

THE FIRST FEDERAL INVASION
OF INDIAN TERRITORY

By Gary N. Heath*

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, the Confederates held the balance of power in Indian Territory. The leader of the Loyal Indians, Opothleyehala, and his followers were pushed out of the area in December, 1861.¹ The Confederates then had virtual control of all the Territory.

The Loyal Indian refugees in Kansas were most anxious to return home. When William P. Dole, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, arrived at Fort Leavenworth, to give what aid he could to the refugees, he assured them that every effort would be made to return them to the Territory at the earliest possible date.

The Battle of Pea Ridge, Arkansas, on March 8-8, 1862, was the turning point of the war for Indian Territory.² The Confederate forces were defeated and from this point on the Federal power was to grow while the Confederate power began to wane.

Commissioner Dole thought that the Federal power in Kansas had increased to such a point that a try at an invasion of Indian Territory could at last be made. On March 13, 1862, he recommended to Secretary of Interior Caleb B. Smith that he "... procure an order from the War Department detailing two Regiments of Volunteers from Kansas to go with the Indians to their homes and to remain there for their protection as long as may be necessary, also to furnish two thousand stand of arms and ammunition to be placed in the hands of the Loyal Indians."³ The effect of this letter was instantaneous. In less than a week Dole had been promised a force of two white regiments and two thousand Indians, appropriately armed.⁴

To expedite matters and avoid any difficulties that might arise, a semi-confidential agent, Judge James Steele, was sent by

* The author, Gary N. Heath, is a former graduate student of Dr. LeRoy H. Fischer, Professor of History and Civil War era specialist at Oklahoma State University. This article was written while Mr. Heath was a member of Dr. Fischer's seminar in Civil War history.

¹ Grant Foreman, *A History of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1942), p. 107.

² United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (hereinafter referred to as *Official Records*) Ser. 1, Vol. 8 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1882), pp. 287-92.

³ United States Government, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1862* (hereinafter referred to as *Indian Affairs*) (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1862), pp. 147-8.

⁴ *Official Records*, Ser. 1, Vol. 8, pp. 624-5.

the Indian Office in Washington, D. C. to General Henry W. Halleck, Commander of the Department of Mississippi, with an order for the delivery at Fort Leavenworth of the requisite arms:¹

It is the desire of the President, on the application of the Secretary of the Interior and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, that you should detail two regiments to act in the Indian country, with a view to open the way for the friendly Indians who are now refugees in Southern Kansas to return to their homes and to protect them there. Five thousand friendly Indians will also be armed to aid in their own protection, and you will please furnish them necessary subsistence.

General Halleck disliked the order. He was opposed to arming the Indians and would not commit himself as to when the auxiliary force would be available. Halleck was interested at the moment in the suppression of jayhawkers, and wanted Dole's nominee as commander of the Indian Expedition, Colonel Robert B. Mitchell, to command his own forces.

General Halleck at last put the wheels in motion that would culminate in the Indian Expedition. On April 5, 1862, he ordered General James W. Denver to designate the First Kansas Infantry, the Twelfth and Thirteenth Wisconsin Regiments, the Second and Seventh Kansas Cavalry and two batteries of artillery for the Indian Expedition.

It took some time to accumulate and inspect enough arms for two thousand Indians. By April 8, 1862, however, these arms were collected and shipped to Superintendent of Indian Affairs William G. Coffin in southern Kansas where they arrived eight days later. Coffin was sure that complications would arise as soon as the distribution of the weapons was begun. He believed that all the Indians, whether they intended to enlist or not, would try to obtain weapons.

The time was right for starting the expedition south. Confederate troops had not been sighted recently by the patrols and only small bands of raiders detested by both sides were to be found. At this critical juncture General Denver was relieved of command of the Indian Expedition, and he was succeeded by General Samuel D. Sturgis on April 10, 1862.²

The replacement of Denver by Sturgis in command of the Indian Expedition was the beginning of what contemporaries described as "Sturgis' military despotism."³ The policy of General Sturgis toward the recruitment of Indians for the expedition was unknown. His ideas were soon revealed and were hostile to the whole project. Sturgis issued an order on April 25, 1862, put-

¹ *Ibid.*

² *Ibid.*, pp. 602, 603.

