensively used at Adobe Walls. Between the use of skirmishers with rifles and Lieutenant Pettis's long guns, the troops did their best to keep the Kiowa and Comanche Indians well out of hand-to-hand range.³³

³²Ibid, 106-108.

³³Ibid, 110-111.

Most of the traditional Plains Indian weapons were designed for hunting and the kinds of raiding warfare upon which they had based their economy. Their best defense had been their mobility. Defensive warfare tended to consist of warriors trading space for mobility, and buying time for their fellow villagers to escape or protect property. To that end, they were not well prepared for a defense against an invading force like Carson's column that attacked during the winter. Carson's success in achieving initial surprise and the destruction of an entire village against the standard tactic of "see and flee," which normally frustrated the army's attempts to prosecute hostile Indians, allowed him what success he ultimately was able to achieve. The weapons the Indians brought to the fight were well suited to their normal modes of warfare, but Carson forced them out of their tactical comfort zone. In the type of battle that occurred on that November day, the army's weapons were superior. Numerical strength caused them to retreat, but not after inflicting a powerful blow considering the forces at hand.

7. Army Strategy

The Winter Campaign

General Carleton and Kit Carson faced challenges that had burdened U.S. Army officers trying to prosecute campaigns against the Indian tribes of the Great Plains throughout the 1850s. The fact that Plains tribes were able continually and consistently to exploit their few tactical advantages testified to their creativity and tactical prowess. Plains tribes showed an exceptional aptitude for adaptation. Repeatedly, they engaged United States troops equipped with vastly superior technology and firepower with success that frustrated American troops for decades. The U.S. Cavalry plodded about the plains like a clumsy heavyweight fighting the nimble, flyweight Indians. The army usually brought more firepower to a fight than any single band or collaboration of Indians. Indian tactical mobility time and again rendered the army's superior firepower useless. Internal confusion over U.S. Indian war strategy did not help.

Indians generally avoided direct conflict, with two exceptions. They would attack or fight if they held an advantage in numbers or firepower that virtually assured success. For instance, they were amenable to attacking individuals, small parties, or green settlers who would not likely be able to mount a sufficient defense. Indians would also fight if cornered or trapped. If their families were threatened by an imminent attack on their village, they would sometimes join pitched battle until their dependents were safe or had escaped.¹ Both of the above elements came into play later at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, where Custer's attack placed the Sioux villages and families at risk, forcing the warriors to fight. At the same time, Custer's Sioux opponents vastly outnumbered his

¹Utey, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 6-9; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 7.

assault force. The Sioux also had better firearms than their Seventh Cavalry assailants. Many Sioux had repeating rifles, while the Seventh Cavalry fought primarily with single-shot breach-loaders.²

One of the few pitched fights between colonial forces and Indians involved Comanches. In the fall of 1751, Spanish New Mexican forces under territorial governor Tomás Vélez Cachupín pursued a Comanche raiding party of several hundred warriors who had just sacked Pecos, New Mexico. Cachupín led ninety-two troops, militia, Indian auxiliaries and scouts on a chase, somehow trapping 145 of the raiders – and apparently their families – in a box canyon along the edge of the Llano Estacado caprock. A fight ensued that lasted until dark by which time the Comanches had expended nearly all of their ammunition. Despite chilly temperatures, the Comanches then retreated to the middle of a small pond for defense. Cachupín torched the brush around the pond to provide light and ordered his men to shoot anything that moved. Upon hearing the cries of women and children, Cachupín called for a ceasefire. He offered to spare anyone who surrendered, but threatened to wipe out anyone who failed to surrender by sunrise. The remaining Indians tested Cachupín by first sending out a wounded teenager. Upon seeing that he was treated well, most of the remaining Comanches capitulated. A few holdouts decided to go out fighting, and charged to their deaths in a suicidal 3 a.m. flurry. The Spaniards killed 122 Comanches, captured thirty-three (or forty-nine) prisoners, 150 mules, and enough fighting credibility to negotiate and trade with the Comanches from an improved footing.³

²For an extensive discussion of armament at Little Bighorn, see Richard A. Fox, *Archeology, History, and Custer's Last Battle: The Little Bighorn Reexamined* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).

³Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire*, 46.

Plains tribes consistently used superior mobility to frustrate army attempts at engaging Indians in pitched battles. Since most Plains tribes followed the buffalo, their societies were horse savvy and agile. This proved helpful for defense both against the army and rival plains tribes. Comanche adaptation to a fully equestrian hunting and raiding lifestyle allowed them to sweep Apache bands out of the Arkansas River drainage and later gave them the same advantage over the Utes, once the Ute-Comanche alliance dissolved. In the case of both the Utes and Apaches, small vestiges of reliance on riparian agriculture tied those tribes to specific places at specific times of the year, allowing the nimbler Comanches to pummel them during their periods of static ties. Army leaders could not plan to take strategic points, such as cities or lines of communication, because societies like the Comanches and Kiowas were not tied to such static formations. With significant warning, a Plains village could be dismantled and its inhabitants vacated long before the army ever struck.⁴

In summer 1860, the Comanches repeatedly flustered Major Charles F. Ruff, who commanded a 225-man scout force intended to strike a blow in the Canadian River region. Ruff's troops, a force of Mounted Riflemen, came upon a Comanche village of about three hundred people along the Canadian River. Ruff's regulars surprised the village. But the Indians fled with what they could easily carry, shooing along the livestock. The Comanches bolted in three different directions. A main party of about eighty to one hundred warriors broke one way. A dozen and a half drove the village's

⁴Uteley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 6-7; Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire*, 31-32.

herd of five hundred or so livestock in another. The remainder of the populace, primarily women, children, and elders, took off in a third.⁵

This tactic employed by the Comanches against Ruff's cavalry had its risks. They left their entire herd of livestock lightly protected. They also left the women and children at risk. And of course, any hope of protecting the valuable goods that could not be brought along from the village was lost. Eventually, the cavalry did make it back to the abandoned village and destroyed most of the property.⁶ While they lost many possessions when Ruff's troops burned their lodges, the Comanches' tactics were largely successful. The entire populace escaped, and they left the army's horses in such poor condition that further pursuit was impossible for quite some time. Ruff said of the encounter: "The Indians abandoned everything, (and) separated into three parties. We took the direction of the warriors of the party and pursued them for 12 miles, most of the time under full run, over a high prairie. It soon became apparent that the Indian horses 'out footed' our animals, and that unless they chose, we could not come up with them. It was in fact marvelous that our poor broken down horses were able to keep up the killing pace for the distance they did."⁷

The Indian warriors probably could have further "out footed" the Mounted Riflemen. The Comanches allowed the Ruff's troops to remain close, stringing out the pursuit and drawing the cavalry further away from their women, children, elders, and livestock while allowing the warrior party to keep eye contact with the riflemen and ensure that they did not break off to pursue one of the other fleeing Comanche

⁵Ruff to Maury, 30 July 1860, R/21 LR, 1860, DNM, r. 12, M1120, RG 393, NA.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

contingents. The scheme worked masterfully. Ruff may have claimed it was “soon apparent” that he would not be able to overtake the warriors, but not apparent soon enough to prevent him from pursuing the Indian decoys for twelve miles. Twelve miles at a dead run would kill most horses.

This same game of cat and mouse occurred at least three times during Ruff’s scout. Each time Ruff’s prey split up, and each time he was unable to run down the warrior party. Once, during the night, the Indians mounted their own attack. It was daylight before the cavalry could respond. By then, pursuing the Comanches was futile. Although Ruff blamed his repeated failure to corner the Comanches and Kiowas on a lack of competent guides, it seems doubtful that he would have been any more successful unless he explored different tactical pursuit options.⁸

Of the three basic nineteenth-century army units – infantry, artillery, and cavalry – cavalry was by far the most mobile. But even U.S. cavalry was no match for the mobility of the Plains tribes. U.S. cavalry horses were large, sturdy animals, capable of carrying a rider and his field kit, together weighing about 350 pounds.⁹ Such horses, like the men who rode them, could not survive on the plains without a supply line. They simply were incapable of indefinitely “living off the land.”¹⁰ Ruff’s mounted scout encountered this problem. He found that summer rains on the Southern Plains did not support sufficient grass to keep his horses strong. His men wound up “dragging their exhausted horses, in the hottest of days.”¹¹

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ball, *Army Regulars*, 30.

¹⁰Utley, *Frontiersmen In Blue*, 339-340.

¹¹Ruff to Maury, 30 July 1860, R/21 LR, 1860, DNM, r. 12, M1120, RG 393, NA.

Indian ponies were smaller than American dragoon or cavalry horses and incapable of bearing the heavy loads the army demanded of its mounts. But they did not need to. Indian ponies could bear a warrior and thrive on prairie grass. A cavalry unit involved in a long chase across the prairies was usually tied to a cumbersome supply train or static post whose rations and forage were needed for men and stock. Indians and their mounts could live off the land and were therefore more mobile and flexible than mounted army units. If they did not want to confront the cavalry, they did not have to. Captain Kirby Smith, famous more for his career as a Confederate general than for his service in the antebellum army, summed up the challenge of operating on the plains. After six weeks of chasing Comanche chief Sanico around the upper drainage of the Brazos and Colorado Rivers, he lamented, “As has been the case with all large expeditions against the nomadic tribes on our western prairies, we traveled through the country, broke down our men, killed our horses, and returned as ignorant of the whereabouts of Mr. Sanico as when we started.”¹²

If U.S. forces were to subdue the Plains tribes, they had to devise a way to convince them to capitulate. The army could either remove Indian ability to survive or their ability to resist. Thus the U.S. army developed the tactic of the winter campaign, first demonstrated by Colonel William S. Harney in 1855. During the winter, tribes were less mobile than they were during spring, summer, or fall. This time of year, they lived in fixed villages in river valleys and relied heavily on shelter and stored food supplies. Plains Indians were more vulnerable to plodding U.S. cavalry attacks during the winter.

¹²Joseph Howard Parks, *General Edmund Kirby Smith, C.S.A.* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1954), 89-90.

The tandem of Carleton and Carson had utilized winter campaigning and resource destruction to pen up the Navajos. But although the Navajos made use of horses and raiding, their dependence on agriculture made them easier targets for these tactics, and gave Carson and the army a much larger time window in which to inflict their damage. Although the final penetration into Canyon de Chelly occurred during the winter, Carson's most lethal blows occurred bit by bit through the summer and fall as the army destroyed the crops the Navajos would need to survive the winter.

After the recent success of their winter campaigning against the Navajos, Carleton sought to employ similar tactics against the Comanches and Kiowas at the next opportunity. The intention was to allow Carson's command to locate a concentrated group of Kiowas, Comanches, and Plains Apaches and catch them in a less mobile state. Carleton probably did not realize why winter campaigning had worked so well against the Navajos, or why it would not be quite as effective against the Kiowas and Comanches. He clearly understood that Carson would be more likely to catch them for a significant encounter in the winter than any other season. Carson found them all right, but the encounter and result turned out far different than that of the Navajo campaign.

8. Carson's Campaign

"Adobe Walls" in the Canadian Valley

Carson planned from the outset to use a place he knew as Fort Adobe for his base of operations against the Kiowas and Comanches.¹ Fort Adobe, or Adobe Walls, served as a landmark for travelers through an area noted for its lack of them. North of present day Amarillo, the Canadian River cuts a gash through the high plains caprock. Down in that gash stood a set of walled adobe ruins. These walls were all that remained of an abandoned trading operation that had been attempted by the same outfit that ran the much better-known Bent's Fort along the Arkansas River in present-day southeastern Colorado in the early and mid 1800s.

Bent, St. Vrain, and Company established Fort Adobe in the mid 1840s as a satellite of their main trading enterprise at Bent's Fort. The post sat about ten miles east of present-day Stinnett and Borger, north of Amarillo in the Texas Panhandle. The Bent brothers had attempted to establish trade with the Comanches and Kiowas as early as the late 1820s.² These tribes made operations for Bent, St. Vrain, and Company treacherous almost from the outset. The company apparently built a log structure in the vicinity in the early years and assigned Ceran St. Vrain to run the post. Comanches and Kiowas eventually ran off every single animal St. Vrain had in his possession. Stranded and desperate, he resorted to some crafty, if morally questionable, tactics. Under a white flag, he assembled the tribal leaders in his wooden stockade. He locked the doors and held

¹Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 939-943.

