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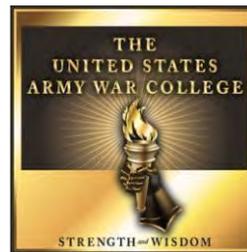
A Thousand Dead Indian Horses: Soldiering in a Complex Environment

by

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Abstract

Focusing on a critical decision at the Battle of Palo Duro Canyon of the Red River War, 1874-75, this paper examines how a small, professional army adapted to an irregular foe in a complex and harsh environment. It exposes the factors that led Colonel Ranald Mackenzie to order the slaughter of over 1000 captured Native American horses, a decision that ultimately led to the final subjugation of hostile bands of Comanche, Kiowa, and Southern Cheyenne tribes and the opening of an area from Central Kansas to Central Texas for settlement. The study contends that the attributes of discipline and individual grit, empowerment of trusted leaders up and down the chain of command, and an acceptance and reliance on indigenous expertise made Mackenzie's formation effective in the field. History can offer an enhanced perspective and a framework for navigating contemporary challenges. The attributes of Mackenzie's formation offer a lens from which to evaluate today's force and its readiness to meet contemporary irregular threats in a complex environment. Discipline, grit, and empowering trusted leaders are characteristics of today's army. Mackenzie's example implies that the modern army field leadership needs an openness and willingness to rely employ indigenous expertise as well.

A Thousand Dead Indian Horses: Soldiering in a Complex Environment

“At daylight that morning [of 29 September, 1874,] I began roping horses and they were led out to a firing line by detailed soldiers who began to shoot them... The horses became excited and would run up on the pile of dead horses four or five deep just like climbing over rock. We killed 643 head in this pile. That evening we moved up the stream and killed 242 more.”¹

–Henry Strong, Scout for the 4th Cavalry Regiment

In the first hours of September 29, 1874, fifty-three officers and approximately 550 soldiers from the 4th Cavalry Regiment and 10th and 11th Infantry Regiments marched in darkness over twenty miles, burdened by 1,400 captured Indian horses, from the Palo Duro to the Tule Canyon of the Texas Panhandle. They journeyed through the barren wasteland of the Staked Plains: waterless; flat; and devoid of features, foliage, and landmarks.² The men in the column were exhausted. After 48 consecutive hours of fighting, riding, and hard duty, scout Sergeant John Carlton dozed off in his saddle. He felt a hand shake his shoulder and the voice of the column's commander say, “wake up your men and look after the horses.”³ At daybreak a few hours later, that same man, Colonel⁴ Ranald Mackenzie, ordered his men to slaughter 1,000 of those horses.⁵

¹ Henry W. Strong, *My Frontier Days & Indian Fights on the Plains of Texas* (Henry W. Strong, 1925), 62.

² The Staked Plains are often referred to by the Spanish name “Llano Estacado.” Historically it was a forbidden zone for the army. The natives of the Southern Plains thrived in its barren seclusion. One of the largest mesas or tablelands on the North American continent, the elevation rises from 3,000 feet in the southeast to over 5,000 feet in the northwest, sloping uniformly at about 10 feet per mile. Historian Robert Leckie described this area as one of the last frontiers for the white man and equally the last home of the natives. The “desperate people” of the Comanche, Kiowa, and southern Cheyenne had nowhere else to go to make a final stand.” William H. Leckie, *The Military Conquest of the Southern Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 27.

³ John B. Charlton and Robert Goldthwaite Carter, *The Old Sergeant's Story; Winning the West from the Indians and Bad Men in 1870 to 1876* (New York, F. H. Hitchcock, 1926), 108.

⁴ For consistency in the paper, I refer to individuals by the rank held at the time of the Red River War. Moreover, I exclusively use Regular Army rank in lieu of brevet or honorary volunteer ranks used in correspondence.

