

The Battle of Valverde:
A Strategic Victory for the Union Army

by

MSG Antonio S. daRosa
SMC 53, Student Number 158

Military History Award Competition

29 December, 2002

In 1861 the United States Army in New Mexico was demoralized. The troops had not been paid in over a year, lacked provisions and ordnance, and their officers were deserting them for positions in the rebel army. Four of the five cavalry commanders resigned their US commissions and took up arms against their former comrades. Additionally, Apache, Kiowa, and Navajo tribes continued to menace the soldiers and the civilian population. Such were the conditions that Colonel Edward R.S. Canby found upon assuming command of the Department of New Mexico. Despite these seemingly insurmountable odds, Colonel Canby implemented a strategy which resulted in the Confederates eventual defeat in New Mexico.

Colonel Canby was a "careful and capable commander." (Kirkpatrick 52) He quickly set out to prepare his command for the war he knew was inevitable. From his many years of experience in the region, he knew that control of the Rio Grande Valley was the key to success in a campaign. He reasoned that there were two possible invasion routes into New Mexico. The first was from El Paso via the Rio Grande. The second route brought them through the Texas panhandle by way of the Canadian and Pecos rivers. Canby did not know if the main confederate effort was north or south, and therefore strengthen his positions at both Fort Union and Fort Craig. At Belen, located approximately 100 miles north of Fort Craig, he positioned a contingency of about 500 regular infantry so as to reinforce either fort.

He then sought to gather provisions and restore morale to his command. Realizing that he had insufficient troops to deal with the impending invasion, he requested reinforcements and received authority to raise four regiments of New Mexico volunteers. Unable to raise the required force, and unimpressed with the performance of the New

Mexican volunteers, he contacted the Governors of Colorado and California for additional support. He alleviated the officer shortage by appointing sergeants as acting officers to fill company grade positions. He also secured personal loans to pay the soldiers. By the end of 1861 he reported that his regular troops were “in excellent condition.” (Kirkpatrick 16)

On 14 December, 1861 Henry H. Sibley, Brigadier General CSA, “assumed command of all Confederate forces on the Rio Grande above Fort Quitman...and issued a proclamation to the people of Arizona promising that the Confederate government would protect their civil liberties.” (Kerby 60) Until the previous summer Sibley had been a major in the Union army and in command of Fort Union.

Upon defecting, Sibley traveled to Richmond to convince Jefferson Davis of his grand scheme to conquer New Mexico and open the way to California. He related to Davis how his brigade would move west into southern New Mexico, where it could expect many Southern sympathizers. From there it would proceed through the Rio Grande valley, capturing Union forts, which he asserted, were staffed by demoralized troops who harbored Southern sympathies. Once the forts were captured and the brigade resupplied, it would move north to Colorado where he also expected to find supportive inhabitants. Then the brigade would turn west to Utah, Nevada, and California, whose population he expected to welcome the Confederate force.

Davis, although encouraged by victories in the east and conscious of the impact of such a conquest, may not have shared Sibley’s enthusiasm. He commissioned Sibley a brigadier general and sent him to San Antonio to raise an army and invade New Mexico. Sibley however, was not be deterred from his grandiose plan and in a discussion with a

subordinate commander confirmed that “on to San Francisco would be the watchword....” (Kerby 60)

Sibley’s plan started to unravel as soon as the campaign began. His soldiers were neither prepared for the harshness of the winter weather nor the barrenness of the terrain. Bennet Young, who served with Sibley, wrote that “practically no preparations had been made to arrange for the wants of the soldiers.” (Young 117) Sibley led his troops up the Rio Grande valley in the middle of a punishing winter storm. One southern soldier later wrote: “The sleet was enough to peel the skin off your face.” (Abarr 4) The brigade suffered many casualties because of inadequate clothing, shelter, food, and water. The brigade desperately needed to capture Fort Craig and its commissaries, which they sighted on the 18th of February.

