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THE DRAGOONS AND EL PASO, 1848

By M. H. THOMLINSON

ONE hundred and fifteen years ago Congress decided to do something about the Army—the Indian situation again was bad and getting worse.

From the beginnings of the country the settlers along the Atlantic seaboard had encountered Indians who travelled and fought on foot, and for many generations their westward-pushing descendants met the same kind of opponents. But in 1832 the frontier was west of the Missouri and, farther southwest, the Santa Fe trail had been opened; everywhere along the border the settler and the traveller found Indians on horseback. The answer, of course, was soldiers on horseback. But the Army had none.

At the end of the War of 1812-1815 the Army had been reduced to about 10,000 men and again in 1821 Congress, in another economy move, had still further cut it down to 6,500 men. There were seven regiments of Infantry, four of Artillery, and a handful of staff people, but there were no Cavalry at all.¹

To cope with the mounted Indian, Congress in 1832 authorized the organization of one battalion of "Mounted Rangers," soon to be increased to a regiment and shortly thereafter designated the "First Dragoons."² This fine old regiment, organized and equipped expressly to fight the Plains Indians, spent much of its early life on the western frontier, but the small part of its history with which this story has to do concerns not Indians but a little known episode of the War with Mexico, involving three companies of the regiment.

In 1846 Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny hastily organized the Army of the West and set out from Fort Leavenworth for the conquest of New Mexico and California. Among his troops were five companies of his own regiment, the First Dragoons. While on the march, near Socorro, in

1. Upton: *Military Policy of the United States*, pp. 149-151.

2. *Army Register*, 1922, p. 1426.

October of that year, Kit Carson brought favorable news to Kearny from California which resulted in three of the five companies of dragoons being left behind in New Mexico.³ Their duties were to help hold the newly acquired Territory and to protect settlers and travellers against the Indians. These three companies were B, G, and I.⁴ In the summer of 1847 they were at Santa Fe and Albuquerque. Shortly, they were to move into Old Mexico.

In the autumn of 1847 Sterling Price, the military governor of New Mexico, became apprehensive of an attempt by Mexican forces in Chihuahua to re-take their lost province of New Mexico. He therefore asked permission of the War Department to lead an expedition into Old Mexico, as a sort of counter-offensive, and, in anticipation thereof, sent a reconnaissance detachment to El Paso del Norte (Juarez) and then concentrated the rest of his troops where they could readily be put in march for that point. Eventually, on February 4, 1848, he received information⁵ which he considered to be justification for his expedition and immediately issued orders for the concentration at El Paso del Norte.⁶ At that time the three companies of dragoons were at Albuquerque. One of them, B, had been converted temporarily into a light artillery company with six cannon, in order to compensate for Price's shortage of artillery organizations for his Mexican venture. The volunteer troops were camped along the river, most of them being around Socorro, New Mexico.

Old records show that all the dragoons left Albuquerque on February 11 and that they arrived in the El Paso del

3. Secretary of War. *Annual Report*, 1848, p. 226 (Swords' Report).

4. Bieber, *Marching with the Army of the West*, p. 38.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 352.

6. Price ordered the following to concentrate at El Paso del Norte—3 companies First Dragoons (two of horse and one of artillery), Major Benjamin Beall; 6 companies 3rd Missouri Mounted Volunteers, Colonel John Ralls; 2 companies Missouri Volunteer Infantry, Lt. Col. A. R. Easton; and the Santa Fe Battalion (3 companies of horse and one of artillery), Major R. Walker. See Price's report in *Ann. Rep. Sec. War*, 1848. In addition, Price also had Lane's detachment that had marched to El Paso del Norte in November and a troop of horse that he used as personal escort. Initially, he also had five companies of Illinois Infantry, but they were returned to Santa Fe before the movement began from Socorro to El Paso del Norte. See McKissack's report in *Ann. Rep. Sec. War*, 1848, pp. 221-225. McKissack reported that eighteen companies marched into Mexico.

Norte concentration area on February 26 and 28.⁷ The artillery company, being heavier, took two days longer than the horse units. Today, the distance from Albuquerque to Juarez is over 270 miles by direct road. Then, with the old dirt trail meandering through the Jornada del Muerto and with two extra river crossings, the journey must have been longer and harder. Assuming the usual one day of rest per week, this march figures out as a rather rapid movement but it turned out to be nothing at all when compared with the accomplishments of the next three weeks. (Lane, with three companies of mounted volunteers, required thirty-seven days to make the same trip, the preceding fall.)

All of Price's troops reached El Paso del Norte before the end of February, except the supply train which was much delayed.