⁵ Ranald Slidell Mackenzie and Ernest Wallace, *Ranald S. Mackenzie's Official Correspondence Relating to Texas, 1873-1879* (Lubbock: West Texas Museum Association, 1968), 117 and Strong, 62. Leckie,

When the column stopped, Mackenzie allowed the Tonkawa and Seminole Indian scouts and civilian guides to select animals from the captured herd for their personal use. Other cavalymen replaced “horses which had succumbed to the hardships of the campaign” with new mounts.⁶ The affection between cavalryman and horse made slaughtering the herd especially difficult. One participant recorded that, “Numbers of them were young and many very handsome, and it seemed the greatest pity to be compelled to kill them.”⁷ The native horses feared soldiers and screamed while resisting them. With great difficulty, the army completed its task. Mackenzie did not know at that moment that his order would have lasting and strategic consequences.

The story of the slaughtered Native American horses emerges from the Battle of Palu Duro Canyon, the largest engagement of the Red River War. Lieutenant General Phillip Sheridan of the Department of the Missouri described it as “the most successful of any Indian campaign in this country since its settlement by whites.”⁸ After less than a year, only seven significant engagements, and relatively few casualties on either side, it resulted in the final subjugation of hostile bands of Comanche, Kiowa, and Southern Cheyenne and the opening of an area from Central Kansas to Central Texas for settlement.⁹ Historians attribute the government’s success in the Red River War to a wide range of factors: sound military strategy, the impact of the buffalo hunters on the

222 lists the number of animals killed at approximately 1,050. The Galveston Daily News from October 22, 1874 gave the number as 1046. The Army and Navy Journal lists it as 1048. Mackenzie in his official report said, “over 1000.”

⁶ Charles A. P. Hatfield, “The Charles A. P. Hatfield Report; Description of the Battle of Palo Duro Canyon,” (Austin: Dolph Briscoe Center for American History; University of Texas, 1874).

⁷ One Who Was There, “Scouting on the “Staked Plains” (Llano Estacado) with Mackenzie, in 1875,” *United Service; a Quarterly Review of Military and Naval Affairs (1879-1905)* 13, no. 4 (1885), 532.

⁸ Robert Goldthwaite Carter, *On the Border with Mackenzie; or, Winning West Texas from the Comanches* (New York: Antiquarian Press, 1961), 525.

⁹ James L. Haley, *The Buffalo War: The History of the Red River Indian Uprising of 1874* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), viii.

bison herd, the aggression of white settlers, Department of Interior and War collaboration, and strong field leadership. Mackenzie's fight at the Palo Duro Canyon "[was] arguably the most significant battle of the Red River War, and many historians have viewed it as the event that marked the turning point in the war for the U.S. Army."¹⁰

The 1870s army, like today's force, was small, professional, and comprised of volunteers. Designed for traditional, European ground combat and organized in infantry, cavalry, and artillery regiments, it was ill-suited to control the indigenous population of the American West. Historians describe the non-traditional frontier army tasks as "thankless and difficult."¹¹ Conventional military tactics and existing doctrine did not work against the natives in the Southern Plains, who rarely massed for battle. Unless surprised, native warriors attacked on their own terms, in raids and ambushes, and chiefly when they outnumbered their enemy. Their advantage was mobility, hence the critical importance of their horses. For the most part, the mobile and elusive native tribes avoided large battles; those that did happen were brutal affairs.¹² By 1874, the army had been fighting natives for over a century and the Plains Indians for at least forty years, and it had adapted to the environment and the enemy.

History can offer an enhanced perspective and a framework for navigating contemporary challenges.¹³ The events that led to Mackenzie's decision to slaughter 1,000 horses reveal how the U.S. Army conducted a mission that it was not structured

¹⁰ J. Brett Cruse, *Battles of the Red River War: Archeological Perspectives on the Indian Campaign of 1874* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 6.

¹¹ Allan Reed Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 252.

¹² John Robert Elting, *American Army Life* (New York: Scribner, 1982), 158-62; Cruse, 42-44.

¹³ William Imboden, "Statecraft, Decision-Making, and the Varieties of Historical Experience: A Taxonomy," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37:2 (2014).

or trained to do, against an irregular foe in a difficult environment. Why did he decide to slaughter the captured horses? Which attributes of Mackenzie's column led to its success in the field? Are these characteristics relevant to the modern warfighter? Do today's combat units have similar attributes to confront modern, complex challenges? This study acknowledges the "most important determinants of outcomes in war... the strengths and weaknesses of individual commanders and their decisions,"¹⁴ but its purpose is not to celebrate Mackenzie. Through an examination of events that led to his historic decision in September 1874, this paper exposes attributes that made Mackenzie's unit effective in the field: discipline and individual grit, empowerment of trusted leaders up and down the chain of command, and reliance on indigenous expertise.