³ Annie Heloise Abel, *The American Indian as Participant in the Civil War* (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1919), p. 104.

ting a summary stop to the enlistment of Indians for the expedition and threatening the arrest of anyone disobeying the order.⁹ Superintendent Coffin, and Colonel John Ritchie of the incomplete Second Regiment Indian Home Guards, protested this action. They wrote to Commissioner Dole for new instructions.⁷

While this internal conflict was raging the Department of Kansas was being reestablished under orders of May 2, 1862. General James G. Blunt was placed in command and took over his duties on May 5. On the day of his assumption of command, Blunt issued the following order countermanding the Sturgis order of April 25: "The instructions issued by the Department of Washington to the Colonels of the two Indian regiments ordered to be raised will be carried out, and the regiments will be raised with all possible speed." With this endorsement of the plan to use the two Indian regiments as guerrillas in the forthcoming expedition, orders were received to hurry the organization and departure of the regiments.¹⁰

The reason for the rush of preparing the troops at the earliest possible date was the increased activities of the secessionists in southwest Missouri. This brought up the question of what had the Indian allies of the Confederacy been doing since the Battle of Pea Ridge? The Territory seemed to be undefended and, indeed, deserted. This was one of the main reasons for the immediate launching of the invasion.

After the Battle of Pea Ridge, General Earl Van Dorn, the Confederate commander, had ordered the secessionist Indians to return to their own country to protect it. The Indians were to harass the Federals by cutting off their supply trains, by hit and run raids on undefended places, and in general annoy the enemy. The Indians had followed these orders to the letter. They terrorized and desolated the border area during the late spring.

Colonel Douglas H. Cooper and Colonel Stand Watie and their men were the two most active commands during this time. The Indians took to the hit and run tactics with such vigor that Colonel Cooper recommended that they be employed as guerrillas. On April 21 the Confederate government authorized the use of partisan rangers, and on May 6 Colonel Cooper made a recommendation for the use of his Indians in this capacity.¹¹

⁷*Official Records*, Vol. 8, p. 305.

⁸*Indian Affairs, 1862*, Coffin to Dole, April 29, 1862.

⁹*Official Records*, Vol. 13, pp. 385-70.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, Vol. 13, pp. 823-4.

¹¹United States Senate, 58th Congress, Second Session, *Journal of the Congress of the Confederate States*, Senate Document Number 234 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1905), p. 285.

A small action was fought at Neosho between Colonel Watie's scouts and the First Battalion of the First Missouri Cavalry on April 26. Watie remained at the site of the skirmish until May 31. Watie's men fought in conjunction with Colonel John T. Coffin at Neosho, where they defeated a Union force under Colonel John M. Richardson of the Fourteenth Missouri State Militia Cavalry.¹³ On the morning of May 31, Colonel Richardson was attacked by Confederate forces. These forces were 500 men strong composed of white men and Indians. He was forced to retire from the field of battle with a loss of eleven men. The Confederates lost one man and captured a number of tents, wagons, horses, and other supplies. After this engagement Watie moved through Missouri into Indian Territory and encamped on Cowskin Prairie.

Meanwhile, The First Regiment of the Indian Expedition had completed its enrollment. This was composed of eight companies of Creeks and two companies of Seminoles. The Second Regiment was not as homogeneous in its composition as the first and therefore was not as readily completed. The prospective commander of the Second Regiment, Colonel John Ritchie, had gone south to try and enlist some of the Osage Nation.¹⁴ These Indians were in a state of confusion due to a lack of cooperation between Superintendent Coffin and the Neosho Indian Agent Peter Elder. This situation delayed Colonel Ritchie's return and the enrollment of the Second Regiment.