Where did Sterling Price's troops camp when they reached El Paso del Norte? With the exception of two companies no one knows with any certainty.⁸ Old reports say, "some in the town and others around the town." The matter is confused because in those days many people referred to El Paso del Norte as El Paso; on the north bank of the river where El Paso, Texas, now stands there was then nothing but the ranch of Ponce de Leon. As for the dragoons, one would suppose that an old soldier like Major Beall would have camped as far from town as possible but in all likelihood he camped where he was told, Price having arrived ahead of him. In any event, it is significant that Beall's return of troops for February 28 was dated at El Paso del Norte, *Mexico*.⁹ Had he been on the north bank of the Rio Grande he would have been in either Texas or New Mexico, according to his predilection.

Sterling Price was in a hurry. Without waiting for his supply train to arrive he divided his force into two parts.¹⁰ Taking the most mobile of his troops in the leading detachment, including Beall with G and I, Price started from El Paso del Norte on March 1, with only eight days rations, and

7. Muster rolls of Companies B, G, and I, First Dragoons, for February, 1848.

8. Bieber, p. 339.

9. Post Return for El Paso del Norte, Mexico, for February, 1848.

10. Sec. War, *Ann. Rep.*, 1848, p. 113.

arrived in Chihuahua on the night of the seventh—225 miles in seven days, in enemy country, over a poor trail, and with great scarcity of water. While on this forced march Beall's two companies of horsemen were detached to make a detour to cut off an expected enemy retreat toward Durango, but their guide lost his way. There were no maps.¹¹

The Mexicans having evacuated Chihuahua and retired to Santa Cruz de Rosales, Price hurried off in pursuit, reaching his objective, sixty miles distant, on the morning of the ninth. By this time his force was pretty well scattered along the road, but they appear to have been in good order and soon came up. Of the nine companies that were with him when he left Carrizal only some 250 men still accompanied him when he appeared before Santa Cruz. Shortage of water and the killing pace had broken down men and horses alike. Horses, however, were easily secured in Chihuahua City. Lieutenant Love, with the dragoon artillery, left El Paso del Norte three days after Price and at first did not seem to feel much need for haste, but somewhere along the road an urgent message from Price reached him and he made the last 210 miles in four nights and three and one half days.¹²

Meanwhile Price had laid siege to Santa Cruz, which he had found to be fortified. Price said of that situation, "without tents, a scarcity of provisions, and suffering from the effects of a forced march beyond parallel, my troops cheerfully performed the onerous duties of the siege." At first he had not many more than 250 men against 900 in the town.

On the sixteenth, when his last troops had come up, he assaulted the place but was interrupted by a cavalry attack against his rear. This diversion was not beaten off until the middle of the afternoon when the assault was resumed, the town surrendering at sundown. Mexican loss was very heavy; Price's quite small. B company of the dragoons had the most casualties, seven, of any company in the entire force. G had two, I none. Considering the circumstances of the fight the disproportion of losses is startling.

11. Beall in *Sec. War, Ann Rep.*, 1848, p. 120.

12. Love in *Ibid.*, p. 124.

After the battle Price's men performed the usual duties of an army of occupation until July, 1848. Very little record has been found of the activities of the volunteers during this period, but the movements of the dragoons have been traced through their muster rolls and field returns. From these records we learn that a few days after the fall of Santa Cruz the dragoons marched to Chihuahua, which was to be their "station" in Mexico. With the exception of some escort duty for one company, there they remained until orders arrived to return home.¹³ For the dragoons "home" meant New Mexico and more Indian fighting, but their more fortunate volunteer¹⁴ friends actually went home and were mustered out of the service.

Now we come to a curious conflict in the record of these same three companies of dragoons. According to a widely accepted report they marched to El Paso (Texas) and constructed and occupied a cantonment there during the same months that they are shown above to have been campaigning in Mexico. Specifically, Beall's three companies of the First Dragoons are alleged to have arrived in El Paso on February 11, 1848, to have built a cantonment on the north bank of the river, on Coontz' ranch, now the center of El Paso, Texas, and to have lived there for several months, when they departed for points not stated.

The basis for this interesting information is a letter from the War Department. It appears that in 1887 some person in El Paso wrote to the War Department asking for a brief history of Fort Bliss. The Adjutant General, Richard Coulter Drum, replied, enclosing a memorandum, prepared by someone whose identity is not disclosed, containing the desired history, which included the following statement, "The vicinity of Fort Bliss was first occupied by United States troops February 11th, 1848, when three companies of the First Dragoons, under command of Major Benjamin Beall, took post near Franklin (El Paso) remaining there, however, but a few months."¹⁵ The original source of the

13. Letter from National Archives, Dec. 5, 1946.

14. War Dept., G. O. No. 25, June 8, 1848.

15. Special edition *El Paso Times*, August, 1887.

embellishments to the Adjutant General's statement is unknown.