²Paul I. Wellman, "Some Famous Kansas Scouts," *The Kansas Historical Quarterly*, 1 no. 4, (1932): 347. For a comprehensive history of the Bent – St. Vrain venture and Fort Adobe, see David Lavender, *Bent's Fort* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1954), 264-265.

them under arms, threatening to kill the lot of them if their tribes did not return his stock and grant him safe passage back to Bent's Fort.³

Questionable or not, the tactics worked. St. Vrain escaped with his stock and his skin. When the company sought to reestablish trade from its post on the Canadian sometime in the mid 1840s, Bent and St. Vrain sent out Mexican adobe builders to create a more stout and defensible position. The adobe structure, nine feet high and eighty feet square, was aptly named Fort Adobe.⁴

The enterprise at Fort Adobe never turned enough profit to compensate for the constant Indian trouble faced by this remote Canadian Valley outpost. Comanche and Kiowa raids continued to plague the fledgling operation. In 1848, the company sent Kit Carson with a small party of four old mountain men and two Mexicans – a cook and a herder – to reestablish the trade. Almost as soon as they arrived, Jicarilla Apaches killed the herder and drove off the entire herd of livestock, save two mules that happened to be tied up inside the adobe post. The absence of stock led Carson and company to cache what trappings they had acquired so far and return to Bent's Fort. A Kiowa party noticed this tiny contingent of traders walking across the plains on their return trip to Bent's and attacked. Carson's party formed up around the two remaining mules. They used a circularly rotating firing pattern to hold off the Indian attackers. The Kiowas called off the assault after losing three warriors – too high a price to pay for a couple of mules.⁵

³Wellman, "Famous Kansas Scouts," 347; Lavender, *Bent's Fort*, 246-247. Lavender calls the event legendary, while Wellman states it as fact but cites no source. Either way, it appears that wariness on the part of Bent, St. Vrain & Co. led to the establishment of a better fortified position.

⁴Lavender, *Bent's Fort*, 246-247, 264-265.

⁵Rathjen, *Texas Panhandle Frontier*, 74; Lavender, *Bent's Fort*, 309.

Always eager traders, the Comanches convinced William Bent that Kiowas had been the source of all his trouble around Fort Adobe. They wanted him at least to continue hauling trade goods from the Arkansas to trade with the Comanches. Bent sent a party of twelve, this time with Dick Wootton, back to Fort Adobe to retrieve the goods cached by Carson and to trade with the Comanches. Richens Lacy “Uncle Dick” Wootton had come west as an employee of Bent, St. Vrain & Company, and after several years trapping, had taken up long-term work with the traders as a hunter. Immediately upon arriving back at Fort Adobe, Wootton’s party perceived their Comanche trading partners as a threat and let only two or three into the post at a time. Soon, seeing even this practice as too risky, they cut a hole in the wall about the size of a train ticket window and conducted all business through the window. The Comanches took offense at this and commenced taking occasional pot-shots at the trading window.⁶ A senior Comanche chief eased tempers, and business was allowed to continue, although in a very tense environment. Wootton departed with a rich load of robes and deerskins, but later recalled, “It was the most hazardous trading expedition I ever had anything to do with.”⁷

William Bent made one final attempt at salvaging the Canadian River operation in the spring of 1849. With ox-drawn wagons he hauled a load of trading goods down to the outpost himself. Not long afterward, local Indians killed some of his livestock. Bent must have suspected he would have more trouble after all the precedents. He apparently also brought with him the means to put an end to Fort Adobe for good if things did not work out, or so he thought. Bent gave up on the enterprise, conceding any future trade

⁶Rathjen, *Texas Panhandle Frontier*, 74-75; Lavender, *Bent's Fort*, 309-310.

⁷Rathjen, *Texas Panhandle Frontier*, 75.

along the Canadian to the Comancheros. He set off a huge explosion meant to destroy the outpost, and then returned to the relative safety of Bent's Fort.⁸ He succeeded only in blasting down the roof and some of the interior walls. The roofless remains became the landmark known as Adobe Walls.

Roofless or not, the structure still had some post-explosion utility. It served as a landmark to Comancheros, and several other expeditions up and down the Canadian Valley during the 1840s, '50s and '60s. It was stout enough for Carson to plan on using it as a base.⁹ Much of the structure of the Adobe Walls seems to have been in good condition as late as 1860, in spite of Bent's blast. Major Ruff described it in his report that year. "The ruins of an Adobe Fort, or trading post, a building of 9 rooms, the walls of seven of which are in good preservation, the west wall is 100 feet, and the north wall is 180 feet long. Nothing of the wood work of this building remains."¹⁰ Nothing remains of the structure today.

Marching into Comanche Country from New Mexico

Transporting Colonel Carson's troops and equipment to the heart of Comanche country on the Canadian River would prove a difficult task. The idea of the winter campaign was to strike Indians when mobility was difficult and they were most dependent upon stationary resources. This of course meant that Carson and his force had to traverse the same terrain through the same weather that would make the Indians reluctant to move. The likelihood of foul weather and miserable travel conditions presented obvious hazards to any march up the Canadian in November and December.

⁸Rathjen, *Texas Panhandle Frontier*, 75; Lavender, *Bent's Fort*, 310.

⁹Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 939-943.

¹⁰Ruff to Maury, 30 July 1860, R/21 LR, 1860, DNM, r. 12, M1120, RG 393, NA.

Adobe Walls was a foreboding place of windblown isolation. In terms of both distance and climate, the remains of Fort Adobe sat a world away from the mountains of Santa Fe. Marching or transporting a force of four hundred men from the relative civilization of New Mexico to the windswept high plains of Comanche country would be a chore any time of year. Doing it during the winter would be that much harder.

Colonel Carson's expedition embarked from Fort Bascom on the Canadian River near present-day Tucumcari, New Mexico, but most of the troops came from the Santa Fe area. Several companies under Major McCleave traveled from Fort Union near present day Pecos, New Mexico, to Fort Bascom before they could depart.¹¹ Carson traveled to Cimarron, brought Indian auxiliaries from that place, and then rendezvoused with Abreu and the infantry at Bascom.¹² Still other troops came from Forts Stanton and Sumner. They checked out what weapons they needed from Fort Union and headed east.

Even with the expedition embarking from Fort Bascom, Carson's party faced a two-hundred-mile journey down the Canadian. The region was isolated and barren, no easy place to lead an expedition. Early frontiersmen knew the Canadian River for its unpredictability. It was thought to be either a dry streambed (unhelpful for watering stock and troops) or a raging torrent.¹³

November was not the season for raging torrents. It was, however, a season of occasional heavy snows. Kiowas called the winter of 1864-1865 the "muddy traveling

¹¹Abreu to Cutler, 5 November 1864, A/256, inclosure, LR, 1864, DNM, r. 22, M1120, RG 393, NA.

¹²Carleton to Carson, 18 September 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 3, p. 243-244.

¹³Rathjen, *Texas Panhandle Frontier*, 5.

winter.”¹⁴ Twice during Carson’s party’s descent of the Canadian Valley, short but severe snowstorms delayed travel and made movement difficult and miserable.¹⁵

As with previous expeditions against Plains tribes, Carson faced the logistical problem of how to supply hundreds of troops and horses in inhospitable territory. He originally planned to bring along a massive mule train. Since there were only one hundred pack saddles available, he abandoned that plan in favor of supply wagons. His column would march with the supply wagons as far as Fort Adobe, and then use the remains of that place as an operating base. In preparation to outfit Carson’s force, the quartermaster at Fort Bascom received twenty-seven wagons and an ambulance on November 4.¹⁶

Carson’s battalion departed Fort Bascom on 12 November 1864. The party crossed the Canadian River at Bergmann’s Ranch, just a few miles below the fort. As was common, they had some difficulty crossing the Canadian from south to north. River crossings tended to be hard on wagons, often breaking bolts and chains, or pulling staples. Once across, the column utilized an established wagon road on the north bank of the river. The old Bascom-Adobe Walls road crept away from the main river bottom, and relied on springs which fed tributaries to the same river system. This route avoided repeated crossings of steep-banked arroyos carved by the creeks and streams running into the Canadian. This would be a particular problem once the Canadian began to slice through the caprock of the Llano Estacado. The old Bascom-Adobe Walls wagon road was no longer an active immigrant trail or a venue for large scale commercial trade and

¹⁴James Mooney, “Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians,” *Seventeenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1898), 314.

¹⁵Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 939-943.

¹⁶Ibid; Pettis, *Kit Carson’s Fight*, 9.

shipping like the Santa Fe Trail. The road had been established by Comanchero traders doing business with the Indians. The strike force camped the first night out of Fort Bascom at the mouth of Ute Creek, a site now inundated by Ute Lake near Logan, New Mexico. The geography of the camp suited Carson well, providing shelter and adequate sites for lookouts, but the flora of the area had all of the nettlesome characteristics that make West Texans and eastern New Mexicans tough to this day. The place was covered with sand burrs, cacti, and prickly mesquite.¹⁷

The second leg of the journey brought Carson's command through gritty, pesky sand hills and down into what was then known as Red River Springs. These healthy springs flow at a broad place in the river bottom used for centuries as a temporary dwelling place by travelers of all kinds, from prehistoric Indians, to comancheros, to the army. Carson must have especially liked this campsite. It appears he spent an extra night there allowing men and animals to recuperate. Some members of the party had strategies for how best to travel in comfort and claim the best spots in camp. Dr. Courtright insisted on taking his place with the front wagons. The air was clearer up there. It also allowed him the chance to set up his hospital unit, and then rest for a while as the remainder of the party completed the daily camp chores. Some men were assigned to picket duty, others to various assignments around the camp. There was plenty of work to do. Once all the chores were complete, the troops spent time around the fire. November brought with it cold nights. They ate, rolled smokes, and told stories.¹⁸

¹⁷Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 939-943; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 9; Lynn, *Kit Carson and the First Battle of Adobe Walls*, 12-15.

¹⁸Lynn, *Kit Carson and the First Battle of Adobe Walls*, 14-18.

Carson's Red River Spring camp happened to be very near the location of his failed attempt to rescue Ann White. Many troops in Carson's party likely knew the story. Jicarilla Apaches had captured White in 1849 when they raided a wagon train just outside Fort Union. Carson was commissioned to guide a rescue party. He struggled greatly to keep the trail, but after several days his party made contact with the Jicarillas. A brief disagreement ensued between Carson and the army officer commanding the pursuit as to how they should proceed. In the meantime, the Jicarilla captors killed White and her young child. Obviously, this was a traumatic emotional moment for Carson. His feelings were intensified by the fact that his party found a paperback novel featuring Carson among White's effects. Thoughts of White holding out false hope that Carson would rescue her plagued Kit for the rest of his years.¹⁹

While camped there, Carson related the details of the event to his accompanying troops. Revisiting the site must have been painful for Carson, but hearing him retell the already legendary tale certainly made an impression on the junior officers of the expedition. Lieutenant George Pettis recalled in his memoir, "Carson explained to us how their attack was made, the position of the Indian camp, where the bodies were found, etc., in his usual graphic manner." Interestingly, Pettis remembered the perpetrators in the story to be the Comanches his party was pursuing on this trip rather than the Jicarillas, who happened to be serving as his party's auxiliaries.²⁰

Kit Carson did not provide the only enroute entertainment on the trip. Every night on the eastbound leg of the trip the Ute and Jicarilla Apaches put on a show of their

¹⁹Quaife, *Kit Carson's Autobiography*, 131-134; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 9-10.

²⁰Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 10-11.

own. Lieutenant Pettis described a raucous war dance. Although the big dance initially piqued the curiosity of some interested parties like Pettis, the act soon wore thin. Several evenings, the unfamiliar and no doubt loud Indians dancing inhibited the sleep of many a tired troop, and complaints began to arise. Carson understood the value of having his Ute and Jicarilla auxiliaries along, however. In fact, he felt more comfortable with them than he did the other troops. Whatever impact the dancing had on a “good night’s sleep,” Carson never interfered with the ritual until operational necessity required silence.²¹

Another difficult stretch of trail faced the wagons and the men who drove them. Carson correctly believed the going would be more difficult if he continued along the river bottom, but the old road hit more sand hills soon after it emerged from the Canadian bottom lands. The party pushed forward through thorny plum thickets and across another then-unnamed Canadian tributary. On the fifteenth, Carson’s command camped on the east bank of what he called, Cañada de los Ruedes, or “Wheel Canyon.” A legend stated that this place had an ample supply of large cottonwoods and that it had been a stopping point for Mexican traders on the way to or from Missouri in the days before the main Santa Fe route on the Arkansas and Cimarron Rivers came into use. The trees made the stop a convenient place to repair ox-cart components. Cottonwoods surrounded a dependable, fresh spring providing ample refreshment.²²

As they proceeded west, Carson employed prudent tactics to ensure the practical safety of travel and to discover the Comanches and Kiowas before they discovered him, hopefully preventing the usual game of chase. Each day, Carson dispatched two of his

²¹Ibid, 11.

²²Ibid, 11-12; Lynn, *Kit Carson and the First Battle of Adobe Walls*, 25-26.

scouts several hours in advance of the main party. These scouts would return in the evening to report any findings. He additionally deployed scouts well out on each flank. Carson knew all about the sprightly maneuvering and speedy departure his quarry was capable of. Under no circumstances would Carson allow his party to be surprised, and if he could, he was determined to himself retain the element of surprise.²³

The main trading road Carson and his men had been following now continued north from the area around Nara Visa, New Mexico. Another, fainter path peeled off to the east over, thankfully, friendlier terrain. The campaigners crossed into Texas, past another spring and a difficult creek crossing. They marched on past obnoxious, encroaching mesquite trees, adorned with their poison tipped thorns. Soldiers were baffled by petrified logs they passed in an area completely devoid of modern *wooden* trees. They looped away from the Canadian when they needed to if it meant they could avoid crossing steep breaks and *barrancas*. After a long day's journey, the party most likely camped along a treeless creek about fifteen miles from where they had begun the day. Without wood, the troops had to cook and warm themselves by the light of buffalo chips. That may have made the fire less pleasant as a source of nightly entertainment – but then, there were still the nightly war dances.²⁴

On the party marched through some *malpais*, past several more creeks, ancient Indian village sites complete with tepee rings, and haunts of the *Comancheros*. Archaeological evidence suggests they may have camped on Punta de Agua, Los Redos, and Rica Creeks. Snow forced the travelers to halt for an extra day on two separate

²³Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 11, 13.