The confederate troops who arrived on the battlefield in February were not the same “war-like lot” (Kirkpatrick 9) who left San Antonio. These were desperate men who sought not glory for the confederacy, but food and water for themselves. They totaled 2,215 officers and men. The brigade consisted of three regiments of mounted rifles. The 4th Regiment was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William R. Scurry, and was made up of ten companies plus a four-gun howitzer battery. The 5th Regiment, commanded by Colonel Thomas Green, had the same complement of troops. Lieutenant Colonel John S. Sutton commanded the 7th Regiment and was organized with five companies. Additionally, the brigade was augmented by Major Charles L. Pyron’s 2nd Mounted Rifles Regiment consisting of four companies, two small companies of Arizona Mounted Volunteers, a company known as the “Brigands,” the San Elizario Spy Company, and two batteries of the 1st Texas Artillery with eight 12-pounder Brass Howitzers.

Canby had followed Sibley's progress, knew his location, and was aware of his logistical situation. He also recognized the difficulties of his own command

“The plan and scope of the Texan operations admits of the concentration of their force in one body, and permits them to assail the Territory with the great bulk of their forces at any one of several points. Our own circumstances are widely different. We have extensive country to defend and long lines of communication to protect, and it is barely possible to keep in hand a force that will not be inferior to that which the enemy is able to send into the country. It would be exceedingly unwise... so to disseminate our forces that they could not be concentrated in season to meet invasion at any one point that may be attempted.” (Kirkpatrick 61)

He knew that Sibley must capture the forts to sustain his forces. As H.J. Hunter, who rode with Sibley during the invasion, noted, “if some decisive strike is not made soon, our provisions and clothing will be extremely scant.” (Taylor 23) Canby devised a plan to deny Sibley the much needed supplies and force him to abandon New Mexico.

To accomplish this mission he had a force of 3810 men, composed of eleven companies of the regular Infantry, commanded by Captains Wingate and Plympton; six companies of regular cavalry, led by Captains Lord and Duncan; Captain Dodd's company of Colorado Volunteers; five regiments of New Mexico Volunteers, led by Colonels Carson, Pino, Gallegos, Paul and Lieutenant Colonel Roberts; and two companies of New Mexico Militia commanded by Colonels Armijo and Pino. In addition, Captain McRae and Lieutenant Hall both led a battery. Captain Graydon commanded the spy company.

Word of Sibley's advance reached Canby on the 9th of February and he promptly recalled the Belen contingency. Over the next several days both forces would engage in small inconsequential skirmishes as the Confederate forces drew closer to Fort Craig. Sibley's approach culminated in a reconnaissance in force in an attempt to draw the Union troops into an open engagement. Sibley would later write that, "the reconnaissance proved the futility of assaulting the fort in front with our light metal, and that our only hope of success was to force the enemy into an open-field fight." (Kirkpatrick 71) When Canby failed to take the bait, Sibley withdrew and decided to bypass the fort.

Realizing Sibley's decision, Canby convened a war council and issued the following orders; "follow the enemy closely in his march up the valley, harass him in front, flank, and rear with irregular troops and cavalry- burn or remove all supplies in his front, but avoid a general engagement, except where the position is strongly in our favor." (Anderson 699) His plan however, was either not understood or deliberately disregarded by Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin S. Roberts, who "precipitated a decisive engagement with the enemy, where the latter had the advantage of position." (Anderson 699)

On the 21st of February it became apparent that Sibley was moving toward an area approximately five miles north of Fort Craig, known as the Valverde Ford. Canby dispatched his principal subordinate, Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin S. Roberts, to "occupy the ford and hold the woods." (Porter 14) Roberts' column consisted of,

"Major Thomas Duncan's cavalry; four mounted companies from the Third New Mexico Volunteers under Lieutenant Colonel Jose Valdez, Captain Alexander McRae and two of the three sections of his light battery, Lieutenant Robert H. Hall and his battery of two twenty-four-pounder field howitzers, and several companies

of infantry, for a total of about 850 men and six cannons,” (Taylor 42)

Duncan’s cavalry reaches the ford and observes rebel soldiers “rushing out of order to reach the water, on the east bank.” (Kerby 69) Both sides dismount, a skirmish ensued and both withdraw to defensive positions. Roberts soon arrives at the ford with his infantry and notices the rebels attempting to gain the foothold below the ford. He alerts Duncan and orders him to control key terrain which is a grove of trees which. He also sends a company of infantry, under Captain Brotherton, to cross the river and deploy as skirmishers to reinforce the cavalry.

