

A DIFFERENT KIND OF WAR

With the exception of the Battle of Honey Springs July of 1863, a different kind of war was usually fought in Indian Territory. Almost immediately after the guns went silent at Fort Sumpter, South Carolina during April of 1861, a clash of philosophies began on how battles should be fought. Most officers, Union and Confederate, were educated in military strategy at West Point and schooled in the tradition of European battle tactics that required large numbers of soldiers. Companies of one hundred men or regiments of a thousand, even more, would line up a short distance apart and fire at each other with smooth bore, short range weapons. Closing ranks as their comrades fell, troops would realign, shoot, move several paces forward, reload and fire again...some as rapidly as three times a minute. From the first battle of Bull Run, July 21, 1861, generals like Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson were exhorting their troops to engage in face-to-face combat, by firing and then “to use the bayonet.” Opposing troops grappled while cannon fire laced with grape, “hot” shot or chains mowed them down in large numbers. And, as the war progressed, repeating rifles were used more frequently, adding to the mayhem. Epic battles resulted in horrific numbers of casualties, further east, captured headlines and continued throughout the war. The dead and wounded at Gettysburg (40,600); Chickamauga (28,300); and the Seven Days (27,500) became monuments to a system that seemed to ignore the fact that modern weapons were now being used.

Early in the war, west of the Mississippi, or the Trans Mississippi as it became known, that same strategy was attempted. Commanders learned at Wilson’s Creek, Missouri in August of 1861, then Pea Ridge, Arkansas the following March that neither the terrain in general nor Indian troops in particular, were suited to it. In addition to losing 8000 casualties in those combined battles there were discipline issues, particularly for the Confederates. Indian troops had grown up on horseback, or during conflicts, ambushing opponents from protected vantage places. If these first two battles were any indication, in the future these men would only be moderately effective as foot soldiers in open terrain, but could be unequaled when fighting on horseback.

Another important factor, relevant to both the east and Trans Mississippi fronts, was that most Confederates were fighting on their home territory, while Union troops came from states far removed from the battlegrounds, Confederate soldiers seeing their homes laid waste or their families displaced or killed, frequently took “French Leave” to protect loved ones, even staying long enough to plant crops or repair buildings. This inconsistency resulted in southern officers frequently restructuring units within their commands.

Finally, in Indian Territory there was the underlying issue of divided loyalties, within the Creeks and Seminoles, but particularly among the Cherokees. Bitter feelings had consumed that nation since a delegation had signed the Treaty of New Echota, These “treaty signers” and the other faction “traditionalists” were constantly at odds. That division had surfaced again before the Cherokee Nation finally cast its lot with the Confederacy, but hard feelings remained as the following incident demonstrates. At the conclusion of the defeat at Pea Ridge and while retreating through the Boston Mountains, Colonel John Drew’s cavalry consisting of Pin Indians, the traditionalists, looted the

Confederate supply wagons as they fled. Although Drew's regiment had fought with southern troops, their sympathies obviously were more Union driven. That became evident when a short time later that same unit, surrendered to the Union's Third Indian Regiment at Park Hill and were sworn into the Union army.

These issues of failed military strategy, location, and loyalty, were not lost on the Confederate's Commanding General Earl Van Doren, who was stinging from the defeat at Pea Ridge, his first loss in eleven engagements. Van Doren prepared the following order addressed to his subordinate, General Albert Pike "To take his Indians back to their country, cut off wagon trains, annoy the enemy in marches and prevent him as far as possible from supplying his troops in Missouri and Kansas." Further, "to maintain themselves independent...you will not give battle to a large force, but fell trees, burn bridges, destroy supplies, attack enemy trains, stampede his animals, cut off his detachments..." These orders and this strategy were immediately embraced by fifty three year old Stand Watie and his confederate counterparts. From that time forward, the fall of 1862 until the end of the war, there were few frontal conflicts out west...Prairie Grove, Honey Springs, First and Second Cabin Creek...but a myriad of lesser battles and skirmishes, guerilla warfare that was uniquely adopted to both the terrain and participants.

Van Doren's order was initiated shortly thereafter and Trans Mississippi military strategy was redefined. Unfortunately his far sightedness didn't extend to his personal life, he was killed by a jealous husband the following year. Trans Mississippi battles have never received the visibility nor acknowledged importance compared to eastern conflicts. It is notable however, that as time has passed military tactics have changed. Massive frontal attacks frequently are replaced and today opposing forces fight a different kind of war.