²⁴Lynn, *Kit Carson and the First Battle of Adobe Walls*, 30-31.

occasions. But they did make progress. On the evening of November 23, Carson still intended to set up a base camp at the old Adobe Fort before setting out to hunt for Comanches and Kiowas in earnest. His scouts still scanned the region for enemy activity as well as the best way to proceed, but Carson probably believed there would be a long and perhaps tedious search before any fighting would take place. He had marched around for months searching for Navajos, finding at best a few corn fields to destroy. These Plains tribes did not even have gardens to tie them down temporarily. As his scouts led the troops down into the arroyo of Blue Creek, Carson had no way of knowing a battle lurked just downstream. Years on the frontier had taught him to be always cautious. Nearly his entire life had been lived in the presence of at least the possibility of some lurking danger. Even as a youth in Missouri, Carson and his family members had to work their fields with guards posted due to the constant threat of Indian attack. By now, precautionary measures had become second nature, almost habitual. On that evening, they set up camp as usual. Carson set out his pickets. Other than the fact that *Comancheros* and other previous campers had beaten the troopers to all of the wood in the little valley thus forcing another night of buffalo chip fires, everything seemed the way it had been the rest of the trip. Even the Jicarilla and Utes scouts danced their war dance and sang their songs like any other night. Little did they know it would be their last full night of rest ahead of two days of constant marching, combat, and hurried retreat.²⁵

Early in the afternoon of November 24, Carson camped his party at Arroyo de la Mula (Mule Creek) about thirty miles west of old Fort Adobe. The main contingent ate

²⁵Lynn, *Kit Carson and the First Battle of Adobe Walls*, 32-54, *passim*.

supper after the initial camp setup responsibilities had been completed. Some were doing camp chores, some sleeping, others gambling. Suddenly, not long before sunset the Utes and Jicarillas in camp leapt to their feet practically in unison. The scouts dispatched that morning were faintly visible, some two miles distant. Lieutenant Pettis could not spot them without assistance. By some aural signal, they had conveyed to the rest of the auxiliary force that the Comanches had been located.

Once back in camp, the scouts relayed to Carson that about ten miles downstream they had located a sizeable camp of Comanches and Kiowas. Signs indicated a large body of Indians and a giant herd of livestock. Carson's scouts assured him, "We would have no difficulty in finding all the Indians that we desired."²⁶ That prediction turned out to be true – and then some. Finding the mobile Plains tribes was often difficult, Carleton and Carson had improved their odds by engineering a campaign during the cold season. More importantly, Carson's reliance on the scouts combined with his own understanding of how Indian life and warfare worked had accomplished the first part of the objective well ahead of the most ambitious schedule Carson could have laid out. The Comanches and Kiowas had been found! He had not yet learned, however, that he had perhaps been a bit too successful. He had found Indians in even greater numbers than they had expected or prepared for.

²⁶Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 13-14; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 939-943.

9. The Battle of Adobe Walls

The First Village

Colonel Carson's expedition had marched through snow and mud for two weeks, enduring all of the thorns, sand, rocks, and tribulations of the trail. His men wanted to find the Indians, punish them, and return to their comfortable winter accommodations. Not only had the scouts sent out that morning found the Kiowa and Comanche camps, the opportunity for glory and plunder would be magnificent. General Carleton had allowed Carson to promise the Utes and Jicarillas all the livestock they could steal, and chance to make the trip especially worthwhile lay just ahead. Carson would not have to endure the series of month-long, unfruitful scouts – that was the way he had perceived them – that preceded Navajo capitulation. There would be no apologetic letters back to Carleton, whom Carson particularly hated to disappoint. No, the scouts the old trapper had sent out the morning of November 24, 1864, had discovered signs of a massive Indian presence ten to fifteen miles downstream from the present federal camp. The evidence indicated a large body of Indians and an even larger herd of livestock. The Ute and Jicarilla auxiliaries would have all the livestock they could drive off, and Carson would force the kind of climactic battle the army always sought, but Indians seldom accepted on terms other than their own.¹

Although his troops had just set up camp after a day on the march, Carson did not wait. He immediately threw his subordinates into action. Any time lost time might equal lost surprise, or worse yet a missed encounter. He ordered all the wagons loaded for easy

¹Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 13-14; Carleton to Carson 18 September 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 3, p. 243-244, shows Carleton offering the auxiliaries all captured stock that was not property of the United States or U.S. citizens (U.S. citizens would have to pay a reasonable recovery reward to recoup their animals).

defense and left them under the protection of Lieutenant Colonel Abreu and Captain Edmiston's Company A, 1st California Veteran Infantry (about sixty men). Carson directed Abreu and the infantry to remain in camp that evening, and then start after the remainder of the strike force the morning of the twenty-fifth. Carson moved out with the entire mounted force along with Lieutenant Pettis and the mountain howitzers in the fading light of dusk that same evening.²

The remaining combined strike force – now about 340 men counting cavalry and auxiliaries with the artillery pieces – marched through the night under strict orders not to talk, smoke, or create any other disturbance that might give away Carson's location and ruin the surprise. At midnight, the column descended from the rugged edge of the caprock escarpment into the lowlands of the Canadian Valley.³ Once in the bottoms, Carson's command ran across fresh signs of the large Indian party so clear that the trail was easily discernible even in the dark. Carson knew a large and powerful enemy was near but did not know exactly where. Rather than risk stumbling onto them in the dark, he immediately halted his party and again dispatched scouts. Carson's men dismounted, but the stop could not have been a restful one. The silence order was still in effect. Smoking was prohibited. Any sort of warming fire was out of the question. The cavalry troopers had to remain standing because they had to keep hold of their horses' bridles. They could only ponder the black sky, pierced by the points of light from the stars so sharp on a clear, cold prairie night. Visible breath rose from the silent men and animals

²Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 14, 30; Courtright, *An Expedition Against the Indians*, 9.

³Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 14-15.

as they braced themselves against the cold. The frost fell thick and heavy. They tried to remain alert and warm while awaiting further instructions.⁴

The scouts returned before the first light of dawn on the twenty-fifth, reporting the enemy camp still some distance off. Carson's column resumed its silent march. Orders, if absolutely necessary, were relayed with a whisper. Carson led from the front, riding with his experienced Ute and Jicarilla auxiliaries. The Indians crept down the valley, perched atop their horses. They curled their legs beneath buffalo robes to stay out of the biting late-November wind, a sight Lieutenant George Pettis found peculiar as he rode past them toward the front of the column for a meeting with the old colonel. They must have looked like brown mounds stacked on the backs of the horses. Pettis wondered to himself how they kept balanced on their pony's spines with their legs fully retracted under the blankets. A couple of cavalry companies followed the Indians. Pettis's howitzers came next, tucked safely in the center of the procession. The remaining cavalry served as the rear guard.⁵

The valley broadened before them as the Indians, cavalry, and guardians of the artillery crept quietly along. A couple of hours into their march, Carson heard a voice calling from across the river, "Viene aca! Viene aca!" (Come here! Come here!). He had come across what was either something akin to a Kiowa picket, or just some younger men of the tribe out rounding up their horses before breakfast. A quick signal to Major McCleave sent him, Captain Charles Deus, and Company M, First Cavalry, New Mexico Volunteers (seventy-one men in all) splashing across the shallow Canadian in a desperate

⁴Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 15.

⁵Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 15-16; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940.

attempt to intercept the three enemy Indians before they could alert the balance of their village to the presence of the column.⁶

At the prospect of battle with their long-time rivals, the Comanches, Carson's Ute and Jicarilla auxiliaries dove into a brush thicket and lost no time divesting themselves of the great robes that had recently sheltered them from cold of the early morning. They emerged just as fast, painted and ready for action. Carson spotted an enemy village, still about five miles distant and ordered the column forward. The village was far enough away to fool Lieutenant Pettis and some of his enlisted men into thinking it was a camp made of of Sibley tents! Carson explained that a special process Plains Indians used to prepare buffalo hides made them appear so white. This closest encampment was a Kiowa village, the main part of which lay beneath a red bluff, while some other lodges extended along a small creek upstream. He sent Company B, First Cavalry, California Volunteers (sixty men) under Captain Fritz ahead to strike the village in cooperation with McCleave's force already on the opposite bank of the river.⁷

Before long, high grass and divergent travel speeds prevented Carson and Pettis from maintaining visual contact with the advanced cavalry. They never got out of earshot, however. When Carson heard shots ring out in the distance, he knew the battle was underway. He ordered Lieutenant Heath and his command, a detachment of thirty-eight men of Company K, First Cavalry, California Volunteers, into the fray. They

⁶Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 16-17; Mooney, *Calendar History*, 315.

⁷Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 17, 20-21; Hugh Lennox Scott, *Kit Carson and the Kiowa: The First Battle of Adobe Walls, 1864*. in *The Kiowa Collection: Selections from the Papers of Hugh Lennox Scott*, Library of Congress.

charged across the river and on ahead in pursuit of Fritz's company as Carson, his ungainly howitzer crews, and their cavalry escort labored along in the rear.⁸

Carson appears to have been attempting to maintain surprise by striking with the most mobile part of his force. Although he would later be quite relieved to have the howitzers along, at this point they inhibited a rapid advance. The mountain howitzers had small wheels that made dragging them through the high grass and occasional brush thickets of the Canadian River bottom difficult and time consuming. Pettis claimed that the grass in some parts of the valley floor was so high he had difficulty maintaining eye contact with the diminutive Carson while they rode along side one another. Pettis's crews had to take special care not to overturn the howitzer undercarriages in haste, since righting them would cost him even more time. The gun crews could not bring personal mounts, further slowing progress. Even if they had, the guns carriages themselves could not advance at the speed of a man on horseback. Carson, however, could not leave them unguarded. He had no choice but to plod along, hoping McCleave's horsemen would impede the ability of the Kiowa watchmen to notify the village of his approach.⁹

Carson remained with the artillery, accompanied by Witham's and Berney's companies. Once out of the thickets, progress improved somewhat. But the diverse units in the command progressed at different speeds, preventing a steady, coordinated advance. Like an inchworm, they bulged and stretched across the valley floor trying not to get too far behind the advance cavalry. "Trot, march!" would come the order. The cavalry guard would advance with the horse-drawn gun carriages, as the gun crews – traveling afoot –

⁸Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 18; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940.

⁹Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 18.

scurried along behind, trailing across the prairie. Then the order, “Walk, march!” allowed the pedestrian gun crews to catch up. As soon as the horseless men caught their breath, off went the horses again.¹⁰

The valley widened to about two miles as Carson’s party approached the Kiowa village he had seen in the distance. Kiowas had been grazing their cattle and horses in the lush bottom lands. Upon discovering these choice livestock prizes, Carson’s Ute and Jicarilla allies began rounding up Kiowa livestock. The intrepid auxiliaries would ride into a group of Kiowa animals and identify a fine horse from the group. They would leap on the back of the fresh animal for use in the upcoming battle, while substituting their exhausted mounts as claim markers. The idea was to return later and take possession of the herds they had liberated.¹¹

Meanwhile, sometime early in the morning, one Kiowa man apparently grew nervous over his horse remuda, which he had not looked in on since the night before. The nervous Kiowa spotted some movement approaching in the distance. He quickly discerned at least partially what was afoot and recognized the danger. With complete disregard for the security of his about to be stolen horses, he bolted back toward the village to raise the alarm, “The Utes are coming to attack us!” What warriors there were in the camp scurried out, without leggings and even moccasins to meet the oncoming foe.¹²

The cavalry strike force under McCleave and Fritz seems to have successfully surprised the Kiowa village, in spite of the wary Kiowa remuda owner’s best efforts. The

¹⁰Pettis, *Kit Carson’s Fight*, 19; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940.

¹¹Pettis, *Kit Carson’s Fight*, 19-20.

