



The Battle of Apache Pass



Introduction

In the spring of 1861, a Confederate force commanded by Brigadier General Henry Hopkins Sibley invaded New Mexico Territory with the intention of seizing the mineral-rich southwest and eventually wresting California from the Union. Volunteers from California, organized the previous summer, began to march across the Arizona desert to counter Sibley's invasion. Yet a force far more elusive than Confederates awaited them in Apache Pass.

The Confederate States Government

By May of 1861, the Confederate States Government cast their eyes toward the southwest. It was hoped that seizing the region would bolster the southern economy by allowing for the extension of slavery into the area, and the construction of a transcontinental railroad to open trade with the Orient. General Sibley, recently wearing Federal blue, received authority from Confederate President Jefferson Davis to implement this plan of conquest.

Confederate troops from Texas achieved early victories against the Federal troops in southern New Mexico, but were defeated by Colorado Volunteers near Santa Fe in March 1862. This

defeat destroyed any further designs the Confederate Government had in the area.

While Confederate forces were moving in west Texas, the call went out for Californians to volunteer to defend the state. One particular force called the "California Column" was commanded by Brigadier General James Carleton. They were eventually ordered to march east across Arizona and threaten Sibley's line of supply and communication running south toward El Paso. When the Californians arrived in Tucson in May 1862, Sibley's Confederates had already met defeat two months earlier.

The California Column

General Carleton had approximately 2,350 men in Tucson with additional horses and wagons. Realizing that the harsh desert environment would not allow the entire command to move as one body, he divided the California Column into smaller groups so as not to deplete the water sources along the route. Secondly, he delayed his advance until the end of June to take advantage of the annual summer rains.

A 140-man cavalry force under Lt. Col. Edward Eyre, reconnoitering for Carleton's command, arrived at Apache Pass on June 25 and continued

to the Rio Grande before reporting to Carleton. Fearing the Eyre had been repulsed, a second force under Captain Thomas Roberts left Tucson on July 10 with 126 men, 22 wagons, and two howitzer cannons to establish a forward supply base as a rallying point for Eyre's command.

The temperature was over 110 degrees when the force arrived in Apache Pass on July 15. Cochise and Mangas Coloradas, watchful since Eyre passed three weeks earlier, now prepared an ambush for the Californians.

Conflict and Aftermath

After a forty-mile march the Californians were strung out along the Butterfield Road. The Apaches ambushed the rear of the command and succeeded in temporarily capturing the howitzers. The infantry under Captain Roberts regrouped and attacked the Apaches, whereupon the warriors scattered into the surrounding hills.

From the stage station the soldiers observed Apaches near the spring. Approaching the area with twenty men, the Californians were met with a devastating fire. Captain Roberts ordered them back, and instead used the howitzers to drive the

Apaches away from the spring. However, Roberts realized the key to victory was seizing the high hill on his left.

Twenty men under 1st Sargeant Albert Fountain moved forward as howitzer rounds flew overhead. Ascending the crest of the ridge, Fountain ordered a bayonet charge that drove the Apaches from their commanding position. The command finally gained the spring after a five-hour engagement. The apaches renewed the following day, but it lasted a mere twenty minutes after the howitzers were again brought into action.