

4-1-2017

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Recommended Citation

. "The Story of the First Dragoon Regiment: A Review Essay on Kearny's Dragoons Out West: The Birth of the U.S. Cavalry." *New Mexico Historical Review* 92, 2 (). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol92/iss2/6>

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The Story of the First Dragoon Regiment

A Review Essay on *Kearny's Dragoons Out West: The Birth of the U.S. Cavalry*

SAMUEL WATSON



Father and son, Will and John Gorenfeld, have teamed up to tell the story of the First Dragoon Regiment between its creation in 1833 and the end of the U.S.-Mexico War. The dragoons conducted a series of small-scale expeditions that have been treated in many articles and are touched on in many books, yet only one book has been devoted to the First Dragoons, fully a century ago, Louis Pelzer's *Marches of the First Dragoons* (1917). The Gorenfelds have set out to draw together a chronological narrative connecting the dragoon expeditions, while going beyond Pelzer by examining the dragoons at war with Mexico. The result is occasionally uneven, and would have benefitted from closer editing, but is also comprehensive, up-to-date in its sources and bibliography, often critical, and sometimes outstanding in its military analysis.

My primary critique is that, in providing human interest stories and examining the officers and soldiers of the First Dragoons amid their chronological narrative, the authors frequently digress for several pages at a time. However, the alternative might have been concentrating the human interest into a single "officers and soldiers of the First Dragoons" chapter. While both authors are

Kearny's Dragoons Out West: The Birth of the U.S. Cavalry. By Will Gorenfeld and John Gorenfeld. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016. xiii + 466 pp. 18 halftones, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth, ISBN 978-0-8061-5394-0.) Samuel Watson received his PhD in history from Rice University in 1996. He began his service at the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1999 as an assistant professor in military history and became a full professor in 2013. His most recent work, *Peacekeepers and Conquerors: The Army Officer Corps on the American Frontier, 1821–1846*, was published by the University Press of Kansas in 2013.

experienced writers, and the elder has published academic articles and essays, a closer editorial hand would have helped to smooth some of the transitions and enhance connections between individual stories and that of the dragoon regiment.

Kearny's Dragoons Out West makes four important contributions. First, it unites the many dragoon expeditions before the U.S.-Mexico War in a single narrative, following a long train of authors who have similarly concluded that the regiment proved "remarkable in . . . averting and preventing violence" during its patrols across the prairies and plains (p. 7). Second, the authors focus on the regiment's leadership to explain how it avoided conflict despite its origins in the fevered pursuit of Black Hawk in 1832. They rightly credit Gen. Stephen W. Kearny as the most important influence on the regiment and its culture, although they acknowledge the problems of alcoholism and personal violence endemic among the regiment's officers. Like contemporaries and historians, the authors credit the West Point graduates among the regiment's officers with a generally higher standard of behavior, but they give Henry Dodge, erstwhile frontier ruffian, more praise than he usually receives as a diplomat, if not as an administrator or troop trainer.

Third, while the story of dragoon diplomatic and peacekeeping expeditions is fairly well-known, that of the dragoons at war is much less so. The book's best chapter is on the battle of San Pasqual, in California in 1846. Here the Gorenfelds are critical of Kearny; his officers, who they surmise may have been under the influence, encouraging their overly aggressive charge; and the enlisted soldiers, who they suggest showed a lack of motivation. The chapter contains reasonable inferences about the relationships between anticipated rewards and motivation: officers coveted glory, which they might receive from official reports and attention in the media, and rushed forward, while enlisted men were unlikely to gain more than favor from officers, or reputation with one another, at the risk of a poorly compensated disability. Mounted on mules, they "manifested a bad case of the slows," and officers and noncommissioned officers bore the brunt of the casualties (p. 269).

Equally significant, the normally wise Kearny underestimated his enemy, and overestimated his soldiers and subordinates, few of whom had any combat experience (Kearny's last battle had been in the War of 1812). According to the authors, "On this day the general seemed to have forgotten the strategy he had preached so often to his junior officers: Avoid battle whenever possible; when impossible to avoid a battle, fight with intelligence. Kearny in his heyday would have displayed a redoubtable formation to terrify the foe into retreat or surrender;" or would have waited to consolidate his force, rather than rushing pell-mell into a fog without reconnaissance (p. 254). The strategy of intimidation "had been successfully

practiced by a host of dragoon officers,” against Pawnee, Sioux, Texans, and New Mexicans. They continue: “Central to each of these encounters was the threat of crushing force coupled with diplomacy. This simple tactic had worked every time and had made the dragoons an invaluable tool of the government” before the war (p. 255).

The authors remain critical as they examine the dragoons’ defeat by Comanche raiders at the battle of Coon Creek in 1848. The final chapter veers into exaggeration with the assertion that Capt. Phil Kearny Jr. might have seized a gate into Mexico City in a glorious charge: Kearny had only two companies, pushing dismounted through a throng of fleeing Mexican troops. The authors are not persuasive when they follow contemporary American sources in speculating that reinforcements might have gained the gate and opened the city to an early capture. However, the Gorenfelds do recognize Winfield Scott’s concern for command and control, and his anxiety that soldiers would commit atrocities, threatening to undermine a diplomatic end to the war, if the army burst into the city. *Kearny’s Dragoons Out West* recovers its critical tone by concluding with an examination of the apparent massacre of Mexican prisoners at the battle of Santa Cruz de Rosales (during Sterling Price’s expedition into Chihuahua, and after the cease-fire signed at Guadalupe Hidalgo, though word had not reached Price).

The fourth contribution made by *Kearny’s Dragoons Out West* is to suggest the transformation of the First Dragoon Regiment, and to some extent the U.S. Army as a whole, during the 1850s. One of the lacunae in my own work is not fully explaining how the officer corps I praise in the 1820s, 30s, and 40s spawned so many secessionists in 1860 and 1861, and performed so woodenly in the battles of 1862. The latter is certainly explained by the far greater scale of campaigns and battles in the Civil War. But *Kearny’s Dragoons Out West* provides a link between my work and that of Durwood Ball, whose *Army Regulars on the Western Frontier* suggested a more roughhewn officer corps, prone to a more overt racism and violence during the 1850s, than I see in the officer corps before the war with Mexico. The Gorenfelds point out that the dragoon officer corps of 1846 disappeared during the war. Stephen W. Kearny was promoted out of the regiment, and died at the end of the war. E. V. Sumner and Phillip St. George Cooke were promoted out of the regiment. Four captains and lieutenants were killed in battle; two died of disease, as did (in 1849) the colonel who replaced Kearny. Four more officers resigned soon after the war, including Phil Kearny and Henry S. Turner. The most capable, experienced dragoon officers were all gone by 1853.

Stephen W. Kearny was not replaced by men of equal judgment and “nuance” (p. 5). Like much, although not all, of the army, the First Dragoons shifted from

a peacekeeping force, adept at coercive but not overtly violent diplomacy, to an Indian-fighting force during the 1850s, “acting in a new spirit of violence,” of collective punishment and atrocity (p. 7). The Gorenfelds use James Henry Carleton, who drove the Navajo to Bosque Redondo in 1864, as their emblem for this transformation. Yet Carleton had been an officer in the regiment, and a disruptive force, since 1839. *Kearny’s Dragoons Out West* concludes that the “cavalry legend still defines how Americans see themselves” (p. 360). Now more than ever, Americans should ask ourselves whether we prefer Kearny or Carleton—or whether we can truly separate them.