¹²Hugh Lennox Scott, *Kit Carson and the Kiowa*.

warriors rushed to defend their homes – 150 lodges and all of the winter supplies contained therein. Stumbling Bear, a respected warrior in the tribe, knocked a soldier and a Ute off of their horses. Lean Bear charged into the fray, singing the war song of the Tonkonko military order. He was honor bound to kill at least one enemy before fleeing. A Kiowa-Apache who happened to be in the village at the time of the attack was knocked off his horse by a Ute ball. The Ute dove from his horse and captured the Kiowa-Apache warrior's war bonnet, a fine trophy.¹³

One source says that Stumbling Bear had made for this day an elaborate head dress made from eagle feathers. He used a magpie body, however, to hold together all of those long feathers. In the heat of the battle, enemy troopers eventually shot away most of the eagle feathers, leaving only the magpie. Apparently, as Stumbling Bear rode through the village, the now visible magpie wings caught the air and made the bird on his head appear to fly. It must be said, however, that Stumbling Bear was a notorious teller of tall tales, once even making light of all the lies he had just fed Dr. Mooney, the famous ethnologist who had collected data on the Kiowa picture calendars. He laughed with a friend about how some white big-wig reading the evening news by the fire with a pipe in his mouth would be fascinated by the yarn he had sold Mooney.¹⁴

The warriors held off the approaching cavalry long enough to allow most of the noncombatants to evacuate while they gathered up their weapons. The Kiowa women and children scrambled to the relative safety of the breaks in the caprock, sheltering a handful of white captives from Carson's detection. Although Carson and his command did not

¹³Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940-941; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 21; Mooney, *Calendar History*, 315.

¹⁴Lynn, *Kit Carson and the First Battle of Adobe Walls*, xviii,69.

know it at the time, there were apparently several captives in the upper Kiowa village at the time of the raid, all of whom went unrecovered. A small boy named Setkopte grabbed his younger brother's hand and ran in desperation after his mother. She flung a baby on her back and scooped another in her arms, and they all fled for the escarpment.¹⁵

Dohasan, the renowned but aging Kiowa chief, leapt to his horse and sped downstream to alert other allied Indian camps. When he arrived, his horse foamed with a mixture of sweat and flecks of blood. Upon hearing his warning, the men of the lower village galloped their horses upstream to join in the defense, while the women, children, and aged fled to safety in the breaks.¹⁶

After the Kiowa warriors departed the upper village, a few Ute women who made the trip rifled through the lodges seeking what plunder they could acquire. They found four ancient Kiowa men – two blind and two crippled – who could not evacuate with the young and the healthy. The Ute women split their skulls with axes, perhaps as part of the custom of mutilation of enemy bodies prevalent in some Native American cultures.¹⁷

After abandoning the village, the Comanche and Kiowa warriors inched backward down the Canadian, contesting the federal advance every step of the four miles between the upper village and the old Adobe Walls ruins. The artillery and its guard filtered between the abandoned Kiowa lodges. At the abandoned trading post, the warriors made a stand that stymied the U.S. cavalry advance.¹⁸

¹⁵Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 21; Mooney, *Calendar History*, 315.

¹⁶Nye, *Carbine & Lance*, 36.

¹⁷Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940-941; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 21, 35; Paul A. Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 81.

¹⁸Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940-941; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 21.

McCleave and the three forward cavalry units loosed their horses and corralled them in the Adobe Walls ruins, the walls of which were still about three to four feet high in most places and sound enough to adequately protect the animals. Dr. Courtright set up his hospital in their protection as well. The dismounted cavalry deployed around the ruins as skirmishers. The first Kiowa and Comanche assaults on McCleave's position occurred before Carson arrived with the artillery and its guard. His men fended off several fierce charges. Once within about a thousand yards, Carson had the engagement in plain sight. He and the remaining cavalry charged into the fray, with Pettis' guns rumbling along behind.¹⁹

Twelve to fourteen hundred enemy braves and chiefs encouraged a valiant attack. Comanche and Kiowa warriors galloped by the soldiers lying in the grass as they formed a wedge and wheel formation. The Plains horsemen laid over the backs and ducked under the necks of their ponies to fire as they passed at a full run – some with bows, some with firearms. This tactic must have been intimidating. On the other hand, it would also make accurate small arms fire nearly impossible. This circular wheel tactic, not uncommon during the occasional pitched fight they engaged in, favored their more traditional string and bow weapons. In response, the auxiliaries zipped to and fro, screaming war cries and firing into the circling enemy. Skirmishers lay here and there, prone in the grass, firing when they could get a clear shot.²⁰

During this stage of skirmishing, daring close passes by the Kiowa/Comanche party, and the periodic sniping that took shape at this phase of the fight, one soldier

¹⁹Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 22; Courtright, *Expedition Against the Indians*, 16.

²⁰Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 23; Courtright, *Expedition Against the Indians*, 15-16. Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 258.

suffered a very different kind of casualty. The skirmishers had to stay close to the ground at all costs. To move positions, they had to crawl. To get a steady shot, they had to rest an elbow on the dirt or a clump of grass growing from the valley floor. One of the young Spanish speaking troopers who comprised most of the 1st New Mexico put a hand in the wrong place and was bitten on the ring finger by a rattlesnake. The young man, Juan Buleras, dashed for the hospital inside the adobe fort with the afflicted digit raised high. The good doctor proceeded to treat him, in typical nineteenth century fashion, with a stiff shot of whiskey. He promptly returned to the skirmish line, commenting to the doctor on the way out that the medicine had made him very bold.²¹

Shortly after Pettis arrived with the howitzers, the Kiowas and Comanches appeared to be massing for a charge. Carson deployed the guns atop a small, thirty-foot hill that rose within a hundred yards of the ruins. Kiowas and Comanches looked on in wonder as the federals unlimbered their strange looking guns. “Pettis, throw a few shell into that crowd over thar,” hollered Carson. With a quick salute Pettis wheeled and called out, “Battery, halt! Action, right! Load with shell, load!” Within a few seconds the guns were loaded and sighted. “Number one, FIRE! Number two, FIRE!”²²

The opposing Indians sat tip-toe in their saddles and peered at the new weapon in astonishment. It took only a single exploding shell to inspire a headlong retreat back down the Canadian toward the lower village that Dohasan had visited for reinforcements. Carson had not yet discovered this second village farther to the east, and thus interpreted the Kiowa/Comanche departure as a sign that his fight was done for the day. By the time

²¹Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 31-32, Courtright, *Expedition against the Indians*, 7. Lynn, *Kit Carson and the First Battle of Adobe Walls*, 74; Castello, *Life of Captain Deus*, 26. Dues names the snake-bitten trooper as Buleras, who he claimed as a member of his company.

²²Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 22-25; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941.

Pettis fired his fourth shot, not a Kiowa or Comanche was in the outermost range of his guns. It seemed the howitzers had done their duty. Thinking the battle was over, Carson called in the skirmishers, unsaddled the cavalry horses, and directed that they be watered. He allowed his exhausted troops – they had been up all night and had not eaten since the previous evening – to rest and scrounge in their packs for whatever meal they could muster. After a brief hiatus, Carson intended to head back upstream and destroy the abandoned Kiowa village.²³

McCleave and the cavalry let the horses drink their fill in the cool, clear stream of water running by, then tied them off on pickets to browse the lush prairie grass of the bottom land. The men rummaged through their haversacks to mine bits of bacon and hardtack, probably relieved at having come through the day's fighting unscathed. The respite would have been welcome. It was, after all a beautiful, cloudless day, and the men were so hungry that even two year old bits of bacon and hardtack never tasted so good. The battle appeared to be over.²⁴

Carson soon discovered that this peace and quiet marked only the eye of the storm, rather than its passing. Through his spyglass he observed over a thousand warriors making their way back toward the Adobe Walls with a renewed sense of urgency. The next, larger eastern village of at least 350 lodges lay down stream beyond them. Carson threw his command back into action after a break that in truth had not lasted more than half an hour. The cavalry saddled their horses and drove them back into the ruins. Pettis

²³Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 25; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941.

²⁴Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 23-26; Courtright, *Expedition against the Indians*, 17.

prepared his artillery to renew the battle. Again, the cavalry deployed prone in the tall grass, fighting as skirmishers.²⁵

After abandoning their upper village and valiantly contesting the federal advance and finally forcing the army to a halt at the ruins, the Kiowas had initially backed away out of artillery range. They did this not to retreat or give up the fight but to secure aid from the lower villages before continuing the engagement. The lower villages probably housed more Kiowas, and their allies the Comanches and Kiowa-Apaches. Carson believed the larger part of his foes at Adobe Walls was Kiowa, with a few Comanches, Plains Apaches, and Arapahos cooperating. The first village Carson encountered when marching in from the West was Kiowa. Any Comanches that joined the fight either happened to be in that upper village, or joined when Dohasan and his fellow villagers made the call for reinforcements from the larger downstream village.²⁶

Dohasan led the Kiowa effort at Adobe Walls, probably assisted by Satanta and Satank. It would be a misrepresentation to say that any of these fine warriors and leaders actually “commanded” the Kiowa and Comanche forces, however. Plains warriors operated as individuals in a radically independent, democratic collectives that precluded the selection of a single commander in the same sense the term is applied to a hierarchy structured by rank as found in the armies of Europe and other Western societies such as the United States.²⁷

²⁵Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 26; Courtright, *Expedition Against the Indians*, 18.

²⁶Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 941-942; Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 298; Rathjen, *Texas Panhandle Frontier*, 79; Dunlay, *Kit Carson and the Indians*, 329.

²⁷Mooney, *Calendar History*, 315-317; Nye, *Carbine & Lance*, 36-37; Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 7.

The composite Plains Indian force was a formidable one, whatever its precise composition. At least a thousand Kiowas and Comanches made the afternoon assault on Carson's party,²⁸ again somewhat confined to the area around the ruins of the abandoned trading post. The warriors in this great Indian force brought their best and freshest mounts. The Indian force at Adobe Walls was probably the largest to ever face the U.S. army West of the Mississippi, other than the Sioux at Little Bighorn. They fought shrewdly. The majority of the Indian combatants formed what amounted to light cavalry, sporting their finest and most brilliant war dress. They made frequent charges across the front of the federal skirmish line – left to right, then right to left. They took cover behind the bodies of their mounts, firing under their necks and over their backs. Like the U.S. dismounted cavalry, the Indians deployed skirmishers. These skirmishers laid flat to the ground hidden amongst the high clumps of grass, taking shots at the U.S. troops. The idea behind this deployment may have been for the mounted warriors to inflict what damage they could while they drew fire and helped to expose the location of hidden U.S. skirmishers. This tactic would have improved the Indian skirmishers' targeting and firing.²⁹

The Plains Indian force had learned quickly from its initial experience with Pettis' mountain howitzers. When the warriors renewed combat after the initial engagement, they refrained from operating in masses that would be vulnerable to artillery fire. In this

²⁸Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941 calls the strength of the afternoon assault "at least a thousand." Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 29, sets the number at as many as 3,000. I defer to Carson's experience vs. Pettis's somewhat distant memory. It is also possible that Carson's number represents the initial assault after the half-hour lull (which is clearly what Carson is referring to), and Pettis's refers to the cumulative total of Indian warriors who had arrived from the lower villages by the end of the day. Dr. Courtright believed there to have been 1,200 to 1,400 warriors in the fight just before the hiatus.

²⁹Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 28; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864 OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, p. 941.

phase of the conflict, Carson and Pettis used the howitzers only intermittently.³⁰ While this adjustment in Indian tactics certainly reduced the effectiveness of the U.S. artillery, it also prevented the Kiowas and Comanches from massing for charges likely to have overwhelmed the much smaller federal force.

The Plains Indians at Adobe Walls had another fascinating tactical trick up their collective sleeves. One of their number had at some point captured and learned to play an army bugle. Pettis reports that about a quarter of a mile distant from the main body of federal troops, an Indian stood on a small hill. Throughout the battle he would periodically sound his bugle. The bugler may well have been Satanta himself. He was known to have a bugle he sounded on stately occasions. Remarkably, the bugler consistently issued calls countermanding the signals being used to command the U.S. dismounted cavalry skirmish line. When the U.S. bugler signaled advance, the Indian bugler called retreat, and vice versa. Pettis seems to suggest that the Indian bugler was issuing commands to his own side. The Indian bugle signals could also have been an attempt to confuse U.S. forces. In order to direct his own troops or confuse his enemies, the Kiowa musician needed more than just possession of an army bugle. He must have known the meanings of the signals as well. The Indian bugler played his calls so crisply and accurately that Carson believed there must have been a white man blowing the horn in the enemy camp. There is no evidence to suggest any non-Indian participation on the side of the Comanches and Kiowas. Whatever the purpose of the Indian bugler, he added

³⁰Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 26-27.

a fascinating element to the battle – one that intrigued many on Carson’s side of the fighting that day.³¹

As Indian warriors fell injured or killed during the course of the battle, their comrades swept in to remove all casualties from the field to prevent them from falling into enemy hands. On one occasion, a federal artillery shell scored a direct hit on an Indian pony, killing the horse and throwing its rider. As the dazed Indian lay helplessly on the ground, two of his brothers in arms galloped their mounts to his aid. They split paths around the downed man. Each of the riders draped himself over the back of his horse and grabbed an arm of the injured man as they sped past, dragging him to safety amidst a flurry of army rifle rounds. Pettis observed the execution of this Plains warrior custom several times throughout the afternoon.³²

The afternoon wore on and Carson’s party fended off the passing assaults of his Indian enemies. It became apparent to both sides that the situation would not be resolved with a sudden, dramatic, aggressive assault. Carson’s artillery prevented the Plains warriors from mounting an overwhelming charge, and Carson lacked the manpower to capture or decisively defeat the massive Indian force he had encountered. The Kiowa/Comanche warriors did not completely abandon the present fight, but took positions just out of gun range and seemed content with the possibility of bottling Carson’s command in its present position around the ruins.³³

Plains tribes did not normally practice siege warfare, and Carson soon ascertained their aims. Two to three miles distant, he saw lines of noncombatants flowing past

³¹Pettis, *Kit Carson’s Fight*, 28-29; Mooney, *Calendar History*, 317.