Historian Durwood Ball wrote that in its past, "the professional army has devoted most combat operations to small wars... the vast majority against indigenous societies or against guerrillas."¹⁵ The U.S. Army has conducted large-scale, sustained, high-end combat against state-based forces only a handful of times in its 245-year history. By contrast, army forces have been employed on the domestic frontier or in foreign austere spaces consistently, fighting irregular enemies in complex security environments. While current army leadership focuses on modernization and readiness for high-end, near peer, twenty-first century ground conflict, it is important to acknowledge and prepare for the irregular missions that the army will most likely undertake. The experience of the

¹⁴ Eliot A. Cohen, "The Historical Mind and Military Strategy," *Orbis* 49:4 (2005).
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2005.07.002>, 586.

¹⁵ Paul Andrew Hutton, *Soldiers West: Biographies from the Military Frontier* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 5.

nineteenth-century frontier soldier is not unlike that of today's military performing non-standard missions in various locations worldwide. In the words of historian Paul Hutton, "the Old Army has lessons to teach the modern army."¹⁶

Background, The Red River War 1874-75

During his first term, President Ulysses S. Grant pursued a "peace policy" to convert Native Americans into full-fledged citizens of the United States. It involved teaching the tribes farming and other skills to incorporate them into the fabric of the American economy and society.¹⁷ To end hostilities and establish a lasting peace in the Southern Plains, the government organized a conference with the native leaders at Medicine Lodge Creek. The ensuing Treaty of 1867 established a sanctuary of 5,500 square miles of reservations in return for a cessation of violence against settlers.¹⁸ It stipulated that the Comanche, Kiowa, and Cheyenne live on these reservations and allowed for bison hunting outside the sanctuary, south of the Arkansas River. The government would provide rifles and ammunition for hunting as well as seeds, implements, and instruction for farming. The army struggled with its role in the peace policy. Control over the natives ended at the borders of their reservations, where they fell under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs. This

¹⁶ Hutton, 16.

¹⁷ A comprehensive analysis of Grant's policies toward the Native Americans is in Mary Stockwell, *Interrupted Odyssey: Ulysses S. Grant and the American Indians* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2018) and Robert Wooster, *The Military and United States Indian Policy, 1865-1903* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

¹⁸ Further details on the Medicine Lodge Treaty stipulations are in Odie B. Faulk, *Crimson Desert: Indian Wars of the American Southwest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 298-299.

gave the indigenous tribes freedom to conduct raids off the reservation and, when pursued, return to their sanctuary where the army could not reach them.¹⁹

Though many natives followed the Medicine Lodge treaty, others found the terms irreconcilable with their traditional way of life. They found the pursuit of farming distasteful and resumed hunting and raiding in the Texas Panhandle. Within a year of its signing, bands of the Comanche, Kiowa, and Cheyenne tribes abandoned the reservations. The U.S. government also failed to meet its obligations, providing inadequate annuity rations and protection from encroachment onto the reservations by whites.²⁰ Tensions increased when hunters began killing the southern herds of bison in large numbers, threatening the Plains Indians' way of life.²¹ The natives reacted with violent raids against settlers on the southern plains and a coordinated attack by over 200 warriors on a buffalo hunter and trading outpost near Adobe Walls in June 1874, marking the beginning of the Red River War.

By the late summer of 1874, the federal government altered its policy. The army's commanding general, William T. Sherman, received approval for a strategy that saturated traditional tribal sanctuary in the Staked Plains with converging columns of army units from several directions to "wear down" the hostile bands and force their return to their tribal agencies and reservations. At the agencies, the Bureau of Indian

¹⁹ Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars; the United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (New York, Macmillan, 1974), 212.

