

ARKANSAS MILITARY JOURNAL

**A Publication
of the
Arkansas Militia Foundation**

VOL. 4

WINTER 1995

NO.2

IN THIS ISSUE:

**THE ARKANSAS MILITIA
IN THE
THE MEXICAN WAR
1846 - 47**

ARKANSAS MILITIA FOUNDATION

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

CHAIRMAN

Major General (Ret) James A. Ryan

VICE CHAIRMAN

Col (Ret) Buddy McAllister

SECRETARY

LTC Tom Thomas

TREASURER

LTC George McCulley

MEMBERS

MAJ Cissy Lashbrook

MAJ Larry W. Curtis

MAJ Dudley Smith

MAJ Pete Lawson

Capt Dave Wassell

WO1 Greg Settles

CSM Debbie Collins

SGM Doyle Houston

PUBLICATIONS STAFF

MAJ Larry W. Curtis

1LT LaCretia Cook

SSG Nathan Barlow

SP4 Doug Waller

Incorporated 27 June 1989 Arkansas
Non-profit Corporation

The Arkansas Military Journal is an unofficial publication of the Arkansas Militia Foundation. The purpose of the journal is to aid in the preservation of Arkansas' military history. Comments and materials for publication are invited. Correspondence should be addressed to: The Adjutant General, CS-HS, P.O Box 2301, Camp Joseph T. Robinson, North Little Rock, Arkansas 72118-2200.

Editor's Note

This paper was originally researched and written by members of the 135th Military History Detachment. The authors are **Specialist Barbara Mulkey** and **CW3 Timothy R. Roberts**. Some minor changes have been made from the original transcript.

The National Guard and its ancestor the militia has played a major role in every American military action from King William's War in 1689 to Desert Storm in 1991. Through this three hundred year period the citizen soldier has fought beside the Regular and because of that there has always been a natural tendency to compare the two. Under what circumstances has the Guardsman behaved like a Regular; under what conditions has he failed to live up to his professional counterpart?

The Mexican War of 1846 and 1847 offers a unique opportunity to study the citizen soldier at his best and worst because of the tremendous extremes of success and failure these militiamen had. This is an attempt to study one unit, the Arkansas Mounted Volunteers, in detail. It is also an attempt to trace not only the mechanics of their mobilization and organization, which is of purely historical interest, but to show why some companies of that Regiment failed as military organizations and other companies in the same Regiment added inspiring chapters to military history.

The answer we believe is that some companies of the Arkansas Volunteers attempted to make a real effort to train themselves in conformity to the current Regular Army standards, especially in dragoon tactics when men were trained to fight both as infantry

and cavalry. Other units ignored this rigorous training and failed on the battlefield. The successful companies were the ones that drew no distinction between what a volunteer militiaman did and what a Regular soldier did. They accepted the "one Army" concept long before it became official Army doctrine.

ARKANSAS TO THE FLAG

On May 27, 1846, the Governor of Arkansas, Thomas S. Drew, issued a proclamation calling for volunteers to fight in the Mexican War, requesting that Arkansas provide one regiment of cavalry consisting of ten companies and one battalion of infantry containing five companies. The cavalry regiment was bound for service in Mexico and the battalion of infantry was to replace troops on the Indian frontier who had been transferred to Mexico. As to the organization of the cavalry regiment, the Field and Staff officers consisted of one Colonel, one Lieutenant Colonel, one Major, and one Adjutant. Non-Commissioned Officers for the regiment consisted of one Sergeant Major, one Quartermaster Sergeant, one principle musician, two chief buglers, and ten companies. The organization of each company consisted of: one Captain, one First Lieutenant, one Second Lieutenant, four

Sergeants, four corporals, two buglers, one farrier and blacksmith, and eighty privates.

Dr. Solon Borland, Adjutant General of the State of Arkansas, received orders to "ascertain, by personal inspection, the present state of organization of the Militia of this State; and further, to aid in the formation of a Volunteer Corps". The Arkansas Democrat published the travel schedule which General Borland used in inspecting the volunteer organizations. Between June 2 and June 13, 1846, he traveled in five counties and then returned to Little Rock, the state capitol, to inspect the companies organizing there.

In those days the militia was intensely political, and as soon as the call for troops went out the political strife started. This strife was reflected in the three major newspapers in Little Rock. Two papers had a special animosity for each other, the Arkansas State Gazette, a Whig paper, and the Arkansas Democrat, which leaned toward the Democrat Party. The Gazette and the Democrat took opposing views on the war. On one hand, it was the opinion of the Democrat that the militia companies were needed along the 200 miles of Arkansas which bordered Indian Territory. On the other hand, the Whig Gazette thought that the companies should be put to good use in Mexico and expressed the

hope that the Arkansas Companies might soon reach Mexico City. There "the Arkansas boys could pack off enough little golden images to pay off our state debt". These views were unusual in that nationally, the Democratic Party generally supported the war and the Whigs opposed it.