The Indian Expedition was outfitted at Humboldt, Kansas. The man selected to command it, Colonel William Weer, of the Tenth Kansas Infantry, would have preferred that the outfitting take place at his home base of Fort Scott, Kansas. The supplies issued to the union Indians were of decidedly inferior quality. In some instances the weapons issued to the Indians would not fire and were completely useless.¹⁵

The main portion of the white troops that were to comprise the auxiliary forces for the Indian Expedition had been kept busy chasing bushwhackers in the Cherokee Neutral Lands and adjoining areas of Missouri.¹⁶ At the time of Blunt's assumption of command of the Department of Kansas, Colonel Frederick Salomon of the Ninth Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry was in charge of Fort Scott. The troops stationed at Fort Scott under his command were the eight companies of his own Ninth Wisconsin, a part of the Second Ohio Cavalry under Colonel Charles

¹³ *Official Records*, Vol. 13, 1862, pp. 61-3, 60-92, 64-65.

¹⁴ *Indian Affairs*, 1862, pp. 184-4.

¹⁵ *Official Records*, Vol. 13, 1862, p. 418.

¹⁶ Abel, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

Doubleday, the Tenth Kansas Infantry under Colonel William F. Cloud, and the Second Indiana Battery.¹⁷

General Blunt gave the command of the expedition to Colonel Doubleday of the Tenth Kansas. Doubleday made his plans accordingly. His command consisted of one regiment each of cavalry and infantry and one battery of artillery.¹⁸ His plans called for a rendezvous of his command at the mouth of Shoal Creek, where he would make his temporary headquarters. On June 1 the expedition moved south to the rendezvous site. Blunt, however, had a change of mind and decided to give the command of the Indian Expedition to Colonel Weer. Colonel Doubleday was to be assigned the command of the Second Brigade.

Doubleday was still in command when he conceived the idea that it would be possible to reach Fort Gibson without interference, provided that the attempt were made before the various commands of the Confederate forces could unite to resist the advance. Doubleday's scheme called for cutting off Watie, who was believed to be encamped in the Cowskin Prairie area. Accordingly, on June 6, 1862, Doubleday with one battery of artillery and 1,000 men moved south from Spring River towards Grand River and Cowskin Prairie.

The expedition reached the Grand River around sundown. Watie was "encamped three miles distant."¹⁹ Doubleday immediately ordered the First Battalion of the Second Ohio Cavalry across the river. They were followed by the artillery and the supporting infantry. At a distance of about 500 yards the artillery fired a few rounds of ammunition into Watie's camp. Watie managed to escape under the cover of darkness, leaving behind 600 to 800 head of horses and cattle which were captured by the Federal forces. Had Doubleday been as successful as his report to Weer indicated, he might have retained the command of the whole expedition. As it was, Weer arrived at Fort Scott and ordered Doubleday to make no further advances southward without the Indian regiments.

Although the Indian regiments had a setback and their transportation was inadequate, Weer was determined to start the expedition south before Watie could be reinforced by Brigadier General James S. Rains. His plans came to naught and by the middle of June he was back at Leroy, Kansas. He left Salomon and Doubleday at Baxter Springs, Kansas, on the west side of Spring River, with Salomon in command.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 371-2, and 377.

¹⁸ Joseph B. Thoburn, and Muriel H. Wright, *Oklahoma, A History of the State and Its People* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, Inc., 1929), Vol. 1, p. 334.

¹⁹ *Official Records*, Vol. 13, 1862, pp. 102, 397, 408.

Weer was becoming impatient with the delay. He knew that he must get the Indians away from the influence of their respective chiefs if the expedition was to have any chance of success. By June 16 Weer had the Indians ready to move south from the Humboldt. The final packing for the start of the expedition on June 21 was completed. It was not long before Weer's force made its first movement south.

The dawn of June 28, 1862, saw the Indian Expedition moving south. The first Federal invasion of Indian Territory had begun. The first contingents of the expedition moved forward at daybreak. At the head of the column was the First Brigade, composed of two sections of the Indiana Battery, one Battalion of the Second Ohio Volunteer Infantry, and six companies of the Ninth Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry. One day later the white contingent of the Second Brigade and the unmounted First Indian Brigade followed.¹⁰

The expedition followed the military road across the Quapaw Strip. They proceeded from the border to Hudson's Crossing at the Neosho River, and awaited the supply trains from Fort Scott. These movements went smoothly and were undetected by the Confederates.