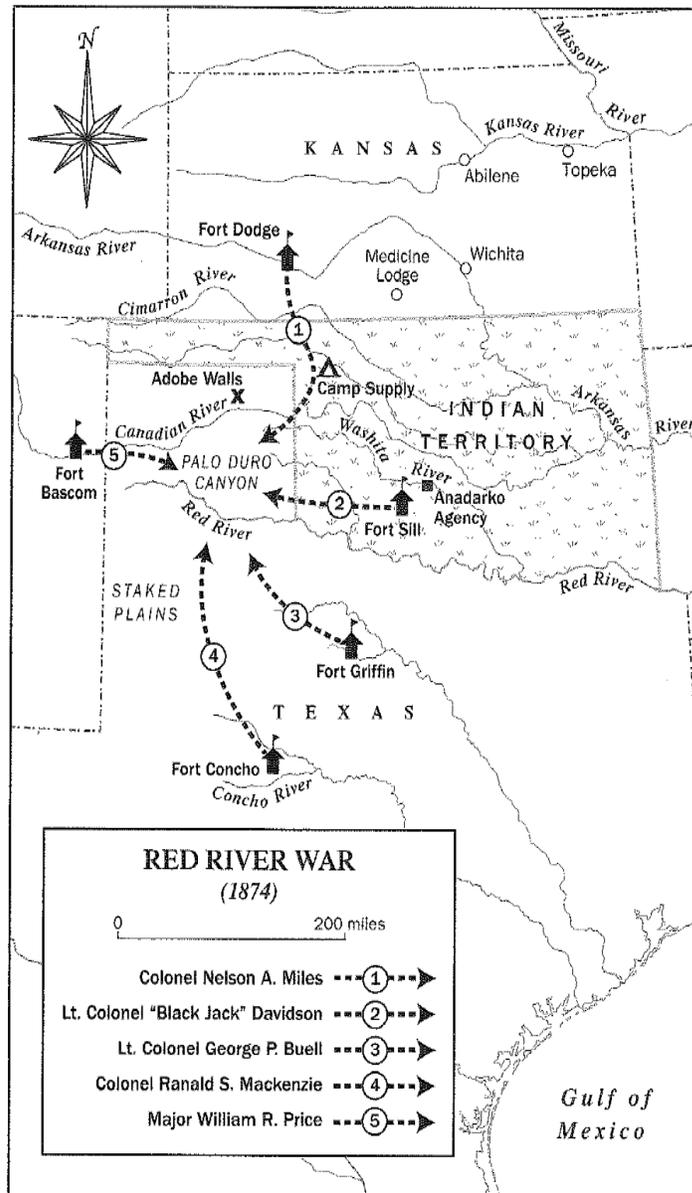
²⁰ Cruse, 11-13, and Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee; an Indian History of the American West* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970), 263.

²¹ Between 1872-1874 professional hunters killed 3.7 million bison. By comparison, Native Americans of the plains killed only 150,000 during that same period. Brown, 263-67.

Affairs started registering all peaceful Indian residents. Sheridan ordered five attack columns to pursue renegade Indians, numbering about 5,000, from the Comanche, Kiowa, and Cheyenne tribes into the Staked Plains.

From the north, a column of eight companies from the 6th Cavalry and four companies of the 5th Infantry under the command of Nelson Miles advanced south from Fort Dodge, Kansas. At Fort Concho, Texas,

Mackenzie's eight companies of the 4th Cavalry and five companies of the 10th and 11th Infantry Regiments advanced north. From Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and Fort Griffin, Texas, two columns approached from the east, and Major William Price advanced to the west



Red River War (1874). The map shows the convergence of General Philip Sheridan's five columns on the Red River Valley in northern Texas in 1874.

Figure 1, from *Interrupted Odyssey*, page 149

from Fort Bascom. Roughly 3,000 army soldiers converged into an area the size Maine (see figure 1).