Besides the political jealousy of the newspapers, there was a good deal of hostility in the military because the men organizing companies were also political leaders in the state, representing the opposing parties. For example, Albert Pike, the State's Whig Leader, who was supported by the Gazette, was the only political leader with extensive military experience, organizing a company. The "Little Rock Guards," of which he was the Captain, had been in existence for some time. They had originally been formed to fend off Indian attacks in 1836, when the Indians were migrating through Arkansas to the then new Indian territory in Oklahoma. Pike, however, had little inclination to go to Mexico. He thought the war was a product of the Democratic Party, and, at the same time, he was reluctant to leave behind his valuable law practice in the State. But because Pike took his military duties seriously and his men were well trained and disciplined, he wrote to the governor and offered the services of the "Guards" as a company of infantry on the border.

However, Pike wrote without consulting his men. On their own, they had already voted to offer their services in Mexico, not Arkansas, as a "Company of Flying Artillery". If that was not acceptable then they wanted to go as a company of cavalry. Pike reluctantly accepted the decision of his men. and offered his company to the governor as cavalry willing to serve in Mexico.

Volunteers from every strata of society flocked to enlist. Archibald Yell, ex-governor of the state, a Democratic leader, and at the time, a United States Congressman, resigned his seat in Congress when Arkansas was called on, and enlisted in Solon Borland's company in Little Rock. This action brought an outcry from the Democrat, who disliked Yell, due to a rift in the Democratic Party, and never missed a chance to criticize him. Not a week went by that the Democrat did not print scathing remarks about what it termed the "Yell Clique", so the paper did not hesitate to publish anything which could injure his military status. On June 26, 1846, the Democrat reported that Governor Yell, who had enlisted as a private, did not live as a private. The paper accused Yell of having quarters and eating with the officers instead of sharing the hard lot of the other privates including wet ground and cold food. It also reported that as a ceremony in the city, Yell had sat in the parlor taking

tea with the ladies, instead of standing in parade outside with the other privates. It was the opinion of the Democrat that "such favoritism was singular and was calculated to create dissatisfaction and insubordination among the rank and file".

While the newspapers quibbled, all around the state men rushed to enlist before it was too late, and strike a blow at the Mexicans. Many reasons combined to induce the men to volunteer. Among these were inflammatory newspaper articles against the Mexicans, news of victories by the Americans, fiery speeches at town meetings, which implored the local men to uphold the honor of their country, and the beaming pride of the ladies who made speeches and gave teas and dinners. Some even volunteered because of economic hardship.

An article in the Gazette appeared on June 1, 1846 entitled "Our Country Right or Wrong" urging that men be sent to Mexico to win lasting peace. It also noted that a defeat of the Mexican Army would make other nations pause before provoking a conflict with the United States. The article ended with a poem "To Arms" which was calculated to raise the fighting spirit of the volunteers:

Go vindicate your country's fame
Avenge your country's wrong....

Various meetings were held around the state to encourage volunteers, and notices were put in newspapers asking for volunteers. Captain Pike published such a notice in the Gazette. "To Volunteers", urged men from all over the State to join his company. It said, "To those who desire to serve their country in a position where they will have an opportunity to earn honor and distinction, the ranks of the Guards are open". A meeting in Batesville on June 7, included speeches and a picnic, where 78 men signed up. In Saline County the company known as the "Saline Rangers" filled its company and had to turn potential recruits away. The Captain was heard to say that he would "rather be Captain of the Saline Rangers than be President of the United States".

George S. Morrison joined for economic reasons. In a letter dated March 3, 1847, he stated that he had been in Little Rock, when the call went out, fruitlessly searching for work. His wife was in poor health at the time so he joined Pike's "Guards" for the sake of \$10 per month. With economic hardship and the patriotism of the day, the only place which had difficulty enlisting men was Boonsboro, Washington County, where the people feared Indian attacks.

Not only was the general population called upon for volunteers, but those not signing up were called on to aid the volunteers. In Little Rock a public meeting was called to adopt suitable measures to assist those volunteers that were in need. A committee of ten was appointed to see to the collection of private funds to carry out this program. In the Democrat a notice appeared on June 5, calling for horses from the general public in order to mount the volunteers. The Democrat stipulated that the horses must be four to nine years old, thirteen to sixteen hands high, sound, hardy, and able to sustain themselves on grass.

The ladies of Arkansas busied themselves in sewing battle flags and making uniforms. The flags were presented in grand ceremonies with flowery speeches from the ladies and accepted with gallant replies from the Captains who received them. In Little Rock a huge ceremony was held to present battle flags to the Companies of Pike and Borland. The two companies marched to the meeting place with Pike's Company in the forefront. The flag of Pike's Company had the motto "Up Guards! And at 'em" surrounded by a wreath of embroidery. Captain Borland's Company flag bore the motto "Extend the Area of Freedom". Each flag also had 28 stars and 13 stripes as a background. Miss Josephine P.

Buckner and Miss Ellen Field presented the flags to Captains Pike and Borland respectively. In his acceptance speech, Pike gallantly replied,

"Lady, This flag will return. It may be riddled with shot, and tattered until no word of the motto is left, but that motto will not be forgotten. And whenever shouted by the Captain, I am sure the response will be, one hearty Saxon 'Hurrah! a fiery charge and glorious victory.'"