Upon receiving Roberts alert, Duncan orders Captain Howland’s company C to move to the right and support company D which was acting as skirmishers. This action lasted for a short period with both sides taking turns having the advantage. Eventually, Duncan’s forces gained a slight advantage and the rebels withdrew to a sand embankment which dominated the grove.

The federal batteries arrived and Roberts emplaced them on the west bank to support Duncan. Luckily for Robert’s troops they had the superior artillery and they were able to get the rebels to “lie low,” (Taylor 50) preventing them from reinforcing confederate positions.

This was only a temporary situation though, as Captain Teel arrived and unlimbered two six-pounder howitzers. Immediately he directed a hail of fire toward union positions, concentrating on the artillery. This action allowed the rebels to reinforce their positions.

Roberts could see confederate reinforcements arriving in the grove along the north side of the mesa. Finally, a well placed shell put one of the two six-pounders out of commission, leaving the confederates without forward artillery support. Duncan was

able to occupy the tree grove and the union right consolidated its position at the lower ford. Roberts sent word to Canby that “the enemy’s main force would reach the ford before noon and that reinforcements were needed.” (Taylor 51)

Canby took Roberts report to mean that Sibley intent was the ford and not Fort Craig. He, therefore, committed the majority of his forces to the developing battle at Valverde. He orders Captain Selden’s column of regular infantry, Dodd’s Colorado Volunteers, and Colonel Carson’s 1st New Mexico Volunteers to report to Roberts. Temporarily discounting the threat against Fort Craig, he left behind a few detachments of regulars, two companies of volunteers, and a regiment of militia to garrison it. Canby rode into battle with remnants of company G, 1st US Cavalry, and the remaining section of McRae’s artillery.

When the reinforcements arrive, Roberts quickly dispatches them to the line. He sends Carson up the road to guard the north ford. Selden is ordered across the river; he fixes bayonets and drives the rebels back. Selden prepares to charge again but stops when two companies of confederate mounted lancers attack.

On Selden’s left flank the Colorado Volunteers, led by Captain Dodd, formed into a classic hollow square and prepared to receive the lancers. Dodd waited until the lancers were within fifty to one hundred yards, raised his sword and shouted, “They’re Texans! Give’em Hell!” (Taylor 68) Although the attack was futile, it did have the affect of creating a distraction and desynchronizing Selden’s advance.

There is a lull in the fighting as only artillery fire continues. Canby finally reaches the field. He appraises the situation and orders McRae’s guns and Selden to move further to the left. Carson crosses the river and moves to the right center.

Meanwhile, using a dry riverbed as cover, the rebels make a mounted charge against the right flank. As they came within range Carson's men fired a volley into the column. "His fire, combined with the fusillades from Wingate's battalion, Duncan's command, and the bursting 24-pounder shells from Hall's battery, completely broke the back of the confederate's attack." (Kirkpatrick 115) The charge is broken and the rebels fall back. Carson's mounted companies pursue them up the mesa. This move however, caused a gaping hole to open in the center of union lines.

Sensing an opportunity, the confederates massed for an attack on the union's left flank. The rebels rushed forward towards McRae's battery. Lacking support, and unable to depress their barrels enough to fend off the attack, the union gunners were forced into hand-to-hand combat. Soon the guns were lost and turned on their masters. Fearing an attack on Fort Craig, Canby orders a retreat across the river.