Battle of the Palo Duro Canyon

On September 28, Colonel Mackenzie and his men surprised a large Native American village on the Prairie Dog Town Fork of the Red River, but the slaughter of 1,000 horses started on September 17 when the column began its northward movement from Fort Concho. As they advanced to an old base camp on Catfish Creek in Shackelford County, Mackenzie went to Fort Griffin to receive final instructions from his commander, Brigadier General C.C. Augur (Department of Texas). The column soldiers began refurbishing the Catfish Creek camp while Mackenzie's scouts searched for Indian trails. Meanwhile, his quartermaster, Captain Henry Lawton acquired, stockpiled, and distributed supplies to support the advance north. Mackenzie reunited with the column on September 19, and together they entered the Staked Plains. The column continued north-northwest skirting a gigantic rock formation and scouting for fresh Indian trails. A drought that had plagued Colonel Miles's movements from the north finally abated and much of Mackenzie's advance occurred through mud and intermittent rain, slowing his supply wagon trains. He continued to slog northward through the occasional storm until September 25. After drying out, he advanced with his scouts and cavalry twenty miles to the Tule Canyon, leaving the infantry and supply wagons to move through the mud. As the sun set, a civilian scout, Henry Strong, reported that they had crossed a large Indian trail to the east. As darkness set, Lieutenant Thomson, the scout section leader, reported that he found another trail of 1,500 or more Indians.

Mackenzie immediately ordered four troops to mount and pursue while the rest of the cavalry formation rested in the Tule Canyon. The men slept fully clothed and armed, but no attack occurred. On the 26th Mackenzie remained in the canyon awaiting the arrival of his infantry and supply train and a possible attack from the natives. He positioned the scouts and cavalry five miles down canyon from Tule; signs of native activity were everywhere.²²

That night, Mackenzie took measures to secure his animals, “every horse and pack-mule was staked, cross-side-lined and hobbled.”²³ At 10:00pm, 250 warriors encircled the encampment and attacked to stampede the horses. By 2:00am the natives departed, and the supply column, wagons, and infantry arrived in camp uniting Mackenzie’s formation. At dawn native warriors appeared on a distant ridge and fired into the camp. Mackenzie sent his scouts and a troop of cavalry to flush them. They disappeared into the surroundings, their tracks heading southwest. Mackenzie’s main body remained in camp preparing for an attack, and the scouts continued their search for the main village. That morning scouts located a large encampment to the north on the Prairie Dog Town Fork of the Red River, deep in the Palo Duro Canyon.

To deceive the warriors tracking his movement, Mackenzie followed their tracks southwest until dusk and then temporarily set up camp. Under cover of darkness, he quickly assembled his column and moved all night northwest toward the Palo Duro Canyon. The men paused at 4:00am on the 28th to wait for sunrise. His ruse worked.

²² Firsthand accounts of the events leading up to Palo Duro are in (Carter, 488-495; Strong, 60-65; One Who Was There, 405-412; and Mackenzie and Wallace, 103-122.)

²³ “Staked” connotes tied with a thirty-foot, one-inch rope, to an iron stake called a picket pin, fifteen inches long and driven into the ground. “Cross-side-lined” means that a fore foot was tied to a hind hoof on the opposite side, leaving them the same distance apart as when the animal stands naturally. “Hobbled” is a term to describe that both fore feet are tied together. These measures prevent a horse from running under any circumstances, Mackenzie and Wallace, 114.

The scouts and eight cavalry troops moved to the rim of the main canyon and peered down. Hundreds of feet below, they saw a large encampment at the base of the canyon (figures 2 and 3). Eventually, they located a trail, dismounted, and led their horses “in single-file” along a “narrow zigzag path.” Mackenzie ordered the scouts and A Company to lead the column down. Lieutenant Thompson’s scouts and Captain Eugene

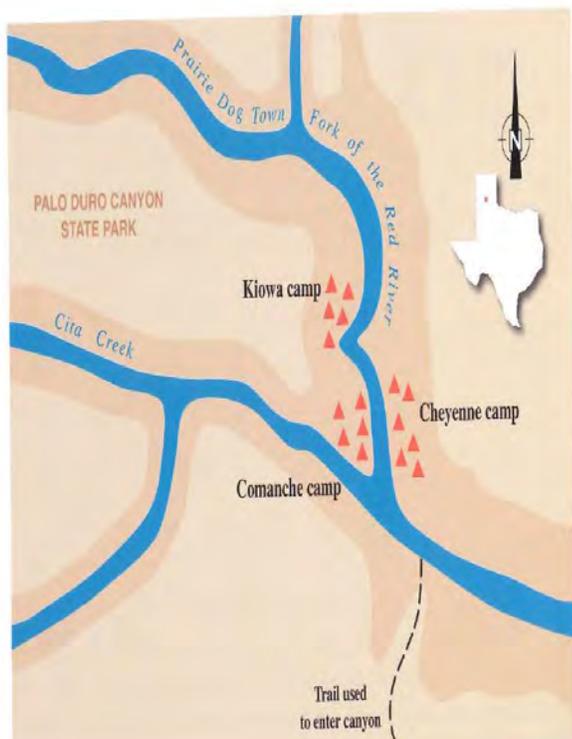


Figure 2 from Cruse, *Battles of the Red River War*, page 106.

