

Californio Lancers: The 1st Battalion of Native Cavalry in the Far West, 1863-1866

Andrew Johnson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Andrew (2016) "Californio Lancers: The 1st Battalion of Native Cavalry in the Far West, 1863-1866," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.3.23

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss3/22>

Review

Johnson, Andrew

Summer 2016

Prezelski, Tom *Californio Lancers: The 1st Battalion of Native Cavalry in the Far West, 1863-1866*. Arthur H. Clark, \$32.95 ISBN 9780870634360

Finding Citizenship in the American West: California's "Native Cavalry"

Who maintained control of the far West for the Union during the Civil War, as the bulk of the Union Army clashed with the Confederacy in the East? In *Californio Lancers*, Tom Prezelski seeks to answer this question. He shows ample evidence that credit should be given largely to the 5,000 men who made up the 1st Battalion of "Native Cavalry." Prezelski argues that of the 16,000 Californians that fought for the Union during the Civil War, the Battalion of Native Cavalry established control over the area by "pursuing bandits, supporting campaigns against Indians in the northern counties, and securing the roads that crossed the southern deserts." Prezelski goes on to state, "they patrolled against Apache Indians [in the South] and guarded ... against Emperor Maximilian's partisans." These men, "were the face of U.S. authority in the region." (11) But what made this group of 5,000 men so unique from the 16,000 Californians who served during the War? The Battalion was comprised of California's "native" Spanish speaking population, or those former Mexican citizens who stayed in the United States following the conquest of Mexico, during the Mexican-American War (1846-48). Prezelski's monograph thus underscores the contributions of Mexican-American history to the history of the United States during the Civil War. He clearly points out that for far too long, the public has overlooked and failed to acknowledge the heritage and history of Hispanics in the United States. Instead, "Americans" treated these people as foreign, with no claim to a share in the nation's history. But Prezelski makes a bold counterclaim as a result of their service during the Civil War, Mexican Americans were no longer a conquered people, but rather, "a constituency that demanded a seat at the table" within the American political system. (13)

Prezelski divides the book into roughly two sections, the first section covers chapters one through six. These chapters deal primarily with the organization of companies A-D. These military units formed what would become the 1st battalion. He also acknowledges and explores the officer corps that made up the command structure of the battalion, and the conflict that often arose between Anglo-Americans, and their Spanish speaking subordinates. Prezelski also points out that two of these units organized in northern California fought against rebellious Indian tribes in the region.

The second section (chapters seven through twelve) deals with service the battalion provided in southern California, which at the time was considered a bastion of confederate sympathy. The second section chronicles the battalions time fighting against the Apache, securing the frontier from Maximilian's Mexico, and dealing with the inhospitable climate of the high desert. In this reviewer's opinion, it makes up the crux of the book, providing a detailed description of Mexican-American cavalry life. A particularly strong contribution—chapter twelve—provides the reader with what should be considered an epilogue, as Prezelski explores what happens to many of the officers who served for the United States in this battalion during the Civil War. Prezelski has also attached five Appendices which lists the men who served in the cavalry, the women, the chain of command, desertion amongst the cavalry, and finally an account of Lieutenant de la Guerra who pursued deserters in in 1864.

While Prezelski shows the contributions of these "native" Californio's, and provides the reader with many amusing anecdotes about the use of lances amongst the battalion (yes they actually used a medieval weapon) the book still had one glaring shortcoming that at times hindered and hurt the effectiveness of the story he wrote. The author fails to recognize the irony of one completely marginalized group (Mexican-Americans) within American society, acting on behalf of a government attempting to subjugate another completely marginalized and excluded group within American society (Native Americans). While the military history within this monograph is excellent, providing the reader with meticulous details of the battalion, the officers, and the battalions' movements in California and Arizona, it could have raised larger social questions, about the process of reconstruction that appeared to be underway in the West during this time. The United States engaged in conquering the Native Americans who called this area home, and while this process was not complete until Wounded Knee in 1893, the wars of the Great Plains and Far West, were underway during the Civil

War. Prezelski's account fails to answer a larger question: were these "native" Californio's who experienced the process of conquest during the Mexican American War and subsequent marginalization by Anglo-Americans so different from their Native American counterparts?

Tom Prezelski's book does not address it, but surely these larger social questions are crucial to our understanding of citizenship and control in the West during and after the Civil War. *Californio Lancers* is nevertheless a fine contribution to military, as well as Chicano-history. Mexican-American history, is American history, and by shedding light on the 1st battalion of "native" cavalry Prezelski shows that Mexican-Americans engaged in the process of building a new nation during the Civil War.

Andrew Johnson is a PhD candidate at Louisiana State University. His dissertation is titled: That Diabolical Sect: Antimasonry, Religion, and the Remaking of Citizenship in Antebellum America.