Normally the Adjutant General is excellent authority, but in this instance we find his 1887 statement, quoted above, to be at variance with official reports and other records that were written at the time of the event. Obviously, some investigation and comparison are necessary in order to determine the relative value of the conflicting items of information.

General Drum's letter and memorandum were written nearly forty years after the war. In 1847 Drum was a lieutenant in the Ninth Infantry and is mentioned in the records as having been present with that regiment, in the fall of 1847, at one of the battles around Mexico City.¹⁶ Later, he transferred to the Fourth Artillery. Neither of these regiments was anywhere near El Paso del Norte in the spring of 1848 nor does Drum's name appear in the lists of officers who were with Sterling Price in Mexico. Evidently then, Drum had no personal knowledge concerning that part of the "history" he sent to El Paso and, as stated above, the actual compiler of the memorandum is unidentified. Since no one concerned with Drum's memorandum is shown to have any personal knowledge of the case in question, and because no "sources" are quoted, it is necessary that this bit of information be put in the undependable class until verified.

Opposed to the statements in Drum's letter to his El Paso friend in 1887 are the contents of letters and records that were written in 1847 and 1848, and which can now be found in the annual reports of the Secretary of War for those years or in old War Department files. The papers referred to include official reports written by Sterling Price, his staff and his subordinate commanders, and the field returns and muster rolls of the three companies of dragoons under Major Beall's command.

The reports cover two periods, (1) the various stages of the concentration of troops prior to the march into Mexico and, (2) those written after the battle of Santa Cruz de

16. Heitman, *Historical Register . . . United States Army*, I, 384.

Rosales. Price's own reports, brief and to the point, are confirmed in their essential details by those of his subordinates. There appears to be no good reason to question any of them. Field returns and muster rolls of the three companies are available for the entire period under consideration.

In explanation of the value of these organizational records, a field return was a sort of inventory of troops that showed the strength in officers and men, names of organizations, names of officers, and the activities of the group, such as marches and battles, and was usually submitted on the last day of each month; a muster roll was something like a pay roll of today and included a list of the entire personnel of the company together with detailed information affecting each man's status as to duty and pay, and occasionally other miscellaneous data. Certainly, field returns and muster rolls are first class sources of information.

To recapitulate, the muster rolls of Major Beall's battalion show that all three companies left Albuquerque on February 11 and that they arrived in the El Paso del Norte area on February 26 and 28. Reports by Price and subordinates show that all three companies left El Paso del Norte early in March and that all were present at the battle of Santa Cruz de Rosales on March 16.¹⁷ Field returns account for the three companies at Chihuahua, Mexico, monthly from March 19 until the end of June.¹⁸ Word having reached Price that the peace treaty had been ratified and the army of occupation ordered home, we find from the July returns that on the last day of that month G and I Companies were in camp at Camp Scott, twenty miles above El Paso del Norte, on the east bank, and that B Company was in camp near Socora (Socorro?), Mexico.¹⁸ Thereafter, the three are found garrisoning the posts at Socorro (New Mexico), Albuquerque, and Taos.¹⁹

The possibility that three other companies of the First Dragoons may have been referred to in the Adjutant Gen-

17. Sec. War, *Ann. Rep.*, 1848, p. 113 ff and map.

18. Letter from National Archives, Dec. 5, 1946.

19. Sec. of War, *Ann. Rep.*, 1848, p. 164; *Ibid.*, 1849, p. 104.

eral's letter is eliminated by a check of the companies of that regiment—only five accompanied Kearny to New Mexico and of those five two went with him to California; the remaining companies of the regiment were employed elsewhere.

Similarly, the suggestion that detachments of Beall's companies may have remained behind from the expedition into Mexico and built a cantonment is likewise negated by an examination of the muster rolls from March to July. No men were on detached service in El Paso or anywhere else during that period except an occasional few that were detailed on escort duty with Colonel Price.¹⁹

Finally, we are forced to the conclusion that the long accepted report that Beall's dragoons built and occupied a cantonment on the site of what is now El Paso, Texas, is a myth. Not only a myth, it is actually a reflection on the record of the men of those three companies who, instead of sitting comfortably in a cantonment, had marched into Mexico to engage in the war.