Other towns and counties held similar ceremonies. On June 20, 1846, a flag presentation was held in Sevier County where Miss Louisa Jane Pettigrew presented a flag to Captain Edward Hunter. At Batesville, Miss Caroline E. Pelham made the presentation to Captain A. R. Porter, and in Johnson County a dinner was held to honor the volunteers. On July 13, the Gazette reported that the ladies of Little Rock had finished the uniforms of the Volunteers. Those of the "Guards" were described as having blue jackets with gray pantaloons with red stripes at the sides.

In spite of all the fine speeches and opportunities for glory, not all men volunteered in good faith. Some men joined without any intentions of serving; others found military life not to their taste and deserted. In the beginning the volunteer's

punishment for such dishonor was public ostracism. On June 29, 1846, Captain A. R. Porter published the following notice:

BEWARE OF A SCOUNDREL

A THING, calling himself M. C. RUCHING, previous to my Company leaving home, enrolled himself as a volunteer in my Company of Mounted Gunmen, and after, upon this pretense, obtaining a horse and other rigging from another volunteer, to be paid for out of his pay, obtained leave of absence under pretense of visiting a relation, and then sloped with the property this dishonorably obtained. All persons wherever this scoundrel appears, would do well to notice their corn-cribs and meal houses, as he has given sufficient indications that he will steal whenever an opportunity presents itself.

A letter in the Gazette signed by Pike stated that Alford and William Stacy deserted on July 1, 1846, after having been enrolled to be mustered into service. Interestingly enough, the article does not call for their arrest, but was published in order that everybody would know of their disgraceful conduct.

Once the Companies were fully manned, they elected officers, gathered what equipment and supplies they had, and headed out for the rendezvous point at Washington, Hempstead County. The

original order was for ten Companies of Mounted Men and three of Infantry, which was later changed to twelve Companies of Mounted Men and three of Infantry. When the Companies of the various counties came together, there were twenty-two companies of Mounted Men and seven of Infantry, fourteen more than were needed.

Only ten companies of mounted men were selected. Among the companies, the counties from which they came, and the name of the Captains and the dates mustered into Federal Service were:

Company	County	Captain	Date
A	Pope	James S. Moffett	01 July 1846
B	Pulaski	Solon Borland	06 July 1946
C	Johnson	George W. Patrick	30 June 1846
D	Independence	Andrew R. Porter	03 July 1846
F	Pulaski	Albert Pike	02 July 1846
G	Crawford	John S. Roane	29 June 1846
H	Franklin	Willion C. Preston	30 June 1846
I	Hot Springs	William K. Inglish	01 July 1846
	Saline		
K	Phillips	John Preston, Jr.	10 July 1846

On July 4, the officers of each company voted for the field officers of the Arkansas Regiment of Mounted Gunmen. The results of the election were Archibald Yell, Colonel, Commandant; John S. Roane, Lieutenant Colonel; Solon Borland, Major; and Gaston Mearse, Esq., Adjutant. To replace those elected as Field Officers, the Companies elected C.C. Danley, Captain of Pulaski, replacing Borland, and John J. Dillar, Captain of Crawford, in place of J. S. Roane.

Once the election results were known, outcries in the newspapers began immediately. The Democrat accused President Polk of interfering and getting Yell elected as Colonel of the Regiment. The Gazette countered that this was impossible as the law forbade Federal interference with the State militia to prevent the President from taking over the Country. The Gazette published a list of resolutions made by Pike's men asking him to run for the position of Colonel, as they wished to retain him as their Captain. Later the Gazette refuted an article in the Arkansas Banner which stated that Pike's men had never held a meeting and that Pike did not run for regimental commander because he was afraid Yell would beat him, despite Governor Yell's lack of military experience.

Under Yell's command the Arkansas Regiment headed for Mexico. The Regiment traveled from fifteen to eighteen miles a day, setting up camp at approximately twelve o'clock each day. Only Pike used the afternoon to train his men, while, reportedly, "the other companies had been doing nothing". Dr. O. Petton stated that during the afternoon the other companies hunted and fished. He reported that at night, they had songs and "camp dancing", and were "the jolliest set of fellows in the world".

By the sixth of August the Regiment had reached Robin's Ferry, where they finally met not only their supplies, but the paymaster as well. The pay was undoubtedly welcome, especially to those who had enlisted for economic reasons. Bad weather delayed the Regiment at Robin's Ferry for four days. They were finally able to leave on August 10, reached the Brazos River on August 16, and arrived at the rendezvous point at San Antonio on the 28th of August.

Once in San Antonio, they were under the command of Regular Army Brigadier General John Ellis Wool. Here the Arkansas Regiment had quite a bit of trouble with General Wool. Colonel Yell's lack of knowledge in military matters and his inability to control his volunteer troops, earned him the contempt of Wool from the beginning of their acquaintance. Colonel Yell's lack of

military training showed when he placed companies in reverse order when setting up camp. He also failed to provide for any sanitation for the area. When General Wool saw the poor condition of the camp, he ordered the Regiment to march to a new location. The new site was even worse. Captain Pike described the new camp as having no water and being "A hotter place than purgatory". Another officer said that the place had no shade, and that the excessive heat caused 200 men to be on the sick list.