recently assured his followers that “no blue-coated soldiers would ever disturb them in the canyon.”²⁵ He would be proven wrong. The next few

Beaumont’s company reached the bottom first and immediately took up the assault. Two companies (H and L) soon followed, with Mackenzie at the lead.²⁴

Mackenzie’s column caught the members of the village by surprise. Their leader, Maman-ti, a Kiowa Medicine Man had



Figure 3 from the Visitor’s Center, Palo Duro Canyon State Park, <https://tripsintohistory.com/2013/05/23/battle-of-palo-duro-canyon-texas/>

hours were a blur of cavalry charges; fleeing native families; desperate warriors

²⁴ One Who Was There, 410; Charlton and Carter, 107.

²⁵ Mackenzie and Wallace, 123.

defending the withdrawal; and the army's consolidation of captured lodges, animals, and camp possessions. Mid-way through the fight Mackenzie ordered all material of value destroyed. In the afternoon the firing from the tribal bands subsided and by 3:00pm, Mackenzie's column consolidated and reassembled with 1,400 captured ponies. Within an hour it was heading back up the trail, out of the Palo Duro moving toward Tule Canyon where the infantry, supply trains, and the opportunity for much needed rest awaited. Within twelve hours, Maman-ti's herd of ponies were dead, the villagers were on the long march back to their reservations, and Mackenzie's exhausted column rested. Historian Robert Wooster describes the impact of the slaughter of Maman-ti's ponies as "crippling the mobility of the affected tribes."²⁶ Other scholars portray it as "a tragedy from which even the most daring chiefs and their bravest warriors could not recover."²⁷ By the summer of 1875, large scale resistance from the natives ceased.

The movement up the Palo Duro was Mackenzie's third journey into the Staked Plains, and his previous experience fighting natives explains his critical decisions during the campaign. During Mackenzie's first foray, in October 1871, Quahadi Comanche raiders led by Chief Quanah Parker raided his encampment and stole a large group of horses, including the Colonel's personal mount.²⁸ Afterwards, he learned to stake and secure horses when anticipating a raid, evident in the prudent measures he took to hobble the animals on September 27, 1874.

²⁶ Wooster, 158.

²⁷ Stockwell, 151.

²⁸ Five years after Mackenzie lost his horse to the Quahadi Comanches, their chief Quanah Parker visited him and offered to return the handsome grey horse that the raiders tribe stole during this incident. Mackenzie declined.

Mackenzie also learned that, while on campaign, he could not defend against the natives' night raids to reclaim captured animals. Early in September 1872, Mackenzie's command attacked and destroyed Comanche Chief Mow-way's village, capturing a small herd of ponies. That evening Comanches warriors attacked and retrieved their horses, along with several mounts from the soldiers guarding the animals. These soldiers returned on foot, "looking sheepish and woefully dejected, the butt and ridicule of the entire command."²⁹ After that incident he made no attempt to keep an Indian herd because he believed that they would certainly successfully steal them back in the future.³⁰

Attributes of Mackenzie's Column – Discipline and Individual Grit

Mackenzie's experience informed his decision to slaughter the captured ponies in September 1874, but the attributes of the army column that put him in position to make the decision reveal fundamentals of successful soldiering in a complex environment. His column surprised a native village and destroyed its contents, something no other senior commander accomplished during the Red River War. The elusiveness of the Plains Indians was legendary, and Mackenzie's force needed discipline and individual grit to arrive at Palo Duro and surprise Maman-ti's village.³¹

Mackenzie's military record reveals that he imposed order, discipline, and grit in his commands. First, during the Civil War, he turned the beleaguered 2nd Connecticut

²⁹ Charlton and Carter, 84.