Canby's departure from the battlefield, although seen as a tactical defeat, was actually a strategic victory. From the beginning of the campaign he was adamant that

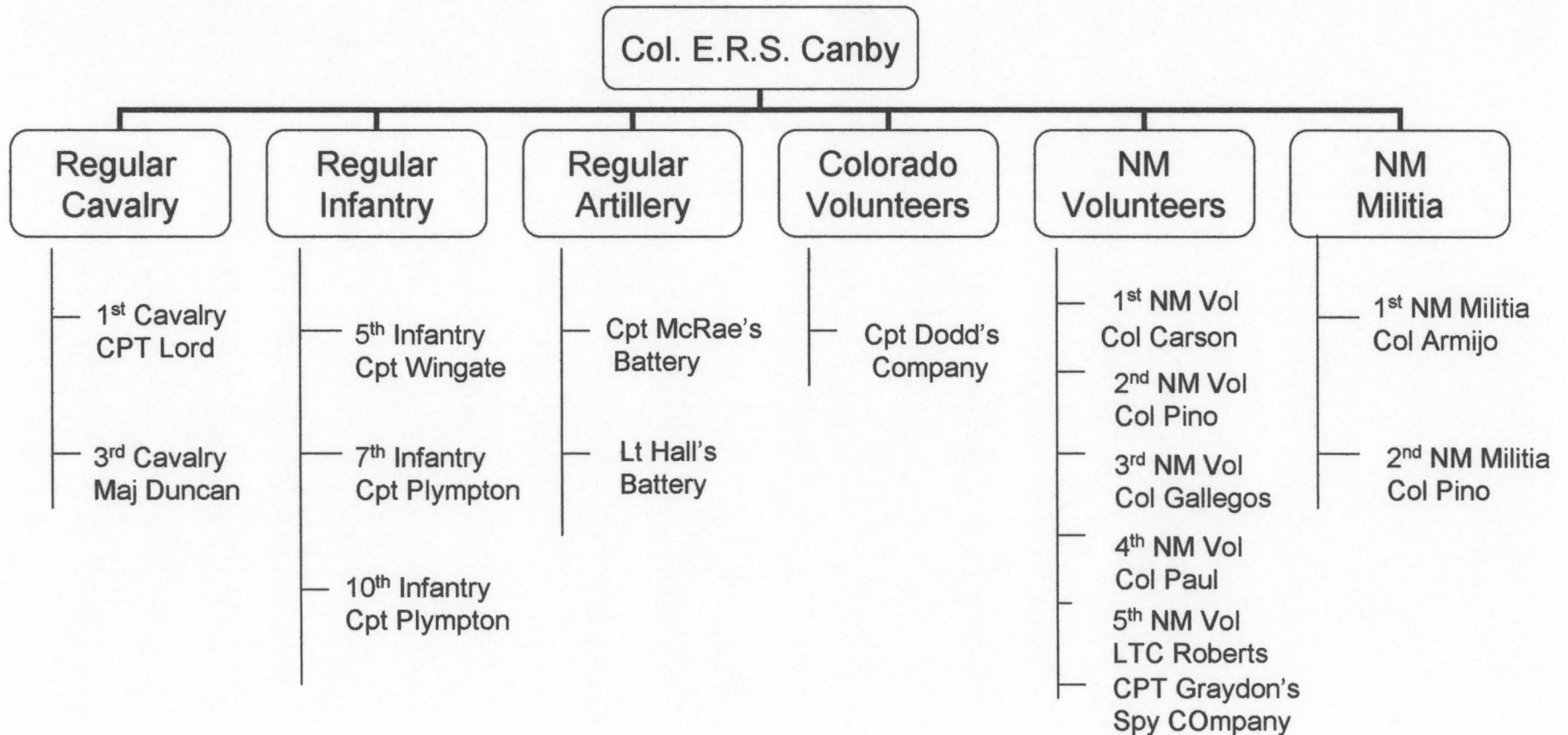
It is essential to the general plan that this post (Fort Craig) should be retained if possible. Fort Union must be held and our communications with the East kept open. If you move, a reliable garrison must be left in it. The communications by Fort Garland should also be kept open. If it cannot, that post should be destroyed. All other points are of no importance. (Kirkpatrick 61)