³²Pettis, *Kit Carson’s Fight*, 27; see also George A. Custer, *My Life on the Plains*, (1874; reprint, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977).

³³Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941.

toward the abandoned village, intent on retrieving the lodges, livestock, and other possessions they had left behind. He knew immediately his mission required at least an attempt at preventing these Kiowas and Comanches, whom he was charged with severely punishing, from recovering all the goods and stock they began the day with. Carson may have also been concerned for his own supply train. The Indians may not have known of its existence, but it would have presented a ripe plundering opportunity protected only by the small band of infantry and dismounted cavalry left with Lieutenant Colonel Abreu. Such a loss of both manpower and supplies would cripple U.S. hopes of near-term survival, let alone a safe return to New Mexico. Abreu did report seeing Indians periodically throughout the day, though they never threatened the train.³⁴

Several junior officers lobbied Carson to make a charge at the next downstream village – a larger settlement of about 350 lodges – that was visible not far off.³⁵ Carson found himself in a difficult position. Duty called him onward to destroy the entire complex of Indian villages. His present position offered the benefits of a safe place to store his horses, and a small hill useful to his artillery, but he could not stay there indefinitely. He was separated from his supply train, and if the Indians were allowed to escape with all of their possessions the entire mission would have been for naught. He could race the Indians back to the smaller, upper village, confiscate the stock held there, and destroy what possessions he could. Then again, this course of action would require abandoning his defensive positions.

³⁴Ibid; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 29-30.

³⁵Ibid, 30-31.

Always a man of decision, Carson lost no time and set out to destroy the upper Kiowa village before its inhabitants could return to salvage the lodges and contents. At about half past three, he ordered the group into a column of fours, with one man in each set of four leading that element's horses. He dismounted Fritz and Company B of the First California Cavalry and sent them into a skirmish line designed to protect his right flank. He ordered Company M, First California Cavalry and a part of Company M, First New Mexico Cavalry, with Captains Gilbert T. Witham and Charles Deus respectively, into a similar formation on his left. Captain Joseph Berney and Lieutenant Sullivan Heath led Company D, First New Mexico Cavalry and a detachment of Company K, First California Cavalry into position as rear guard just behind Pettis and the howitzers who brought up the rear of the column. This arrangement left a sort of hollow square in the center which Dr. Courtright used to transport the wounded.³⁶

The Kiowa and Comanche warriors read Carson's intent and mounted their most heroic effort of the day in an attempt to buy time for their fellow villagers to save their supplies. Plains warriors charged the federal rear with an even greater fury. Pettis's guns were limbered, making it more time consuming to fire them. The burden of defending the rear of the column fell to Berney's skirmish line. The dismounted cavalry proved up to the challenge. The pressure was great enough for Carson to later report, "For some time I had serious doubts for the safety of my rear, but the coolness with which they were received by Captain Berney's command, and the steady and constant fire poured into them, caused them to retire upon every occasion with great slaughter."³⁷ Rearguard

³⁶Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 940-941; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 8, 30-31; Courtright, *Expedition Against the Indians*, 20.

³⁷Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941.

skirmish tactics covering a withdrawal required great discipline. Troops had to fire in a pattern that allowed them to alternate falling back and covering the retreat of their fellow troopers. If anyone panicked and turned his back to the oncoming Indian raiders, the entire defense line would collapse and a wholesale slaughter would ensue. Some modern archaeologists believe a similar breakdown plagued some of the 7th Cavalry at Little Bighorn, contributing to the disaster there.³⁸

Carson's cavalry troopers indeed made the fighting hot for the Kiowas. While leading a Kiowa charge, the old chief Dohasan himself had a horse shot from under him. Stumbling Bear, also a prominent leader, led many of the charges designed to divert the army's attention and prevent them from returning to destroy his village. He wore his daughter's shawl that day for good luck. Its power worked. Stumbling Bear survived the day unscathed. The shawl, however, was riddled with holes from the fight.³⁹

This intense fighting did not adequately impede the U.S. advance on the upper village, so the Plains warriors literally turned up the heat on Carson's command. The brush, high dry grass, and weeds did slow the column's advance somewhat. The Indians saw the slower progress of the troops amidst this vast fuel supply and started a prairie fire. A brisk east wind (wind is certainly not uncommon in the panhandle) fanned the flames toward Carson's rear, sending his skirmishers and the tail end of his column on a double-quick march toward the front in accordion fashion.⁴⁰

³⁸Fox, *Archaeology, History, and Custer's Last Battle*, 40-52. Although Custer's troops may have been familiar with an updated set of tactics developed by Emory Upton and published in 1874, the basic principles of covering and the discipline required to avoid panic driven breakdowns would be similar.

³⁹Nye, *Carbine & Lance*, 37.

⁴⁰Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 31.

The prairie fire put Carson in a difficult position. He could not outrun the flames through the thick vegetation on the valley floor and bring out all the men, horses, and howitzers. To clear the path for his troops and remove the fuel for the Indians' fire, Carson ordered the prairie in front of his line fired. This tactic, a counter-fire, allowed the command to move forward more quickly. As soon as Carson could, he steered his column onto the caprock overlooking the Canadian Valley. This repositioning solved the immediate problem. The caprock grass was too short to provide enough fuel to make the fire dangerous and too short to obstruct forward progress.⁴¹

Moving to higher ground eliminated the threat from the fire itself, but the Kiowa and Comanche warriors continued to exploit their fire's effects. Mounted warriors zoomed in behind the thin curtain of the advancing prairie fire. Under the cover of the smoke, they could get close enough to fire a shot without detection and then fade back to safety. On one occasion, a big gust of wind blew back the smoke exposing a Comanche warrior who had approached the skirmishers on the left flank, about six or seven yards from one another. A cavalryman – Juan Buleras, the same young man who had earlier survived the rattlesnake bite – and the Comanche simultaneously raised and fired their weapons. The Indian missed, and the young Hispanic volunteer shot him off his horse. Later that evening, the young man sold the Comanche scalp, reportedly the only scalp taken by the U.S. force that day, to the Ute auxiliaries.⁴²

Still not resigned to losing their upper village, the Kiowa warriors and their Comanche allies attempted to use the cover of the fire to mount charges. Whenever

⁴¹Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941; Courtright, *An Expedition Against the Indians*, 21.

⁴²Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 32-33.

Carson noticed groups massing to make a charge, he ordered artillery fire in that direction. Pettis's artillery successfully thwarted any attempts to mount a massed assault on the rear of the column. His howitzers fired only a few rounds during the return march toward the upper village. The shells no doubt had a significant psychological effect. A few rounds were all that was necessary to scatter massing warriors.⁴³

When Carson's column got within about five hundred yards of the upper village, the warriors made one last attempt to draw his command away from it, "acting with more daring and bravery" than he had ever witnessed. He immediately ordered his howitzers into position and called for Pettis to drop shells, likely including spherical case shot into the charging Indians. These antipersonnel rounds ended the charge, and Carson turned his attention to the village.⁴⁴

Kiowas scurried throughout the village, desperately trying to salvage as much as they could. Pettis dropped two more shells into the village. This tactic, along with a cooperating charge, drove the remaining occupants to its southern edge. The retreating army column entered the upper Kiowa village just before sundown. Approximately half the command was detailed to destroy the lodges, while the other half went to work clearing the remainder of the village and taking up defensive positions. Not all of the Natives were content to let the soldiers burn the village, even after the means to prevent the destruction had been expended. As George Bent remembered it, Old Iron Shirt refused to leave his lodge, and was burned with it.⁴⁵

⁴³Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 33.

⁴⁴Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941-942; Lynn, *Kit Carson and the First Battle of Adobe Walls*, 71.

⁴⁵Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 33; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941; George Bent, quoted in Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, 747. Bent claims Iron Shirt was head chief of the Plains Apaches, but also mistakenly understood the village Carson destroyed to have been Apache. Several Indians from

Carson sent Pettis atop a twenty-foot sand hill with his howitzers to aid in the defense of the column's new position in the village. Apparently, the sand hill was fairly steep and not completely secure. The location required an awkward firing and reloading procedure. According to Pettis, the sand hill

served as earthworks for the detachment. The pieces were loaded at the foot of the hill, and at the command of By hand, to the front they were pushed to the top, when the gunner would aim the piece, and at the command ready number four would insert the friction primer, and lying on his stomach, with no part of this body exposed, would wait for the command to fire. The piece on being fired would recoil, sometimes tumbling over and over and at others coming down fairly on the wheels to the bottom of the hill, when the other piece, having been loaded meanwhile, would be moved to the top and fired in its turn.⁴⁶

Skirmishers drove about three dozen remaining Kiowas and Comanches steadily toward the southern limit of the village, fighting "lodge to lodge" in what amounted to nineteenth-century urban warfare tactics. As the sun sank in the west, these last defenders leapt on their mounts and dashed off toward the river. Pettis dropped one more twelve-pound shell into the receding party for good measure, and the long day's fight finally drew to a close.⁴⁷

The Kiowa warriors and villagers succeeded in salvaging some of their possessions from the captured upper village. They regained all their livestock, except those animals that had been "traded" by the Utes and Jicarillas on the inbound leg of the day's journey. They also recovered the women and children who had fled to the breaks in the caprock near the village, as well as a few white captives who had been taken to that place.⁴⁸

this era were known by the name Iron Shirt.

⁴⁶Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 33-34.

⁴⁷Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941-942; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 35-36.

⁴⁸Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 21, 30.

That being said, the material loss suffered by the Kiowa residents of the upper village must have been devastating in the winter season. Carson's command fired all the 150 or 176 finely constructed lodges – depending on whether one believes Carson's report or Pettis's memoir. They destroyed large stores that would have been very helpful to Indians trying to survive a harsh winter on the plains: dried meat, berries, buffalo robes, powder, cooking utensils, and other household items. Soldiers confiscated several finely dressed buffalo robes for their own use. These in particular must have made excellent prizes. The robes were especially warm and took innumerable man hours to manufacture and cure.⁴⁹

Carson's soldiers also discovered plenty of items confirming that they had indeed “punished” the intended party. They burned a buggy and a spring wagon, along with several sets of harnesses, which after one of the summer raids had come into the possession of Dohasan. They also found numerous items of women's and children's clothing, several photographs, and a cavalry sergeant's hat with accompanying belts and saber that had belonged to a member of the Colorado Volunteers.⁵⁰ One witness reported finding five hundred dollars in cash among the items apparently captured in previous raids. There may have been as many as seven women and several children held captive in the village the day the army struck. They were among the women and children who were shuffled off to the caprock breaks just as the soldiers first arrived at the upper village.⁵¹

⁴⁹Ibid, 34, 36; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 941-942.

⁵⁰Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 34; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 942.

⁵¹Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 43; Costello, *Life of Captain Deus*, 26.

Carson's men and their horses were exhausted after a long day. The battle had been far more grueling than anyone had expected. After the destruction of the lodges and remaining contents was complete, however, Carson ordered his men back into column formation. He did not want to risk ending the day with a divided force. Lightly wounded troopers mounted their horses and rode back to the west. Carson used his two gun carriages and the two accompanying ammunition carts to transport the more seriously injured. Cautiously, the column made its way back to the supply wagons. After a three hour ride from the upper Kiowa village, Carson's men saw the faint glow of campfires in the distance. The infantry and the wagon train they had guarded inched forward as ordered throughout the day. They indeed heard the sounds of the battle – at least the howitzer shots – and knew there was a fight. They never reached the battlefield, but they did shorten Carson's return journey.⁵²

Once in camp, most of the cavalymen and soldiers who had manned the small cannons laid down and went to sleep. After thirty hours on the move, most of which was spent fighting, the need for sleep outweighed the need for sustenance. Carson posted a double guard, as Lieutenant Colonel Abreu had informed him that Indians had been present on the hills around the wagon train all the past day. The men unsaddled the horses or unhitched them from the carts, and set them out on pickets. In spite of eating nothing all day other than the pork and hardtack, most of the men did not think of eating before collapsing into their bedrolls.⁵³

⁵²Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 36-37.

⁵³Ibid, 37-38.