After a two day delay at Hudson's Crossing the main body of the expedition crossed the Neosho River and moved down the west side of the Grand River to Carey's Ford where it crossed to the east bank and encamped at Round Grove on Cowskin Prairie.¹¹

The Second Indian Regiment, under Colonel John Ritchie, followed a day later by the mounted men of the First Indian Regiment under Major William A. Phillips. Both Ritchie and Phillips were ordered to leave the military road and cross to the east bank of the Spring River. They were then to turn south and proceed to scout the country between the Grand River and the Missouri line.

The Confederates were still in the vicinity of Cowskin Prairie, as they had been since Watie's return from the Battle of Pea Ridge. They were determined to oppose and stop the Federal invasion. General Thomas C. Hindman had assumed command of the Trans-Mississippi Department in late May under orders from General P. G. T. Beauregard.¹² His assumption of command was apparently without the knowledge or official sanction of the Confederate War Department.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. 13, 1862, pp. 416-19, 430-1, 434, 441, 458-60, 461.

¹¹ Abel, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

¹² *Official Records*, Vol. 13, 1862, pp. 28, 456.

On June 23, General Albert Pike ordered Colonel Cooper to proceed to the country north of the Canadian River and to assume command of all the troops in the area, with the exception of Jumper's Seminole battalion. Three days later on June 26, Hindman, who was uninformed of the prior appointment, ordered Colonel James J. Clarkson to assume command "of all forces that are now or hereafter may be within the limits of the Cherokee Creek, and Seminole countries."²¹ It became Colonel Clarkson's fate to be the first Confederate force to oppose the expedition.

The invaders fully expected their advance to be opposed by all the power the Confederates could concentrate. They believed that Rains, Coffey, and Watie were in the immediate vicinity awaiting the opportunity to strike singly or in a united force. The advance had not been contested and Weer knew the area behind the Federal force was clear of Confederate troops, thanks to the very able scouting of the Indians under Colonel Phillips. The way ahead was an unknown quantity. The possibility of concerted Confederate action was ever present.

Colonel Watie had been keeping a sharp watch for the advancing Federals. When he learned the location of the Union forces he planned to head off the advance guard of the Federals. Using the guerrilla tactics of surprise and hit and run, Watie was able to hold up the Federal advance guard at a skirmish at Spavinaw Creek.²²

In the meantime, Weer had learned that Colonel Clarkson was encamped at Locust Grove. Weer began to make plans to engage Clarkson as soon as possible. Weer sent his baggage and supply trains, part of his artillery, the Second Ohio Cavalry, and the Ninth and Twelfth Regiments of Wisconsin Infantry, from Round Grove to the west bank of the Grand River with orders to continue on the military road to Cabin Creek. Weer then ordered Lieut. Colonel Lewis R. Jewell of the Sixth Kansas Cavalry to take his men and engage Stand Watie.²³ This diversionary raid was supposed to keep Watie from joining Clarkson at Locust Grove, where the main engagement was to take place.

The skirmish at Locust Grove began at dawn on July 3, 1862. Weer was successful in surprising Clarkson. He had between 200 and 300 men with which to strike an unknown number of Confederate troops. The suddenness of the attack and the broken nature of the battlefield caused the troops engaged to rely on their individual efforts. The engagement was short but decisive. Colonel

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 829-46, and Vol. 22, p. 728.

²² *Indian Affairs, 1862*, pp. 102-3.

²³ Wiley Britton, *The Civil War on the Border*, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), Vol. 1, p. 300.

Clarkson was completely defeated. Clarkson lost one-hundred men killed and one-hundred prisoners, and was himself captured. Along with the prisoners, a large amount of supplies was taken.²⁴

The significance of the skirmish at Locust Grove was not so much that the Federals had captured a number of Confederates and their supplies, but that the Confederates had been defeated. The routed men of Clarkson's battalion fled towards Tahlequah spreading fear and panic among the Indians there. This panic brought about a disintegration of the Confederate alliances with the Indians. They became thoroughly frightened and sought refuge within the Federal lines. This, of course, gave a big boost to the invading forces.²⁵ The Confederate loss at Locust Grove had another side effect also. Many of the Confederate Indian soldiers deserted to the Federals. Colonel Drew lost most of his regiment in this manner. This desertion and subsequent enlistment in the Federal army by the ex-Confederate Indians facilitated the completion of Colonel Ritchie's Second Regiment.