³⁰ Robinson, 122.

³¹ Excellent examples of the ability of the Southern Plains natives (Comanche) to conduct long range movements and evade detection are in S. C. Gwynne, *Empire of the Summer Moon: Quanah Parker and the Rise and Fall of the Comanches, the Most Powerful Indian Tribe in American History* (New York: Scribner, 2010).

Artillery Regiment into a respectable fighting formation. After the war, he received command of the 41st Infantry Regiment and turned it into a crack fighting unit. Finally, his influence on the 4th Cavalry Regiment made them the most notable mounted formation, placing them first in general merit for the Army's Inspector General Reports.³²

Mackenzie had a reputation for enduring extreme physical discomfort, allowing him to impose strict discipline by personal example. While on campaign, he carried the pain of six Civil War wounds and several missing fingers. In October 1871, during his first campaign in the Staked Plains, Mackenzie took a Comanche arrow to the thigh. He remained in the field, but the wound was painful enough "to incapacitate him for a while, and put him in a foul mood."³³ Another typical account of Ranald Mackenzie's imperviousness to discomfort comes from one of his scouts in December 1874 who wrote, "just as we were ready to eat... Mackenzie came around shaking as though he would fall to pieces. We made him sit down and have a warm meal."³⁴ During the fighting at Palo Duro, he was everywhere, orchestrating the movement of his companies, inspiring his subordinates, and aggressively maneuvering his formation.³⁵

A disciplined unit functions well in its leader's absence. Weeks prior to the movement into the Staked Plains Mackenzie's column demonstrated its abilities in the absence of its commander. On September 2, 1874, while Mackenzie was meeting with the Texas Department Commander, Brigadier General Augur, his unit was working out logistics of the campaign, drilling, and accumulating supplies. Logistical preparation for

³²Carter, 421; Utley, 25; Charles M. Robinson, *Bad Hand: A Biography of General Ranald S. Mackenzie* (Austin: State House Press, 1993), 20-22, 40-48.

³³ *Ibid*, 105-6.

³⁴ Strong, 66.

³⁵ Haley, 180.

the campaign, absent Mackenzie's direct involvement, led to a relatively smooth operation. Conversely, the column approaching from the north under Colonel Nelson Miles was "hog tied by continuing supply problems."³⁶

An ability to perform under extreme conditions characterized the soldiers in Mackenzie's column. As they moved from Fort Concho on September 17 to an attack position on the early morning of September 28, they encountered extreme severe temperature fluctuations. Water in the surrounding area was scarce. Most of the soldiers went forty-eight consecutive hours without sleep or food prior to the slaughter of the ponies. When the main columns arrived in the Tule Canyon on September 25, one scout wrote of a "norther" that hit Mackenzie's column, "which added greatly to the discomfort of the troops."³⁷ The night prior to the attack, the natives harassed Mackenzie's perimeter with whooping, gunfire, and attempts to stampede the horses, disrupting the rest plan for Mackenzie's attack column. Poor rations, a shortage of potable water, sleep deprivation, long marches, and extreme climate conditions were common experiences, especially in the week leading up to Battle at Palo Duro. Mackenzie's discipline and the grit of the frontier soldiers, scouts, and their Native American allies put the column in position to attack and capture the horses.

Privation during the Red River War was not limited to Colonel Mackenzie's formation. Extreme conditions of the Staked Plains affected the other columns as well. On one cold evening in November 1874, twenty-six men from Lieutenant Colonel John

³⁶ Haley, 167.

³⁷ Charlton and Carter, 104. A "norther" or "Blue Norther" is a fast-moving cold front. Common characteristics are a dark blue-black sky, strong winds, and temperatures that can drop 20-30 degrees within minutes. While northers can occur in other parts of the country, the phenomenon is commonly associated with the Texas Panhandle.

Davidson's column advancing from Fort Sill, suffered frostbite and 100 animals died from exposure.³⁸ Nelson Miles's command also suffered extreme adversity. Departing Fort Dodge on August 15, Miles wrote to Brigadier General John Pope, Department of the Missouri, on September 1st that "The march has been rapid and the heat intense, the unusually dry season has left the country almost destitute of water; it would be impossible to describe what the troops have suffered for the want of it."³⁹ A few months later, in his official report to General Pope, he highlighted temperatures reaching -25 °F, and infantrymen walking over 700 miles of frozen plains with only tents to shield them from snow and ice. Miles offered praise for "the fortitude and cheerfulness with which they [his soldiers] endured the severity of the season."⁴⁰ The presence of grit and discipline in the other columns of the Red River War imply their importance as frontier army-wide attributes.