Carson anticipated that if the enemy planned to attack his camp, they would do so just before dawn. He ordered reveille well before first light and posted his troops to receive an attack. It never came. The entire party – cavalry, artillery, Utes, Jicarillas and all – devoured a massive prairie breakfast, which depleted their food stores to the point that they had to send out hunters to restock the commissary wagons. The men gorged on wild turkey and antelope until it was gone.⁵⁴

On November 26, Carson moved his force only about five hundred yards to procure better grass for the animals. With his men and horses exhausted, Carson chose to rest a day and consider his options. For most of that day of rest, the Kiowas and Comanches were present on a hill about two miles distant. Indians from Carson's party initiated the day's only excitement, a nineteenth-century game of chicken. Two of the Indian auxiliaries mounted their horses and set out at a walk toward the distant Comanches. Two Comanches responded in kind. A dozen more of the auxiliaries then joined the first two. Again the Comanches followed suit. This game of brinksmanship continued until as many as two hundred Indians seemed headed for a meeting on the prairie. Once within about two hundred yards, someone fired a shot. Several others followed, but the Comanches wheeled and dashed off in short order, and no other fighting ensued.⁵⁵

While Carson carefully weighed his options, most of his officers wanted to attack again and attempt to destroy the larger villages. The Utes and Jicarillas favored returning to Fort Union. The auxiliaries were right, and Carson sided with them. Without a

⁵⁴Ibid, 39.

⁵⁵Ibid, 40; Courtright, *Expedition against the Indians*, 26.

stronger, better-equipped force and without fresh horses, the column could accomplish nothing, except to jeopardize its survival, which had been tenuous on the twenty-fifth. In his report, Carson said he could no longer surprise the Indians, and his horses were in no condition to pursue them and their livestock. The aggressiveness and size of the Comanche-Kiowa force also factored into his decision. Furthermore, by the end of the afternoon on the day of the fighting, the older muzzle loaders issued to the New Mexico Volunteers had become so dirty, they were practically useless.⁵⁶

Carson and his column began a slow march back toward Fort Bascom. Initially they moved cautiously, based mostly on Carson's understanding that they had been fortunate to have escaped such a large party of plains warriors with no worse losses than they sustained. As they moved farther west, it became apparent that they were no longer in danger of further Kiowa and Comanche retaliation. Carson sent his initial report back to headquarters from a camp he called Rita Blanco on December 4. While Carson clearly meant "Rita Blanca Creek," there is some doubt as to where he actually camped when he made his report. Nearly all of the small creeks and tributaries emptying into the Canadian River in the Texas Panhandle have changed names over the years. Sometimes nineteenth-century maps even had the then-current name wrong. Carson may have been at what was then called Rita Blanca Creek, but archaeological evidence suggests that he probably did not camp multiple days and file a report from the creek now known by that name. In any case, the assault party had accomplished all it could, and had arrived at a place where even the cagey old frontiersman felt safe. Carson nursed his animals along,

⁵⁶Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 942; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 41; Courtright, *Expedition against the Indians*, 23.

making an easy trip home. The only excitement seems to have been the nightly scalp dances by the auxiliaries, which had replaced the nightly war dances from the outbound leg. From there, the party marched on another six days and reached Fort Bascom on December 10.⁵⁷

Carson's column lost two soldiers and one Ute killed. Ten soldiers were wounded, as were five Utes. Some of the wounded soldiers later died. Kiowa and Comanche losses are more difficult to ascertain. Carson estimated about sixty killed and wounded. Pettis claims to have met a Comanchero trader three years later who was in the villages at the time of the attack. This Comanchero informant allegedly told him Indian losses were 100 killed and between 100 and 150 wounded. In later interviews, Kiowa participants claimed a loss of just five, although this number may have been just from the Kiowa upper village. It seems most likely that the true number of Plains Indian casualties lies somewhere between the extreme estimates. Army reports often overestimated Indian casualties, and Indian interviewees habitually understated their own.⁵⁸

In addition to the human death toll, the Kiowas suffered a great material loss when the cavalry located and destroyed their upper village. That being said, the Kiowas and Comanches surely gave Carson's party a rude awakening. In spite of what he said in his initial reports about teaching the Indians a severe lesson, Carson clearly stated in later accounts that he felt quite fortunate that he and his command marched out of the

⁵⁷Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 942; Lynn, *Kit Carson and the First Battle of Adobe Walls*, 41; Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 39.

⁵⁸Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 38, 43; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 942; Utley, "Kit Carson and the Adobe Walls Campaign," 74-75.

Canadian Valley alive. Were it not for the mountain howitzers, there may not have been a white man left to tell the tale.⁵⁹

⁵⁹Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 44; Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 942.

10. The Aftermath

“I Have Taught These Indians a Severe Lesson”

In his initial report, Colonel Carson wrote to General Carleton commending his troops for their coolness in combat. He certainly conveyed that his force had successfully prosecuted the mission as he understood it. He wrote, “I flatter myself that I have taught these Indians a severe lesson, and hereafter they will be more cautious about how they engage a force of civilized troops.”¹

Carleton had only Carson’s report from which to assess the Canadian valley operation. He had no reason to believe Carson misrepresented his results. He fully understood that a large force of Kiowas and Comanches remained at large on the Canadian and that Carson’s party had only managed to destroy the upper village. Carson’s report indicated his failure to capture the large quantity of Indian livestock held near the villages. Carson made it clear to Carleton that more work remained to be done. None of this dampened Carleton’s praise of Carson and the expedition. He expressed “thanks for the handsome manner in which you all met so formidable an enemy and defeated him This brilliant affair adds another green leaf to the laurel wreath which you have so nobly won in the service of your country.”²

Carson wanted to embark on another, larger expedition as soon as his livestock recovered. He estimated that time at about six weeks. He believed that if he had a force of about a thousand troops (he made no mention of auxiliaries), four more guns, and forage and supplies to camp near Adobe Walls for four months, he could completely

¹Carson to Cutler, 4 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, pp. 942.

²Ibid; Carson to Carleton, 16 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 943; Carleton to Carson, 15 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 944.

bring the Comanches and Kiowas to U.S. terms. Carson knew that he had not decisively defeated the Indians; otherwise another such campaign would not have been necessary. He also learned after the campaign that Indians held several white captives in the villages. Carson always felt honor-bound to liberate captives; so this knowledge likely influenced his desire to lead a follow-up mission.³

Carleton understood that he had not solved the problem of potential raiding on the Santa Fe Trail, but his department lacked the resources to undertake the operation Carson proposed. As he did the previous summer, Carleton requested aid from the Department of the Missouri. He suggested that Major General Curtis strengthen his garrisons at Forts Atkinson and Larned and place a semipermanent camp in the Palo Duro area. The latter would function as a base from which troops could readily punish hostiles the following summer when traffic on the trail – and the corresponding raids – increased. Carleton believed that he could protect the trail from his department to the Arkansas Crossing but that he could not guard Bosque Redondo, protect the Santa Fe Trail, and prosecute campaigns against hostile Indians with the manpower at his disposal.⁴

Major General Grenville M. Dodge succeeded Curtis as departmental commander after the Atlanta campaign in the East. Upon receiving Carleton's request, he expressed his desire to cooperate with Carleton to protect the Santa Fe Trail. He took immediate action to bolster his posts along the route. The two attempted to set up a system by which Carleton's command escorted trains between Forts Union and Larned, and Dodge's command escorted travelers between Larned and Council Grove (about twenty-five miles

³Carson to Carleton, 16 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 943.

⁴Carleton to Curtis, 24 January 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 1, pp. 635-636.

south of present Manhattan, Kansas). Trains embarked twice a month, and deviations from these sanctioned, escorted parties were prohibited. Dodge initiated no direct action against the Kiowas or Comanches by sending an expedition to the Palo Duro, however.⁵

General Carleton initially found reason to hope his punitive mission had pressured the Comanches to sue for peace. A Comanche named “Sheer-ke-na-kwaugh” visited Fort Bascom in mid-January claiming to be the head chief of the Comanches. The commander at Bascom, Major Bergmann, believed that he had honest intentions. The visiting Comanche promised peace and even offered to provide any information he could attain about planned Kiowa and Kiowa-Apache raids. Bergmann told him that only Carleton could make that peace and suggested that he wait at Bascom until Carleton arrived. Sheer-ke-na-kwaugh would not wait but promised to return at the “last quarter of the moon.” Carleton was quite pleased at the prospect but still skeptical. He made plans to attend the meeting at Bascom and asked Carson to accompany him. Relations with the Comanches appeared headed in the right direction, apparently as a direct result of the Adobe Walls campaign.⁶

“Our Troops Were Badly Whipped”

Not everyone offered such a sanguine evaluation of Carson’s campaign. A string of articles and letters criticizing the affair appeared in the *Santa Fe New Mexican*. Although the writers made every attempt to avoid criticism of Carson and the expedition’s participants, they published reports that milked every possible negative connotation from available battle reports and laid the blame squarely upon General

⁵Dodge to Carleton, 23 March 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 1, p. 1246; Dodge to Ford, 20 March 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 1, p. 1224; Ford to Tappan, 17 April 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 114.

⁶Bergmann to Carleton, 25 January 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 1, pp. 611-612; Carleton to Carson, 30 January 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 1, p. 689.

Carleton. They cited several reasonable arguments in calling the affair a defeat: failure of Carson's command to make off with any livestock, the fact that the Indians were left in possession of the field of battle, and lack of evidence to support federal estimates of Kiowa and Comanche casualties. Their overall assessment was "that our troops were badly whipped" and that the whole operation had been ill-advised and completely unnecessary in the first place.⁷

The newspaper business in Santa Fe was a highly politicized enterprise during Carleton's tenure as departmental commander. Two competing Santa Fe papers, the *New Mexican* and the *Gazette*, traded barbs on just about every issue. The *Gazette* supported Carleton and published favorable accounts of his doings at Bosque Redondo, of the Adobe Walls campaign, and of just about everything else. The *New Mexican* portrayed Carleton as something just short of Attila the Hun. Carleton could do nothing right in the *New Mexican*, and the *New Mexican* consistently castigated the *Gazette* for being Carleton's mouthpiece. The *New Mexican* referred to the *Gazette* as "the 'Carletonian Gazette,'" "the translator for Head Quarters," and "the Carletonian." Neither the *New Mexican* nor the *Gazette* bothered with publishing sober assessments. The latter half of the *Gazette's* motto says everything: "Independent in all Things, *Neutral in Nothing*."⁸

Political ambitions clouded credibility in this argument over whether the campaign was a "victory," successful, or necessary. For all the reasons stated in the first chapter, Michael Steck and his allies wanted the campaign perceived as a failure. They pointed out the fact that Carleton had exerted power over Indian affairs to shut down the

⁷Santa Fe *New Mexican*, 24 February; 24 March; 7, 28 April 1865.

⁸Santa Fe *New Mexican*, 28 October; 18 November; 16 December 1864; Santa Fe *Gazette*, 29 October-17 December 1864. Emphasis added.

lucrative Comanchero trade by disallowing all passes issued by Superintendent Steck. He did this under the guise of a war against the Comanches. Subsequently, Carleton allowed some traders to pass but only with his personal endorsement. The anti-Carleton party claimed that he was using his military authority to create a trading monopoly for his favorites and associates. They sought to portray the Carson campaign as just another Carleton power grab at best. At worst, it was an impending disaster to residents of the territory's eastern frontier, who might face reprisals from angry Comanches and Kiowas.⁹

Carleton and his allies needed to show that the campaign had been a success in order to retain credibility, and garner support for the candidate for territorial governor endorsed by Carleton and his allies at the *Gazette*. Further, Carleton remained under heavy criticism throughout his tenure as departmental commander, and could use public support wherever and however he could get it. The pro-Carleton party was more than willing to point to the Sheer-kee-na-kwaugh visit as evidence that the Adobe Walls campaign had made the Indians “feel the white man’s power” and had pressured them into accepting peace on terms favorable to the United States.¹⁰

The Comanche Peace

Unfortunately, the meeting between Carleton, Carson, and Sheer-kee-na-kwaugh never materialized. The man who purported to be “head chief” of the Comanches disappeared from both the Department of New Mexico and the historical record. This brought great delight to Carleton’s opponents – not that they wanted to face Comanche

⁹Santa Fe *New Mexican* 24, 31 March 1865; General Orders No. 2, 31 January 1865.

¹⁰Santa Fe *Gazette* 4 February 1865.

reprisals, but as evidence of Carleton's failure and incompetence. "Where is Sheer-kee-na-kwaugh and his peace makers?" taunted the *New Mexican*.¹¹

Sheer-kee-na-kwaugh's disappearance foreshadowed approaching troubles. One of the traders Carleton allowed onto the plains in the spring of 1865 was Arthur Morrison, who had been an aide to Carleton during his time in the army. Comanches accosted Morrison's Nuevo Mexicano scouts, stealing their saddles and firearms. Morrison encountered another Nuevo Mexicano trading party that had been endorsed by Carleton. Comanches had stolen all their trading goods and threatened them with death, should they return. Morrison considered himself lucky not to have lost his trading stake and fled the plains.¹²

Morrison brought bad news for Union forces. The Comanches and Kiowas had joined forces with a dozen more tribes across the Southern Plains and Indian Territory in an alliance with the Confederates. They said the Confederates promised them food, clothing, and ammunition in return for their cooperation in a general strike against New Mexico. Nuevo Mexicanos, who had been safe on the plains for decades due to their favorable trade relationship, were now also in danger when attempting to trade on the Llano Estacado. A large portion of Carson's force at Adobe Walls had been Hispanic. The Kiowas and Comanches recognized this and now considered their former trade partners enemies.¹³

¹¹*New Mexican* (Santa Fe). 28 April 1865.