Wool and the Arkansas Regiment were continuously in conflict. Wool's measures did little to endear him the "Arkansas Devils" as he nicknamed them. A portion of a diary entry by an Illinois private showed the hostility between General Wool and the volunteers - particularly the Arkansas Regiment:

"General Wool is liked less every day by the volunteers because of his aristocratic manner and his harsh treatment of them. The Arkansas Volunteer Cavalry, which General Wool calls Colonel Yell's Mounted Devils, if provoked by him, would at the first opportunity blow out his life. Recently an Arkansas Volunteer passing the General's tent stopped and out of curiosity looked in. It displeased the General, and he told him to leave; as he did not leave immediately, he told his orderly to point a gun at him. The Arkansas soldier pointed his gun at General Wool and said; "Old horse, damn your soul, if you give such orders I will shoot you for certain". General Wool withdrew quickly. Another Arkansas soldier who met the General wearing civilian clothes in his tent, asked him "Stranger, have you

seen my horse this morning?" although he knew it was General Wool. Another time General Wool sent his orderly to the Arkansas camp with the request not to make so much noise. The Arkansas replied: "Tell Johnny Wool to kiss our ____."

Not all of the Regiment felt this way. Pike disagreed with the actions of the Arkansas Volunteers and placed some of the blame on Colonel Yell. Although Pike could be considered less than candid, due to his political differences and his loss of the election for Regimental Commander, even Major Borland, a Democrat, reported that "things in our regiment have not been well managed".

Despite Yell's shortcoming's Pike continued to drill men in the latest military formations and tactics. It was reported in the Gazette that he had one platoon that drilled on foot and another one that was coming along well in platoon drill. They expected to be drilling on horseback within a few days after reaching San Antonio. The same report revealed that at that time Captain William C. Preston started to drill his company as well. The Gazette reported that it was believed at that point that the companies of Pike and Preston together would make a good squadron.

THE MARCH INTO MEXICO

The Army assembled at San Antonio was expected to play a unique role in the war against Mexico. The United States Government had learned through agents in the northern Mexican states of Chihuahua and Coahuila that a great amount of animosity existed toward the government of Santa Ana. The Army that left San Antonio on September 26, 1846, under General John Ellis Wool, had as its objective the fomenting of revolution among the disenchanted Mexicans. Wool planned to lead his Army across the Rio Grande at Presidion Del Rio Grande then South to Saltillo and West to Chihuahua. His 1,950 man force consisted of six companies of Regulars from the Sixth Infantry, one company of cavalry, and an artillery battery of eight guns. In addition, Wool had the Arkansas Mounted Volunteers and two infantry regiments of Illinois Volunteers.

The march to the Rio Grande was unpleasant, the land was sterile and inhospitable. Indians circled around the flanks of the column to pick off stragglers. During the day the temperature reached 90 to 95 degrees, but fell at night to 48 degrees. The cold nights produced heavy concentrations of dew that in turn helped improve the otherwise sparse grazing. The journey was boring and the troops were disappointed after

crossing the Rio Grande, in finding no Mexicans to fight. A member of the Arkansas Mounted Volunteers wrote home: "...I am sick of ranging over uninteresting country, looking for an enemy we cannot find...Captain Pike...would, himself, gladly be on his way home. He is most anxious for immediate discharge". The country was hard on horses. In Pike's own company twenty men had to get rid of horses that had gone lame. Pike himself abandoned one and had two more stolen.

Once in Mexico there were problems getting food from the local Mexicans since they would not take greenbacks but demanded gold or silver coins. The officers of the Arkansas Regiment were forced to purchase food for their troops out of their own pockets and the men were forced to scrounge for wild fruits. The only commodities in abundance were coffee and sugar which the Army supplied free.

To add to the misery, the men's clothes were wearing out. The old uniforms provided by the ladies of Arkansas were ragged and threadbare. Furthermore, since the men had not been paid since leaving Louisiana they could buy nothing from the merchants who accompanied the train. Finally one of the Arkansas officers persuaded a sympathetic Regular Army Officer to give the troops dragoon uniforms. This improved spirits tremendously.

Sickness was also a problem. In Company E, Arkansas Mounted Volunteers, the commanding officer reported that out of 60 men in his company ten were sick and unfit for duty. Furthermore, three men had died since the unit left Arkansas from various diseases or from the attempted cure: "the injudicious administration of mercury caused poor Moseley's death", wrote Albert Pike in a letter to the Gazette.

Recreation along the route seems to have been limited to telling stories and singing around the campfire. One newspaper reporter, Nathaniel Niles of the Boston Evening Post marveled to hear privates at night round their fires swapping tales on warfare drawn from classical Greek History. According to Niles nearly every volunteer in the Arkansas and Illinois Regiments kept a diary and sent letters about army life back to his hometown newspaper. A few officers like Captain Pike of Company E and John C. Preston of Company H, Arkansas Volunteers, kept boredom down by constant drilling of their troops in cavalry and infantry tactics. "Our squadron spent the time profitably if not pleasantly, in drilling on horseback in the morning, and on foot in the afternoon..."