Canby knew that denying Sibley the forts would cause a weakening of the rebel forces. He could not allow the rebels to seize the initiative and move on Fort Graig. It is clear that the main focus was to prevent Sibley from capturing the fort. In a larger scale, the battle of Valverde can be seen as an interpretation of his orders to "harass him in front,

flank, and rear," (Anderson 699) thus depleting the enemy forces. That being the case, Canby's strategy achieved its desired result. Sibley left the battlefield in worst shape then he entered it. His brigade lost the equivalent of one regiment's animals, a portion of his trains were destroyed, and morale was at a low point. As subsequent battles demonstrated, he could not go much further.

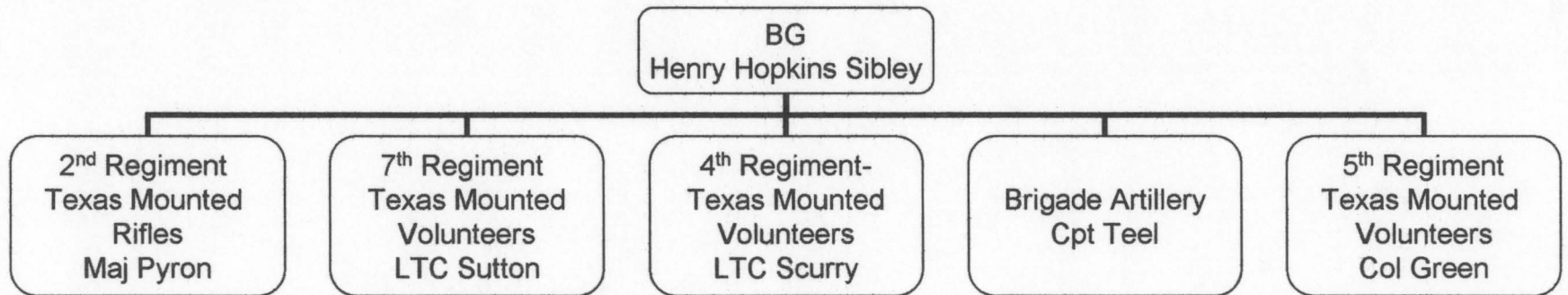
UNION ORDER OF BATTLE

(Taylor 26)



CONFEDERATE ORDER OF BATTLE

(Taylor 26)



Works Cited

1. Abarr, James. "Desolate Outposts: For 31 Years Fort Craig Guarded New Mexico's Southern Flank." Albuquerque Journal, 30 Aug. 1998
<http://www.abqjournal.com/travel/heritage17.htm>
2. Anderson, Latham. "Canby's Service in the New Mexican Campaign." Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, Vol. II. New York: Century Company; 1887
3. Kerby, Robert Lee. The Confederate Invasion of New Mexico and Arizona 1861-1862. Los Angeles, CA: Westernlore Press; 1958
4. Kirkpatrick, Charles E. MAJ. The Prudent Soldier, The Rash Old Fighter, and the Walking Whiskey Keg: The Battle of Valverde, New Mexico. 13-21 February 1862. Fort Bliss, TX: U.S. Army Air Defense Artillery School; n.d.
5. Porter, Charles. Charles Porter's Account of the Confederate Attempt to Seize Arizona and New Mexico. Austin, TX: Pemberton Press; 1964.
6. Taylor, John McLellan. Bloody Valverde: A Civil War Battle on the Rio Grande, February 21, 1862. 1995
7. Young, Bennett H. "Texas Cavalry Expedition in 1861-62: Perilous and Exhaustive Expedition into New Mexico." Confederate Veteran. Mar. 1913