

A Civil War History of the New Mexico Volunteers and Militia

Donald C. Elder III

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Review

Elder, Donald C. III

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Answering the Call of Duty in the New Mexico Territory

As part of its elaborate plan to win a decisive victory over US naval forces in June of 1942, the Japanese military captured the Aleutian Islands of Attu and Kiska. This move soon prompted the US military to respond with a campaign to regain the lost American territory. Although such an action diverted forces to a region far removed from areas of the Pacific that held true strategic importance, the presence of an enemy force on American soil proved so unpalatable to the nation's military leaders that they committed valuable resources to a distant and desolate theater of operations.

Interestingly, the same situation had presented itself to American military leaders 80 years earlier. In 1862, a military force under the command of Confederate General Henry Sibley left Ft. Bliss in Texas and began an advance into the Territory of New Mexico. Faced with an enemy occupying American soil, the nation's military responded in 1862 precisely in the same manner that their successors would choose in 1942 after the loss of Attu and Kiska.

Although similar in many regards, the campaigns to regain lost American soil do have one important difference: the types of military units utilized for that task. While a handful of Alaskans (given the distinctive nickname "Castner's Cutthroats") participated in the liberation of Attu and Kiska, regular US and Canadian army units made up the vast majority of the troops committed to that action. In New Mexico, however, the opposite occurred. As it turned out, most of the American soldiers deployed in 1862 to respond to the Confederate incursion came from the territory itself.

History has largely overlooked the *nuevomexicanos* who provided this military service. Part of this neglect stems from the fact that the records of the

units recruited in the New Mexico Territory were compiled haphazardly, if at all. Unfortunately, it appears that the ethnic prejudices of the regular US Army officers deployed in the region also contributed to this neglect. Hispanics made up the bulk of the manpower recruited in New Mexico during the Civil War, and the predominantly Anglo officer corps largely regarded these individuals as inferior. Accordingly, the official accounts that they wrote of the campaigns in New Mexico usually made little mention of those soldiers.

This neglect has at long last been addressed by Jerry D. Thompson in his *A Civil War History of the New Mexico Volunteers & Militia*. Based on painstaking and meticulous research, Thompson's work tells the story of those individuals from the Territory of New Mexico who offered their services to the Union during the Civil War. In the process, he has presented as thorough an account of their contributions as we are ever likely to have.

Thompson begins his book with an examination of the Civil War as it pertained to the Territory of New Mexico, noting that the conflict came to area in 1861 in the form of a Confederate incursion led by Colonel John Baylor. E.R.S. Canby, who had become the commander of Union forces in the New Mexico territory in May of 1861, responded by calling upon the *nuevomexicanos* to defend their homeland. Some came forth as members of the existing territorial militia, while others joined new volunteer regiments. All prepared to meet an expected Confederate advance up the Rio Grande valley in early 1862.

Much of this history has already been described in books on the Civil War in New Mexico. What sets Thompson's work apart from those earlier works comes from his detailed depictions of the individuals who served as officers in these volunteer units. Most readers will undoubtedly already know of Christopher "Kit" Carson, who became the commander of the First New Mexico Infantry, but few of them likely have any familiarity whatsoever with the vast majority of the other officers in the volunteer units. It turns out that many of these individuals were Hispanics, including the commanders of the Second and Third volunteer regiments. Through the biographies of these officers that Thompson provides, readers will gain an appreciation of how a group largely marginalized in the usual narrative associated with the Civil War actually played an important role in saving the Territory of New Mexico for the Union.

After repulsing the Confederate invasion in the spring of 1862, the New Mexican volunteers assumed that the government would muster them out of the

military. Many had their wish granted, but not all of them—most notably Kit Carson. It turned out that James Carleton, who had succeeded Canby as the commander of Union forces in New Mexico, had other plans for the famous frontiersman. Raids by Native Americans, a fact of life since the United States had acquired the New Mexico Territory during the US-Mexican War, had increased in both intensity and frequency since the outbreak of the Civil War, and Carleton felt compelled to respond to these attacks. Accordingly, he tasked Carson with leading a campaign to subdue the marauding Native Americans. Carson, and hundreds of New Mexico volunteers, would thus have their terms of service extended long past the point in time when the Confederate threat to New Mexico had realistically ended.

Eventually, the War Department determined that it had no further need for the *nuevomexicanos*, and it granted discharges to those individuals who desired a return to civilian life. Most of them opted out of the military, and then disappeared from history. Thompson notes that this was literally true for many, as their muster rolls had either never been compiled or disappeared soon after the war. But through his extensive research efforts, Thompson has found every record that still exists, and in an appendix he gives a brief notation of every New Mexican who served in a volunteer regiment or in the militia during the Civil War.

If for the appendix on military service alone, Thompson's book represents a significant contribution to our understanding of the Civil War through its recognition of the individuals who gave service to the Union in a peripheral theater of operations. *A Civil War History of the New Mexico Volunteers & Militia* is much more than that, however. A useful narrative of the campaigns fought by Union soldiers in the New Mexico Territory during the Civil War era, the book includes a wealth of maps and illustrations that will visually engage the readers. The sheer heft of the book may initially give potential readers pause for concern, but the rewards involved in perusing the book will make such an undertaking quite worthwhile.

This is not to say that Thompson's work is flawless. Perhaps inevitably in a book of its length, errors of form and fact have made their way into print. For example, Thompson has Confederate General Henry Sibley's invading force gathered at Ft. Bliss "by Christmas 1862," when he in fact means Christmas 1861. He asserts that "Gen. Phillip Kearny" named Santa Fe's Ft. Marcy after the Secretary of War during the US-Mexican War, when the distinction of naming

the fort actually belonged to General Stephen Kearny. Inexplicably, Thompson states that E.R.S. Canby became the commander of the Division of the Pacific in 1879, and then *in the very next sentence* notes that in 1873 Canby became the only US Army general ever killed in action while facing Native Americans. Clearly, better editing would have strengthened Thompson's work.

In spite of this caveat, Thompson deserves high praise for his book. Through his efforts, Thompson has brought to life the story of many of the individuals who helped defend the New Mexico Territory during the Civil War era. While focusing primarily on the Union perspective during the conflict, Thompson has tried to do justice to all of the combatants in that area during the four years in question. Most importantly, Thompson has shown how a relatively small group of individuals (most of whom had been American citizens for only 15 years) helped their new nation maintain its authority in the face of a determined enemy during our country's crucial moment of truth.

Donald C. Elder III is professor of History at Eastern New Mexico University, where he specializes in the Civil War Era. He is the author of A Damned Iowa Greyhound: The Civil War Letters of William Henry Harrison Clayton (1998), and Love Amid the Turmoil: The Civil War Letters of William and Mary Vermilion (2003).