As the column moved into Mexico instances of guerrilla warfare increased and created tension within the troops. On

February 9, 1847, for instance, Private Samuel A. Colquitt of Company B, Arkansas Volunteers was brutally strangled with a lasso and left tied to a tree by Mexican guerrillas. His friends in the Arkansas Regiment began a search for the culprit. In a small settlement called Cantana, some two miles from the murder site they discovered the personal effects of another missing Illinois volunteer. This was enough evidence for them and they began to systematically shoot down a number of men. Officers intervened to stop the carnage and the companies responsible were later put on punishment details.

The small American Army also had to be watchful for Regular Mexican troops that constantly circled and picked off stragglers and small scouting parties. Early in January, 1847, Major Solon Borland with a mixed group of 70 Arkansas and Kentucky volunteers was surrounded and captured by 3,000 Mexican lancers at the village of Encarnacion. Borland and his men were marched in stages all the way to Mexico City, often threatened by mobs of angry civilians along the route, and then imprisoned in a penitentiary. Along the route they were "privileged" to see Santa Anna himself pass by with his whole army on the way to the Battle of Buena Vista.

"...then came Santa Anna in person, seated in a chariot of war drawn by eight mules and surrounded by his staff

elegantly and gorgeously equipped; then fluttered on his rear a bevy of wanton women; and lastly, covering his rear, his baggage train, in the midst of which were five mules loaded with cocks from the best coops in Mexico."

The American officers were finally given the freedom of Mexico City, but the poor enlisted men struggled to survive among convicts. Even the officers were not provided for adequately by the Mexican government, but had to exist on the charity of American, British, and Irish merchants in Mexico City. Some of the officers escaped and joined General Winfield Scott when he attacked Mexico City, but most of the prisoners had to wait for the formal end of the war.

Besides fighting the weather, terrain, lack of supplies, guerrillas and worrying about the threat of capture, the little American army fought among themselves. Unfortunately the Arkansas Volunteers fell afoul of General Wool again. The bad feeling that had begun in San Antonio continued as the Arkansas troops proved unwilling to follow the rigid military discipline of the Regular Army directed by General Wool. The Arkansas troops were convinced that Wool "had it out for them", and purposely assigned them bad details and poor campsites. Josiah Gregg, the chronicler of the northern Mexican campaign apparently agreed. It had been a current saying, and virtually true, that

to know where the Arkansas camp was, it was only necessary to look which way the stream upon which you were located ran, and go to the extreme lower end ...so that the Arkansawyers' had filthy water to drink.

Colonel Yell, the commander of the Arkansas Volunteers was especially bitter towards Wool. Once ordered to camp his unit in an unusually noxious place he refused. Wool ordered Yell arrested and then ordered the second in command, Lt. Colonel John S. Roane to carry out the order. When Roane refused to follow the order he was arrested and Wool ordered Major Borland to pitch the camp as directed. Borland refused, was arrested, and the camp was not pitched until Captain Andrew Porter agreed to issue the order. Yell and his officers were released five days later after they acknowledged regret for their actions. The animosity between Wool and Yell's Arkansas Volunteers never ended and the unfortunate affair poisoned staff relations throughout the campaign. Wool's dislike of Arkansas troops was not all inclusive however. He singled out the praise Company E commanded by Albert Pike and Company H under William C. Preston. Wool was impressed by the military skill of these units that Pike and Preston had drilled into their men through long hours of practice. Wool singled out the two companies by forming them

into a special detached squadron which he and General Zachary Taylor then used for special reconnaissance missions and as a mobile reserve at the Battle of Buena Vista on February 23, 1847. Pike was proud of this distinction and wrote about it in the Arkansas State Gazette:

"I know it will gratify the friends of those who are serving in our two companies to learn that the squadron has received distinguished marks of favor and confidence from the generals; that we are detached and sent here because the men are orderly and obedient, respect private property, are never known to disobey an order and kept in fine condition as to discipline and drill."

Wool's little army with its contingent of Arkansas Volunteers continued to move further south into Mexico. Three months out of San Antonio, the unit lay at the town of Parras ready to move westward towards Chihuahua. By that time, however, the strategy of the war was changing. Now while Zachary Taylor sat in northern Mexico, another American invasion force was forming to take Mexico City under General Winfield Scott. Scott needed troops and he took them from Taylor. By January, 1847, General Scott had taken nearly all of the Army Regulars from Taylor. Santa Anna, watching this with interest, decided on an incredibly bold plan to temporarily ignore Scott on the east coast of Mexico near the capital, and turn suddenly north to

destroy Taylor's little force. As the intelligence came in and Taylor began to see his danger he suddenly needed more men, and Wool's force to the west was the natural choice. The message from Taylor reached Wool's base at Parras and within two hours his army was marching east to reinforce Taylor's small army at Agua Nueva. They marched rapidly, covering forty miles in the first twenty-four hours, twenty-five miles the next day, and twenty the next. By December 21, the small American force of two small armies was at Agua Nueva, a strategically important place because it was the only abundant source of water for thirty-five miles. If Taylor could hold Agua Nueva, Santa Anna could come no further north.