The Indian Expedition had started out with a definite program regarding the management of Indian affairs. John Ross and his people were to be given a chance to return to their old alliance with the United States Government.²⁶ Further, the program as stated by First Lieutenant James A. Phillips, Acting Assistant Adjutant-General, to Colonel William R. Judson, was:²⁷

The evident desire of the Government is to restore friendly intercourse with the tribes and return the Loyal Indians that are with us to their homes. Great care must be observed that no unusual degree of vindictiveness be tolerated between Indian and Indian. Our policy toward the rebel portion of them must be a subject of anxious consideration, and its character will to a great degree be shaped by yourself in conjunction with Colonel Salomon. No settled policy can at present be marked out. Give all questions their full share of investigation. No spirit of private vengeance should be tolerated.

After the skirmish at Locust Grove, Colonel Weer thought that the time had come to attempt to fulfill the first part of the program. Weer addressed a communication to Ross stating:²⁸

I desire an official interview with yourself, as the Executive of the Cherokee people. The object will be, on my part, to endeavor to effect a restoration of good feeling and the observance of law and order in this beautiful country, now threatened with the horrors of civil war.

I desire to ascertain from you officially if some plan satisfactory to all parties cannot be adopted by which the unfaithful portion of the Cherokees may be induced to place themselves, their families, and property under the protection of my forces.

²⁴ *Official Records*, Vol. 13, 1862, pp. 137-8.

²⁵ Abel, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

²⁶ *Official Records*, Vol. 13, 1862, pp. 137-8, 450, 463-4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 450, Phillips to Judson, June 28, 1862.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 454, Weer to Ross, July 7, 1862.

Ross's reply was entirely unsatisfactory to Weer:³¹

... In reply I have to state that a treaty alliance, under the sanction and authority of the whole Cherokee people, was entered into on the seventh day of October, 1861, between the Confederate States and the Cherokee Nation, and published before the world, and you cannot but be too well informed on the subject to make it necessary for me to recapitulate the reasons and circumstances under which it was done. Thus the destiny of this people became identical with that of the Southern Confederacy.

... I cannot, under existing circumstances, entertain the proposition for an official interview between us at your camp. I have therefore respectfully to decline to comply with your request.

Verbal reports reached Weer that Ross was acting diplomatically and waiting for the right time to change sides. Weer referred the whole matter to his commanding officer, General Blunt. Blunt was in the process of trying to hurry Weer along on his mission of returning the Indians to their homes.

Weer, aware of his open position, began sending out reconnaissance parties to scout the area. He sent two detachments on patrol on July 14. The detachments were commanded by Major William T. Campbell and Captain Haris S. Greeno. Major Campbell's force was "to reconnoiter the alleged position of the enemy south of the Arkansas." Captain Greeno's force was dispatched to Tahlequah and Park Hill. Campbell advancing south soon ran into a considerable body of Confederates encamped at Fort Davis. Campbell turned toward Fort Gibson where he awaited a junction with Weer.

In the meantime Captain Greeno moved to his assigned area of Tahlequah and Park Hill. Park Hill was the residence of Chief Ross. When Greeno arrived all the leaders of the Cherokee Nation had been summoned to Park Hill. Greeno captured all of the commissioned men and made them prisoners of war. He then decided to arrest Ross and to release him on parole.

The Indian Expedition seemed to be able to do nothing wrong. Everything they had attempted up to now had gone off smoothly. From this point on things began to turn against the expedition. There had been certain basic weaknesses of the expedition since its beginning. These began to show themselves and soon proved to be insurmountable. Most of the white troops involved were from Ohio and Wisconsin. They were ill-equipped and not used to the stifling summer heat of Indian Territory. With supplies running low and the troops exhausted by the heat the expedition ground to a halt at Fort Gibson.