¹²Kenner, *The Comanchero Frontier*, 152-153; Dodge to Pope, 13 June 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 871-872.

¹³Leavenworth to Ford, 30 May 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt.2, p. 687-688; Adair to Veatch, 20 July 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 1102-1103; Kenner, *The Comanchero Frontier*, 153-4. It seems unlikely that the Confederacy could have delivered so much at this point in its existence. The thrust seems to have been aimed more at keeping peace with Comanches and Kiowas on the Texas frontier. See also General E. Kirby Smith to Albert Pike, 8 April 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 1266-1269; Brigadier General

May of 1865 was a bad time to make deals with Confederates. Bereft of aid from the Confederates and now estranged from their former New Mexico allies, the Kiowas and Comanches signed the Little Arkansas Treaty in October 1865. This treaty, like most others, proved ineffective within a year. The U.S. reached another agreement in 1867, the Medicine Lodge Treaty. It, too, brought only a temporary peace. In the long run, only military conquest of the Comanches and Kiowas in the Red River War of 1874 and 1875 finally brought peace to Comanchería's neighbors.¹⁴

Michael Steck

Although the Adobe Walls campaign may not have been militarily decisive, Carleton thought that he might walk away from the affair with a different kind of victory. He believed he had the necessary evidence to rid himself and the territory of Superintendent Steck, who ardently opposed almost every initiative Carleton undertook involving Indians. The two had long standing feuds over Carleton's administration of martial law in the territory in general, the Bosque Redondo affair, Carleton's launching of the Adobe Walls campaign, and his use of Ute and Jicarilla auxiliaries without consulting Steck, to name a few.¹⁵

Steck was not alone in opposing Carleton's administration of martial law. Steck, however, held a high enough position occasionally to stand in Carleton's way. Once Carleton knew he would prosecute a campaign on the plains in 1864, he attempted to shut down the Comanchero trade to prevent the Kiowas and Comanches from receiving advance notification of Carson's arrival. He also, of course, wanted to prevent

Douglas Cooper to Brigadier General J. W. Throckmorton, 16 May 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 1309.

¹⁴Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 306-308; Greene, *One Hundred Summers*, 6; Kenner, *The Comanchero Frontier*, 154.

¹⁵Refer back to "Situation in New Mexico" chapter for a discussion of the Carleton-Steck feud.

Comancheros from supplying the Indians with ammunition and supplies they would later use against his force. Carleton asked Governor Connelly to cease granting trade permits and ordered his detachment at Fort Bascom to halt any trading parties bound for Comanchería. Connelly agreed to the restriction.¹⁶

Steck disregarded Carleton's request and Connelly's policy. He continued to issue the passes. The Fort Bascom command was ineffective in stopping the traders but did confiscate passes from several traders on their return trip. Steck had signed the passes after Carleton's decision to prosecute the campaign. Carleton and Carson were livid. They were certain that their men had been killed and wounded by ammunition Comancheros had provided the Comanches in the days just prior to the assault. They directed the force of their anger not at the traders but at Michael Steck – understandably so, considering the personal history between the two, and the signatures on the passes.¹⁷

Carleton figured that he finally had the evidence he needed to get rid of Steck once and for all. He wrote a letter to the adjutant general of the army, Brigadier General Lorenzo Thomas, which included several supporting documents. His letter lamented the difficulty of prosecuting hostile Indians while other federal agencies appeared to be aiding and abetting them. Carleton wrote:

The military is doing its best to protect the people and the lines of communication from the hostile Indians; but when a high civil functionary gives passports to men to carry on a nefarious traffic, when he knows in reason that those men will give information of the movements of the troops; and when he sits down and deliberately writes to the Governor that

¹⁶Kenner, *The Comanchero Frontier*, 148; Carleton to Brigadier General Lorenzo Thomas, 29 January 1865, 44, vol. 11, LS, DNM, r. 3, M1072, RG 393.

¹⁷Carson to Carleton, 16 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 943; Bergmann to Carleton, 26 November 1864, B/642 LR, 1864, DNM, r. 22, M1120, RG 393, NA; Bergmann to Cutler, 4 December 1864, B/666, LR, 1864, DNM, r. 22, M1120, RG 393, NA.

he has not given such passports, you must know, General, that such conduct adds not a little, to say the least, to our many embarrassments.¹⁸

Carleton's efforts were ultimately successful. The commissioner of Indian affairs asked Steck to resign "for the good of the service" on March 18, 1865.¹⁹

Carleton Follows

The removal of Steck as superintendent of Indian affairs in New Mexico may have seemed like a great victory for General Carleton. However, he would have little time to gloat. Steck was only one of a sizable contingent of politicians in Santa Fe who despised Carleton and wanted him out. They resented Carleton's rigid enforcement of martial law and his seemingly arbitrary enforcement of his own edicts. They determined that most of Carleton's decisions had the aim of personal empire building.²⁰

Bosque Redondo fell squarely in the center of the debate. Steck's allies in Santa Fe vehemently opposed Bosque Redondo, but not because they saw it as some kind of inhumane experiment. They argued that it left the hated Navajos far too close to settled New Mexico. The costs of the operation were exorbitant and amounted to favors Carleton could use in building his personal empire. They additionally argued that such large government purchases drove the prices up on items they needed for daily existence. Carleton's expedition against the Comanches only added fuel to the fire. Some of his enemies believed the whole affair was just an excuse to build another Bosque Redondo and pilfer even more government funding to distribute among his "cronies."²¹

¹⁸Carleton to Thomas, 29 January 1865, 44, vol. 11, LS, DNM, r. 3, M1072, RG 393.

¹⁹Kenner, *The Comanchero Frontier*, 149; Commissioner to Steck, 18 Mar 1865, box 2, folder 2, Steck Papers, CSWR, UNM.

²⁰Santa Fe *New Mexican* 28 October; 18 November; 16 December 1864.

²¹Santa Fe *New Mexican* 16 December 1864.

On July 4, 1865, Carleton attempted to quell the anger against him in Santa Fe. He felt safe abolishing martial law now that the Civil War was over. In his rescission declaration, he concluded with a conciliatory passage apparently aimed at mending fences. The damage was done by now, however. Anti-Carleton forces in Santa Fe undertook a letter-writing campaign demanding an investigation into Bosque Redondo specifically and the Carleton regime generally.²²

Although no investigation followed, complaints consistently flowed back to Washington regarding Carleton's administration of military affairs in New Mexico. On October 6, 1866, the war department removed Carleton from command and reassigned him as a lieutenant colonel in the Fourth Cavalry, headquartered in San Antonio, Texas. Whether he was reassigned merely as part of the postwar army reorganization, the Doolittle Commissions findings on the Bosque Redondo affair, or consistent pressure from New Mexicans, is unclear.²³

One thing was certain. Carleton's career was effectively over. He was never again promoted, nor did he receive any other important assignment. He remained in San Antonio until pneumonia claimed his life on 7 January 1873.²⁴

Kit Carson's Last Fight

Kit Carson did not share the fate suffered by General Carleton or Superintendent Steck. It may seem strange that his last and largest Indian fight is largely forgotten. That may be in part because many perceive it as a defeat. Carson did not see the fight that

²²Hunt, *James H. Carleton*, 252; Gibson, *James H. Carleton*, 72.

²³Gibson, *James H. Carleton*, 72; Hunt, *Frontier Dragoon*, 344; Kane, "James H. Carleton," 141-142.

²⁴Gibson, *James H. Carleton*, 72, 75.

way. He knew that getting his men out of such a dangerous situation was victory enough.²⁵

Carson remained a devoted Carleton disciple as long as the latter remained in command in New Mexico. Carleton was delighted to know that his trusted field commander would remain in the service of the country throughout his tenure in the territory. Carleton allowed Carson a few months' respite at home – something Carson consistently longed for at this stage of his life. Shortly thereafter, Carleton called Carson back to duty as part of his cooperative endeavor with the Department of the Missouri to protect Santa Fe Trail traffic from Comanche and Kiowa retaliation. On May 20, 1865, Carson led a contingent to Cold Spring, at the extreme western edge of “no-man’s land.” There he set up camp on a high bluff overlooking a segment of the Cimarron Cut-Off and watched for trouble. There was none. Adobe Walls was indeed Kit Carson’s last fight.²⁶

General Carleton’s Adobe Walls campaign was militarily indecisive. It contributed to the demise of both Carleton and his principle political opponent Michael Steck. Many consider the battle a loss that might damage the record of Carson, an otherwise great frontiersman. These factors may be reasons why the 1864 Adobe Walls campaign has been largely forgotten.

The rancorous New Mexico politics that surrounded Carleton and the Adobe Walls campaign obstructed what would have been a difficult mission under the best of circumstances. As it turned out, the near term results of the campaign not only killed the

²⁵Dunlay, *Kit Carson & the Indians*, 339.

²⁶Dunlay, *Kit Carson & the Indians*, 339; Carleton to Carson, 4 May 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 317-318; Carleton to Carson, 6 May 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 318; Spec Orders No. 15, 7 May 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 344; Carleton to Carson, 8 May 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 360; Carson to Carleton, 19 June 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, pp. 341-342.

careers of two prominent leaders, but did not yield decisive results. But decisive results are not the only significant events in history. There were other factors contributing to the battle's importance.

11. Conclusion

The Forgotten Campaign

Die hard aficionados of Western history may have heard of Adobe Walls. If so, they probably remember the 1874 battle between the hide hunters and Comanches featuring Bat Masterson, Quanah Parker, and Billy Dixon's famous shot. The Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum – one of the finest regional museums in the country and the most prolific historical interpreter in the area – does not even differentiate between the 1864 and 1874 battles in its archive. If it has a document referring to Adobe Walls, it assumes that material pertains to the hide hunters' fight.

How could the 1874 Adobe Walls Fight, a relatively minor skirmish, dwarf Kit Carson's campaign in regional memory? Perhaps an explanation can be found in contemporary context. The 1864 campaign took place in the midst of the Civil War. It was certainly not the largest, best known, or even most important battle in 1864 – a year during which the Atlanta campaign, Cold Harbor, and Petersburg were fought.

Maybe Adobe Walls fails to live up to the American frontier myth. From our twenty-first-century perspective, it is difficult to look positively at a cavalry force riding in to assault Indian villages. We see villages as the peaceful residences of families – which they no doubt often were. But they were also the only place the army could find the warriors conducting the damaging raids, and almost certainly the only places around which those raiding Indians could be forced into a fight or captured. Army leaders believed Indians had to be fought where they could be found, and that was during the

winter in villages. Regardless of the absence of alternatives for prosecuting Plains Indians, the story is not so well received in America today.

Most likely, historians neglect the 1864 Adobe Walls campaign because they do not know what to do with the fight. The campaign was indecisive. Nineteenth-century American Indian War battles and campaigns almost always were inconclusive, primarily due to the nature of the fighting and Indian tactics. Like Major Ruff's fruitless scout in 1860, or Kirby Smith's hunt for Sanico, campaigns against the Plains tribes so often netted the army only frustration and wasted energy.¹ When the American military achieved success on the plains, it came through persistence and destruction rather than a climactic large-scale battle.² When Indian Wars battles were decisive, the decision often favored Indians as at Pine Creek (1858) and Little Bighorn (1876) since they seldom fought toe-to-toe without some significant advantage.³

Many historians – and Americans in general – prefer to make definitive statements about historical events. We call battles either victories or defeats and campaigns success or failures. Most interpreters of Adobe Walls either speak of success or failure in guarded, cautious terms, or call the mission an outright military defeat.⁴ Decisive, watershed moments in history such as Gettysburg, Waterloo, or the use of the first atomic bomb at Hiroshima make for sharper studies, and provide far easier subjects on which we can definitively comment.

¹Parks, *General Edmund Kirby Smith*, 89-90; Ruff to Maury, 30 July 1860, R/21 LR, 1860, DNM, r. 12, M1120, RG 393, NA.

²Dunlay, *Kit Carson & the Indians*, 339.

³Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 257.

⁴Rathjen, *The Texas Panhandle Frontier*, 80; Utley, *Kit Carson and the Adobe Walls Campaign*, 4; Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, 299; Kenner, *The Comanchero Frontier*, 148-150; Dunlay, *Kit Carson & the Indians*, 334-337; Nye, *Carbine & Lance*, 37; Nye, *Bad Medicine & Good*, xv; Sabin, *Kit Carson Days*, 746-748; Mayhall, *The Kiowas*, 232; Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 306.

Was the 1864 Adobe Walls Campaign a Success or a Failure?