THE ARKANSAS MOUNTED VOLUNTEERS AT THE BATTLE OF BUENA VISTA,

FEBRUARY 22-23 - 1847

General Taylor realized that although Agua Nueva was the only good source of water where an army the size of Santa Anna's could resupply after the long, dry march from San Luis Potosi, the terrain around the springs was open and without natural defense. Had his army been anywhere equal to that of the Mexicans, the danger of the open ground could have been overcome

with entrenchments. But even the best entrenchment could not make up for the four to one superiority that Santa Anna enjoyed.

On February 20, a Mexican deserter named Francisco Valdes told the Americans that Santa Anna's Army numbered 20,000 men and was slowly moving north toward the Americans from La Encarnacion 35 miles away. This information was supported the next day by the report of Major Henry E. McCulloch and his group of Texas rangers who the previous night had succeeded in sneaking through the entire Mexican Army while it was camped at La Encarnacion. McCulloch estimated the Mexican Army to number 18,000 infantry, 3,000 to 8,000 cavalry and 36 pieces of artillery. On the other hand the total strength of the Americans was 4,759 most of whom were volunteers.

By noon the same day, General Taylor had decided to abandon the camp at Agua Nueva and order the whole American Army back six miles to a more defensible position near the hacienda of Buena Vista. However, there were vast amounts of military stores at the site including large mountains of grain purchased by the Mexican population. Taylor ordered that as much of the grain as possible be shoveled into wagons and moved back to the rear; what could not be moved was to be burned. To protect the wagons from attack Taylor ordered Colonel Archibald Yell and his regiment of

Arkansas Mounted Volunteers (minus the companies of Pike and Preston) and part of the Kentucky Cavalry Regiment to stay at Agua Nueva. Leaving Yell at Agua Nueva was not entirely a defensive move against the oncoming Mexicans. It was partially inspired by General Taylor's distrust of the teamsters. Teamsters were not soldiers but civilians hired by the army to haul supplies. These men were generally distrusted and many soldiers shared the opinion of Josiah Gregg that they were, "a set of most ignorant, inefficient, presumptuous upstarts, generally appointed through favoritism or imposition..." The teamsters, nervous at their closeness to the advancing Mexicans, loaded only a portion of the grain and even abandoned some loaded wagons. They drove off so quickly that the empty wagons made a "thundering rattle that the enemy mistook them perhaps for artillery". Colonel Yell, in disgust, then ordered the remaining grain burned and led his rear guard to the new American position.

The new position near Buena Vista had been chosen by General Taylor with care as a natural defensive position where his small army would have a chance against the larger Mexican force. He had been directed to the position by General John Wool who had noted the position when he scouted the area nearly two months earlier accompanied by a young Captain of Engineers named Robert

E. Lee. At a point known locally as La Angostura (the Narrows), a system of gullies and plateaus shut the road in on both sides and created a narrow pass. On the west side of the road, a small stream had dug a maze of gullies twenty feet deep with steep sides. These gullies made it improbable that an enemy could go around a unit dug in on the road. Along the east side of the road, ran a long, high plateau, cut here and there by ravines running from the top of the plateau down to the road at right angles. Troops on top of the plateau could fire down from it, but could only be attacked in a few places where the ravines gave infantry access to the top of the plateau. Elsewhere along its length the plateau was too steep. Taylor knew that if he placed strong bodies of troops at the heads of the ravines he would not be forced to form a long and continuous defensive line and could offset to a considerable degree the numerical advantage of the Mexican Army.

A mile beyond the Narrows the valley broadened out into a flat plain. On this plain was the Hacienda of Buena Vista. Taylor saw immediately that the hacienda offered a fortified base from which troops and supplies could be fed into the battle. This hacienda was typical of the fortress like ranches necessary in outlaw and Indian infested northern Mexico. It was a walled

village with the houses, storerooms and corrals built in a square with bland walls facing out. The rear walls extended above the roofs and had loopholes for muskets. In the event that the Mexicans broke through the Narrows the hacienda would make a strong defense point.

Throughout the 22nd and during the morning of the next day General Wool, on orders from Taylor, organized a defensive line. He placed a strong battery of artillery across the road at the narrowest point between the gullies and the edge of the plateau. From there he strung his regiments along the top of the plateau where the ravines could give access to the top. These infantry formations were supported by concentrations of artillery. To guard the southern ravine Wool placed six companies of Colonel Yell's Arkansas Volunteers along with troops from the Kentucky Mounted Volunteers. Both groups were dismounted with their horses tied well to the rear. The remainder of the Arkansas troops comprising Albert Pike's Squadron were held as a mobile reserve at Saltillo about six miles from the battlefield along with Captain Charles A. May's 2nd Dragoons and the Mississippi Rifles of Jefferson Davis.

While Wool was putting the finishing touches on his line, two companies of Arkansas Volunteers came under enemy fire.