Colonel Weer had been warned by General Blunt not to extend his communication with Fort Scott to such a point that

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 480-7, Ross to Weer, July 8, 1862.

they would be easy to cut. Weer realized the low condition of his supplies and had made a desperate effort to reach the Grand Saline River to replenish his supply of salt at a place used by the Confederates. In this effort he failed. He had also known that to obtain certain ordnance supplies he would have to send to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

With events moving from bad to worse, Colonel Salomon acted. On July 18, 1862, Salomon committed a clear case of mutiny when he arrested his commanding officer, Colonel Weer.¹² The reasons Salomon gave for his act are contained in his announcement to his associates:¹³

Sir: In military as well as civil affairs great and violent wrongs need speedy and certain remedies. The time had arrived, in my judgment, in the history of this expedition when the greatest wrong ever perpetrated upon any troops was about to fall with crushing weight upon the noble men composing the command. Someone must act, and that at once, or starvation and capture were the imminent hazards that looked us in the face.

As next in command to Colonel Weer, and upon his express refusal to move at all for the salvation of his troops, I felt the responsibility resting upon me.

I have arrested Colonel Weer and assumed command. The causes leading to his arrest you all know, I need not reiterate them here. Suffice it say that we are one-hundred and sixty miles from the base of operations, almost entirely through an enemy's country, and without communication being left open behind us. We have been pushed forward thus far by forced and fatiguing marches under the violent southern sun without any adequate object. By Colonel Weer's orders we were forced to encamp where our famishing men were unable to obtain but putrid, stinking water. Our reports for disability and inability for duty were disregarded; our cries for help and complaints of unnecessary hardships and suffering were received with closed ears. Yesterday a council of war, convened by the order of Colonel Weer, decided that our only safety lay in falling back to some point from which we could reopen communication with our commissary department. Colonel Weer overrode and annuls the decision of that council, and announces his determination not to move from this point. We have but three day's rations on hand and an order issued by him putting the command on half rations. For nearly two weeks we have no communication from our rear. We have no knowledge when supply trains will reach us, neither has Colonel Weer. Three sets of couriers, dispatched at different times to find these trains and report, have so far made no report. Reliable information has been received that large bodies of the enemy were moving to our rear, and yet we lay here idle. We are now and ever since our arrival here have been entirely without vegetables or healthy food for our troops. I have stood with arms folded and seen my men faint and fall away from me like the leaves of autumn because I thought myself powerless to save them.

I will look upon this swear no longer. I know the responsibility I have assumed. I have acted after careful thought and deliberation. Give me

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 460-2, 472, 478, 480-9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 476-7, Salomon, July 18, 1862.

your confidence for a few days, and all that man can do, and with a pure purpose and a firm faith that he is right, shall be done for the preservation of the troops.

In his report of Colonel Weer's arrest to General Blunt, Salomon made the same charges as he stated in his announcement to his associates.

This action by Salomon brought the Indian Expedition to a complete halt and precipitated thorough confusion throughout the command. Salomon, now in charge, decided to order a retreat and abandon the Indians. On July 19 the white troops began their retrograde march to Hudson's Crossing. Salomon retreated to Hudson's Crossing where he set up a commissary department. The reason he chose Hudson's Crossing for his permanent camp were: "The vicinity of Hudson's Crossing appears as the most commanding point in this country not only from a military view as a key to the valleys of Spring River, Shoal Creek, Neosho, and Grand River, but also as the only point in this country now where an army could be sustained with a limited supply of forage and subsistence, offering ample grazing and good water." Salomon left behind, to guard his retreat, the First and Second Regiments of the Indian Home Guards. These troops were deployed along the Grand and Verdigris Rivers and the fords of the Arkansas.

This ended the first Federal invasion of Indian Territory. The expedition made rapid and practically unopposed progress from the start. Their good fortune brought military victories, a weakening and in some instances disintegration of Confederate alliances with the Indians. The inherent weaknesses of the expedition, that had been there from the first, finally began to take their toll of the invasion. They finally culminated in Weer's arrest and the assumption of the command by Solomon. The expedition that began with such high hopes then ended in complete failure.