In many ways, the Battle of Adobe Walls feels like a U.S. failure. The classic measurement of military success – possession of the field of battle – points to a Kiowa and Comanche victory. Though that relic of more conventional warfare could not accurately measure the success of a battle with Indians for the reasons stated previously, many contemporaries viewed the battle as a defeat on those grounds. At the time, Carson's officers seem to have been of the same opinion. They argued in favor of continuing the fight in spite of Carson's experience and their obvious numerical disadvantage.⁵

Carson's later admission that if not for some adept artillery fire, "few would have been left to tell the tale," also suggests failure. Such scrapes do not occur in decisive victories. Many contemporaries pointed to Carson's failure to retain and confiscate captured Indian livestock as evidence of failure. Carson clearly regretted missing the opportunity to liberate several white captives in the villages at the time of his attack. Despite General Carleton's best efforts, the Mescalero Apaches and Navajos at Bosque Redondo could not be convinced to join the expedition.⁶

If Carleton intended the punitive aspect of the mission to prevent future raiding along the Santa Fe Trail, that seems to have failed as well. Sporadic raiding continued throughout the spring and summer of 1865. Since revenge played a central role in the military cult that inspired Plains Indian raiding and war, such punitive campaigns – when not decisive – did more to trigger an increase in future raids than to cow Indians into

⁵Pettis, *Kit Carson's Fight*, 30.

⁶Utey, *Kit Carson and the Adobe Walls Campaign*, 75; *New Mexican* (Santa Fe) 24 March 1865; Carson to Carleton, 16 December 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 943.

submission. The campaign did not stop raids, nor did it prevent large expenditures of manpower drawn from two departments the following spring to protect Santa Fe Trail travel and commerce.⁷

On the other hand, Carson destroyed well over 150 Kiowa lodges, and huge stores of winter foodstuffs. Surely they felt the sting of that loss, particularly since it came at the onset of winter. Carson and Carleton also successfully prevented the pan-Indian uprising that they had feared in light of Robert North's report of the previous summer. The most significant success of the campaign may have been a psychological victory. For good reason, the Comanches and Kiowas saw the Llano Estacado as an almost impenetrable barrier protecting them from hostile foreigners. The Adobe Walls campaign showed that their winter abodes were no longer safe havens, even on the most remote stretches of the Canadian River.⁸

On the surface, the evidence conflicts as to whether or not Adobe Walls should be considered a successful campaign, with perhaps a preponderance of evidence appearing to suggest failure. It would, however, be remiss to attempt to evaluate any military operation without considering its commander's intent. Carleton did not post a list of objectives from which pundits or historians might judge his success. His correspondence, though, does specifically state some of the objectives he brought to this campaign.

⁷Wallace and Hoebel, *The Comanches*, 245; Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 52; Dunlay, *Kit Carson & the Indians*, 339; Carleton to Carson, 4 May 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 317-318; Carleton to Carson, 6 May 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 318; Spec Orders No. 15, 7 May 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 344; Carleton to Carson, 8 May 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 360; Carson to Carleton, 19 June 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, pp. 341-342.

⁸Utey, "Kit Carson and the Adobe Walls Campaign," 75. Dunlay, *Kit Carson & the Indians*, 339; Statement of Robert North, 10 November 1863 OR, ser. 1, vol. 34, pt. 4, p. 100.

Carleton's stated objectives changed a bit depending on whom he was addressing and when. In September correspondence to Carson and when giving instructions as to how Carson's party would be outfitted, Carleton emphasized the campaign's limited resources and limited objectives. He also highlighted the importance of bringing the Utes into the conflict on the U.S. side. He wanted to reduce the likelihood that the Utes would "join in any league which the (Plains) Indians may attempt to make for a general war by all the Indians between the mountains and the Missouri on the whites."⁹

Carleton clearly had designs on a more significant campaign, though, if adequate forces were available. In October, he urged Curtis to send a large force from Kansas "so as to make this the last war that will be necessary to prosecute against these two, the most treacherous tribes of the plains."¹⁰ With a large force at his disposal or not, Carleton clearly intended the mission to be punitive. His General Orders No. 32, which officially committed manpower and resources from his department to the expedition, emphasized its punitive nature as an intended means of preventing Santa Fe Trail depredations the following spring and summer. The orders were dated October 22, 1864. The same day, he told Blunt that he wanted to strike a blow "which these two treacherous tribes will remember."¹¹

In some of his final instructions to Carson before the column embarked on the mission, Carleton made his wishes simple: "It is my desire that you give those Indians, especially the Kiowas, a severe drubbing." He articulated clearly that women and

⁹Carlton to Carson 18 September 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 3, p. 243-244; Carleton to De Forrest, 24 September 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41 pt. 3, p. 353-354.

¹⁰Carleton to Curtis, 23 October 1864, 923, LS, 1864, vol. 11, LS, DNM, r. 3, M1072, RG 393.

¹¹Carleton to Blunt, 22 October 1864, Inclosure 1, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 198; General Orders No. 32, 22 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 198-199.

children were to be spared, while acknowledging that a few noncombatant casualties were likely when Carson's force struck.¹²

Carleton clearly failed to make this the "last war necessary" against the Kiowas and Comanches. But that objective had been based on having a larger force of military columns converging on the region. With the limited resources at hand, Carleton focused on bringing in the Utes and impressing on the Plains tribes that their raiding would trigger U.S. retaliation. Carleton implicitly trusted Carson's ability to relate with Indians, and for good reason. Carson was completely successful in incorporating the Utes and Jicarillas, thus preventing them from joining a larger Indian movement, which Carleton and other U.S. military leaders feared at the time.¹³

Carson was unable to give the Kiowas and Comanches the "severe drubbing" Carleton would have liked, but he did strike a blow "which these two . . . tribes will remember." Carson was fairly successful in destroying Kiowa lodges and winter resources. However, such "punishment" was likely an ill-advised objective in the first place. Carleton and Carson may not have realized it at the time, but the psychological "blow" of challenging winter homeland security was probably the biggest near-term success of the campaign. The knowledge that the army could strike them anywhere in any season would have a lingering effect.

¹²Carleton to Carson 23 October 1864, OR, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, pp. 213-214.

¹³It seems unlikely based on inter-tribal relationships and alliances that the Utes and Jicarillas could have been brought into an alliance with the Kiowas and Apaches in the first place, but it is not beyond the realm of possibility. Some kind of large council took place between over a dozen tribes and the Confederate government. Leavenworth to Ford, 30 May 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt.2, p. 687-688; Adair to Veatch, 20 July 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 1102-1103; Kenner, *The Comanchero Frontier*, 153-4; Smith to Pike, 8 April 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 1266-1269; Cooper to Throckmorton, 16 May 1865, OR, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 1309.

For the Kiowas, the implications were even greater. The Comanches had battled whites from Texas and the United States since Texas was Spanish territory. Adobe Walls was the first military campaign of this size launched against the Kiowas. It was a very visible harbinger of the end of their traditional way of life.

Remembering the 1864 Adobe Walls Campaign

The 1864 Adobe Walls campaign of 1864 should be remembered for several reasons. The battle itself was one of a very small number of clear, pitched battles in the North American Indian Wars. The list is short – Cieneguilla (1854), Pine Creek, (1858), Four Lakes (1858), Fort Defiance (1860), Little Bighorn (1876), Adobe Walls – there were only a few. And even among those, Adobe Walls was numerically one of the largest Indian War battles in the history of the American West, perhaps second only to Little Bighorn. It was the largest engagement ever fought between whites and Indians in Texas. That fact alone argues for the battle’s significance.

Kit Carson’s involvement also deserves attention. Adobe Walls was his last fight, but it is significant in his life for more reasons. In Carson’s long experience on the frontier, he interacted with Indians in numerous ways, including fighting them. Although he never anticipated so encountering such a large force of Indian warriors, Carson’s understanding of Indian fighting allowed him to recognize the danger his command was in at Adobe Walls and avoid disaster. Even after he decided to move his force back toward the supply train, Carson’s quick and creative tactical responses managing his formations and countering “fire with fire” – not just with howitzers – gave his men a safe return to New Mexico. Heroism is often measured in clear triumphs, and success in

multitude and magnitude of victories. Adobe Walls shows Carson's heroism in his ability to make an unpopular decision that salvaged the best possible results from an unfavorable situation.

On a larger scale, the Adobe Walls campaign illustrates several elements of U.S. military action against Plains Indians that eventually became the army's formula for defeating them: destruction of resources, winter campaigning, and the deployment of converging columns.

Destruction of Indian resources was not new to Indian warfare. It was a tactic borrowed from the Indians themselves and used by white Americans against Indians as early as the colonial wars that evolved into a United States military strategy. Union forces were in the process of using similar tactical applications of total war against the Confederates the same year Carson and Carleton prosecuted the Adobe Walls campaign. Carleton effectively used violence and destruction in an environment – the nineteenth-century American West – where those were often the only language spoken and respected.¹⁴ Carleton and Carson used the method with brutal effectiveness against the Navajos in 1863, and incorporated it in their plans for the Kiowas and Comanches the following year. It was a bit more difficult to implement against the Plains tribes, which lacked the sedentary agriculture and large pastoral herds maintained by the Navajos. U.S. forces instead sacked caches of food and supplies the Kiowas had stored for the winter and destroyed lodges, exemplifying a tactic that would be used repeatedly in warfare against other Plains tribes. The army supported a similar concept and applied it more

¹⁴Kane, "James H. Carleton," 141-143.

effectively in the mid to late 1870s when white Americans hastened the demise of the plains tribes' most important natural resource – the great buffalo herds.¹⁵

Carleton had initiated his operation against the Navajos in the summer of 1863. The acute shortage of resources that forced the Navajos to surrender, however, became readily apparent in the winter. Resources available to western Indian tribes were nearly always most scarce that time of year. Furthermore, winter weather particularly limited the Plains tribes' mobility – one of their greatest advantages. Carleton did not originally intend his campaign against the Kiowas and Comanches to be a winter campaign, but by the time Carson launched his men down the Canadian valley, winter weather was at hand. Adobe Walls proved that winter's cold and scarcity of resources greatly aided U.S. troops in locating large, stationary groups of Plains Indians. It turned out to be in essence a “proof of concept” for winter campaigning on the plains. Winter campaigning played a crucial role in later expeditions against Plains Indians. It was decisive against the Cheyennes in the 1868 Washita campaign.

Carleton never successfully elicited support from other departments for his Kiowa and Comanche campaign. This was not for lack of trying. His concept called for columns to converge from Kansas and New Mexico. Each column was to be large enough not to be vulnerable alone to raids. This multitude of large army forces would negate some of the mobility disadvantages on the plains, and create the appearance that federal armies were everywhere in the Indians' home land and could not be avoided.

Although Carleton could not see this plan through to fruition due to other taxes on military manpower in Kansas and Missouri, this very strategy met success in the Washita

¹⁵Dunlay, *Kit Carson & the Indians*, 272-274; Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 246.

campaign and ultimately brought the Comanches, Kiowas and Cheyennes to their knees. In the Red River War of 1874-1875, Major General Phil Sheridan devised a plan in which five columns converged from Forts Concho, Griffin, Sill, Bascom, and Dodge onto the Comanche stronghold – the Llano Estacado. The columns destroyed villages and horse herds as they found them. Within a year, the last hold outs surrendered.¹⁶

Adobe Walls shows the inherent messiness of warfare against the Plains Indians, and its divergence from traditional conceptions of warfare in which two armies place units on a battlefield and match strength against strength, intent on destroying the opposing force with decisive offensive strokes and flanking maneuvers. Adobe Walls shows how elements of Indian strategy were being progressively incorporated into U.S. war strategy, a trend that would continue through the world wars. It shows how heroism cannot be defined in “winning.” And most of all, Adobe Walls directly shows the essential strategic components that would later be used to conclude Indian conflicts in the United States’s favor during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Success can be measured in a myriad of ways. Dunkirk, for example, was a great success in that allied forces retreated and escaped what very easily could have been complete destruction. Along those lines, some of the significance of Adobe Walls may lie in what *did not* happen there. The United States did not suffer a psychologically crushing Little Bighorn-like defeat in the midst of the Civil War. A legendary frontier hero, Kit Carson, was not lost in a daring but ill-fated charge into a powerful enemy. The prudence and heroism of the campaign’s commander prevented those disastrous results.

¹⁶Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 248-261.

History is, among other things, a study of people making decisions. In that light, acts of heroism are significant of their own accord. They do not have to be inarguably successful or decisive to be powerful. Knowing the limitations of what could be accomplished given a set of circumstances, and avoiding calamity when the possibility was very real, reflects the kind of personal leadership that should not be forgotten regardless of the necessity of a later campaign. The courageous actions of men like William Eaton and Stephen Decatur during the Barbary Wars are no less fascinating because President Jefferson undermined their accomplishments. The 1864 Battle of Adobe Walls had no shortage of heroism. Dohasan, Satanta, and their warriors creatively and heroically held off Carson's troops long enough for their family members to escape with all their captives. They engineered enough of a delay in Carson's return to the upper village to allow for recovery of all of their livestock, and probably some possessions before the village was occupied and burned. Carson's crafty use of counter fires and of his mountain howitzers to avoid destruction at the hands of a numerically superior enemy illustrate his ability to react to unconventional warfare with an on-the-spot expertise likely not possessed by any other man in the army. Countless troopers trusted Carson enough to hold skirmish lines and execute orderly retreats against an enemy terrifying in demeanor, number, and tactics. Heroism is one of the rarest and most prized attributes of human achievement. But it was not rare on either side on that November day in 1864, and for that reason more than any other, Adobe Walls deserves to be remembered as one of the great battles in the history of the American West.

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