About two o'clock a brigade of the Mexican Army commanded by General Pedro de Ampudia began to move up a ravine that led from the road to the top of the plateau. It was a good position for an assault, since it was out of range of the American guns at the Narrows and the Mexican forces were practically shielded by the steep walls of the ravine. Americans could only fire on the advancing Mexicans by standing on the ravine edge which exposed them to artillery fire from a Mexican battery placed on a hill behind Ampudia's advancing columns. The Arkansas troops gave a good account of themselves, killing some forty of the enemy before darkness ended the fighting and the Mexicans were then able to establish themselves on the slopes of the ravine in a good position to move onto the plateau top the next morning. During the night the Mexicans massed 1500 to 2600 infantry for the attack. Santa Anna recognized the strength of the American position at the Narrows and knew the only way to take the position was by moving around it through the ravines and onto the top of the plateau. Once in control of the top his forces could move north, take Buena Vista, and isolate the guns blocking the road.

The battle opened at eleven o'clock on the 23rd when Ampudia's troops began to work their way out of the ravine

supported by artillery and infantry firing over the heads of the advancing party. According to one American account, the Mexicans advanced in perfect order "...with a regularity that excited our admiration and must have struck the fancy of our two regular generals". As the troops advanced, Mexican artillery began to drop shells into the ranks of the 2nd Indiana Regiment of Volunteers and the combined group of Arkansas and Kentucky dismounted cavalymen. The Indiana Commander, Colonel Williams A. Bowles ordered his unit to retreat out of range of the cannons, but his men mistook this for an order of general retreat from the field. Before the officers could correct this impression, the unit simply disintegrated and the men streamed to the rear so shaken that the whole regiment was effectively out of the battle. The withdrawals left a hole in the American line and the Mexicans poured infantry into the breach. They hauled cannon up behind the infantry and turned them on the position held by the Arkansas and Kentucky cavalry. At the same time Mexican lancers began an attack on these troops from the front. The Arkansas/Kentucky units, flanked by artillery and fronted by lancers held temporarily, fired a volley that briefly halted the lancers and then repeated the misunderstanding of the Indiana Regiment. When Colonel Archiblad Yell ordered a pullback out of

cannon range, the troops attempted to comply, but broke ranks in the confusion of battle and could not reform. They had never practiced this maneuver on the parade ground as the regular units did. When they needed it in the heat and confusion of battle they failed. Colonel Yell, however, refused to give up, he raced through his retreating troops, took a position in front of them and with his Adjutant, Major Gaston Mears, and his Quartermaster Sergeant, James McVicar managed to stop most of them, form them into a line and fire another volley that again temporarily checked the Mexican advance.

At this point, the 2nd Dragoons of Captain Charles May and the Arkansas Squadron commanded by Captain Albert Pike appeared behind Colonel Yell's men. Pike and May had been out of sight in a ravine trying to organize a line of troops while hundreds of disheartened Indiana volunteers pushed through them. Pike feared that the panic of the Indiana troops might spread to his men, "but they had been too well disciplined for that". As their Captain ascended the line and called on them to follow, every man marched steadily up (they had tied their horses behind them) and formed in line on the summit "with all the accuracy of a parade". Pike was justly proud of his men. Except for Captain William C. Preston, Pike had been one of the few officers to train his

troops in the intricate maneuvers of the 19th century battlefield and so in the face of panic his troops calmly maneuvered into line. Once in position, his squadron shouldered and shoved their way through the fleeing Indiana Troops, and they emerged behind Colonel Yell's position in sight of the enemy with such a disciplined appearance that the Mexican line halted for a brief moment.

Even with this reinforcement, the Arkansans were outnumbered by nearly ten to one, and their line was slowly pushed back toward Buena Vista, but it was no rout. They halted periodically and poured a volley into the Mexicans before retiring again. They were helped by the rugged, ravine cut surface of the plateau that gave them opportunities to place their flanks on ravine edges so the superior numbers of Mexicans could not get around behind them. Pike's Squadron and Yell's command kept moving slowly backwards toward Buena Vista, with Pike to the left of Yell. Finally 200 yards from the ranch Yell turned his troops to repel a group of lancers. Here he made a fatal mistake, he ordered his men to mount their horses and to fire their carbines from the saddle to stop the Mexican charge. A Regular unit would never have done it because it was a violation of basic tactics for the period that dictated the only way to meet a cavalry

charge was by charging yourself. When Yell's men fired, they had no time to reload or draw their sabers and spur their horses into the attack. The Mexican lancers poured over the Arkansans and drove them from the field. Colonel Yell himself refused to leave the field, spurred his horse into the attackers followed by Captain Andrew Porter and a half dozen privates. Yell and Porter were both killed, their bodies so badly torn that it was difficult to recognize them after the battle. Lt. Colonel Roane immediately assumed command and rallied a fragment of the unit under the very walls of the hacienda. Captain May's Dragoons and Albert Pike's squadron charged from the left into the flank of the lancers. In a matter of moments the Mexican victors were running from the battlefield and into the mountains. Pike and May's timely arrival had prevented the Mexicans from reaching Buena Vista. While there were many crucial actions that day, any one of which could have caused the defeat of the Americans, the Arkansans defeat of the Mexican lancers before Buena Vista was one of the most important. Elsewhere along the plateau top the tide began to turn for the American Army, and by late afternoon the Mexicans had withdrawn. The Arkansas troops fully expected the Mexicans to return the next day. However, when General

Taylor ordered Pike's squadron to scout the next day he found the Mexicans in full retreat, abandoning their equipment and wounded.

Buena Vista must have seemed a miracle to the Americans. Less than 4,800 Americans had beaten an army four times their size and one which was to all intents and purposes a professional one via long service in the constant round of Mexican civil wars. But as the Americans discovered after the battle it was an army where the soldiers lacked adequate food, decent weapons and served under brutal conditions. Their shortcomings became apparent to the Arkansas troops as they scouted after the retreating Mexicans. They found wounded soldiers who told of not having eaten for days, who were brutally starving by the time they went into battle. Santa Anna's orders captured after the battle made clear that the soldiers had eaten very little, and on the 23rd when the battle began, they had fought on empty stomachs. Previous to that date they had only a small ration of jerked beef, two biscuits and a small cake of brown sugar called piloncello. After this ran out some soldiers turned to eating raw corn taken from unharvested fields.

The Arkansas troops examined the abandoned muskets of the Mexicans and found they were castoffs from the British Army that were unreliable. Further, the standard issue paper cartridges

contained too much powder that gave a round so much recoil that it hurt the shoulder. To avoid discomfort the average Mexican soldier fired his weapon from the hip which invariably caused him to shoot high.

Pike's troops discovered Mexican soldiers with no morale, a fact attributable to the brutality of their officers. One American soldier who was a prisoner had a chance to observe relations between Mexican officers and enlisted men reported that:

"The private soldiers in the Mexican service are treated with so much imperviousness and hauteur and even cruelty as the disobedient slaves upon the cotton plantations... There is an impossible gulf between the officers and soldiers of the Mexican Army... Mexican officers whip them with the flat sides of their sabers in the most brutal manner."

The reasons for the American victory were many. The Americans had better weapons, the choice of terrain, no lack of food and generally decent officers. But most importantly many American units had been well trained and drilled in the intricacies of nineteenth century tactics. The infantry moved in solid lines marching shoulder to shoulder, many cavalry units had learned to maneuver their mounts in the heat of battle just as if on the parade ground. The intricate formations were the only way

to make the short range, highly inaccurate muskets of the period deliver a killing fire. Units like Albert Pike's Squadron and Jefferson Davis' Mississippi Rifles had trained vigorously all the way from their home states into Mexico. Units like these made the difference at Buena Vista. This is not to say that all the American units were well trained. Regiments like the 2nd Indiana Volunteers and some of Yell's companies in the Arkansas Mounted Volunteers had little training. They had neglected it all the way from home to Mexico considering it silly and dictatorial. They paid dearly for this attitude in the battle. The Regular Army officers at the battle noticed the skill of some of the American volunteer units and commented on it. Captain May whose 2nd Dragoons had fought all day beside Captain Pike's Squadron, said Pike's Squadron "was the best corps of volunteers he ever saw, and that in every respect they behaved as his own men".

Even Wool, the much maligned and hated object of ridicule for the Arkansas Volunteers, reserved special praise for the Squadron commanded by Captain Pike. The Battle of Buena Vista illustrates a good lesson about the citizen soldier of whatever age: adequately trained in conformity with current Regular Army

training he is the best of soldiers, but if laxly trained and allowed to neglect current doctrine he can be a disaster.

After the battle the Arkansas volunteers settled down with the rest of the Army at Agua Nueva where a new camp was begun on the 25th of February. There was little to do in the north of Mexico since the action had now shifted to General Winfield Scott's campaign before Mexico City.

In April, Albert Pike and twenty-five Arkansans made a 300 mile march to Chihuahua to open communications with Colonel Alexander W. Doniphan's Missouri Volunteers. When he returned to Buena Vista in May he became embroiled in a court of inquiry with some officers of other Arkansas companies who felt he had slighted their units in a report of the battle published in the Arkansas State Gazette. The dispute was politically motivated by officers who disliked Pike's Whig politics. This dispute had little justification according to General Wool who heard the allegations and dismissed the court claiming the dispute had been amicably adjusted.

Thus, the Arkansas Mounted Volunteers ended their experience in Mexico. Soon afterwards the unit marched to Monterey, where they were paid and then mustered out of service on June 7th. By June 30th, the Volunteers had landed at New Orleans. On July 9th

they stepped off a river boat to a hero's welcome in Little Rock. The Volunteers marched up the streets of the town greeted by German bands, cannon fire, and hundreds of cheering citizens. At a ceremony in the capitol building Albert Pike returned the battle flag given his unit when it left for war by the ladies of Little Rock. Arkansas' citizen soldiers had proven once more that in the country's hour of need it could depend on its states' militiamen. Arkansas militiamen would be mobilized and proven many more times.