Though discipline and grit were positive characteristics of Mackenzie's column in the field, enduring extreme conditions and harsh discipline created problems for the professional army.⁴¹ Almost one in three enlisted men deserted between 1867 and 1891.⁴² Historians attribute many different reasons for this issue, quality of life among them. Furthermore, a culture of stern discipline caused abuses. An 1873 court martial from Mackenzie's 4th Cavalry reveals an incident where an officer handcuffed a soldier

³⁸ Clint E. Chambers and Paul Howard Carlson, *Comanche Jack Stilwell: Army Scout and Plainsman* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019), 86-87.

³⁹ Nelson Miles to Adjutant General, Department of the Missouri, 1 September 1874, quoted in Joe F. Taylor, *The Indian Campaign on the Stakes Plains, 1874-1875* (Canyon: Panhandle-Plains Historical Society, 1962), 24.

⁴⁰ Nelson Miles to Department of the Missouri, 4 March 1875, quoted in Taylor, 207.

⁴¹ For a complex study on the army's problem with retention, suicide, and soldier quality of like, see Jack D. Foner, *The United States Soldier between Two Wars: Army Life and Reforms, 1865-1898* (New York, Humanities Press, 1970).

⁴² Elting, 160.

and had him suspended from a wall for forty-five hours, except for short intervals. Though the captain was found guilty for “conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline,” the incident caused Brig. Gen. Augur to question what type of “young man of spirit – the very ones required in the army” would volunteer to subject themselves to this type of treatment?⁴³ Reforms would come in the 1880s and 1890s to improve quality of life, but the difficult nature of soldiering was and continues to present recruitment and retention challenges for the small, professional army. Despite this, strong discipline and individual grit, brought Mackenzie’s column to the rim of the Palo Duro Canyon on September 28, 1874.

Empowerment of Trusted Leaders

Mackenzie received the approval and authority from his superiors to pursue the hostile native bands as he saw fit. In early April 1873 when the 4th Cavalry arrived at Fort Concho to manage native raids on the Texas frontier and along the Mexican border, Mackenzie’s adjutant recorded notes from a closed-door meeting with the Secretary of War and Lieutenant General Sheridan. Sheridan stated clearly, “You are to go ahead on your plan of action, and your authority and backing shall be General Grant and myself... You must assume the risk. We will assume the final responsibility should any result.”⁴⁴ Though this example predates action at the Palo Duro, it demonstrates the level of trust senior military leaders placed in Mackenzie.⁴⁵ Brigadier General Augur’s initial orders to Mackenzie in August 1874 reveal a similar level of trust and confidence.

⁴³ Foner, 61.

⁴⁴ Carter, 422-23.

⁴⁵ Robinson, 131-32, discusses the validity this first-hand account affirming that, though likely exaggerated by Carter, senior military and cabinet officials agreed to send Mackenzie into Mexico.

Augur directed him to pursue the hostile Comanche, Kiowa, and southern Cheyenne and “take such measures against them as will, in your judgment, the soonest accomplish the purpose... You are at liberty to follow the Indians wherever they go...”⁴⁶ The formal orders and actions of Mackenzie’s superiors show how empowerment of trusted leaders was a critical attribute of his column, fundamental to the success at Palo Duro.

Policymakers and military leaders who approved General Sheridan’s plan for the Staked Plains made several decisions that gave Mackenzie authority and empowerment he lacked in previous campaigns. First, approval of Sheridan’s plan for the Staked Plains involved approval from the Secretary of the Interior Columbus Delano, and the Secretary of War William Belknap. Prior to the Red River War, Delano was insistent that natives on the reservation remain the sole responsibility of the Department of the Interior and that the army have no authority to pursue hostile bands on the reservations. Public outrage after the Adobe Walls attack softened Delano’s position and Sherman and Sheridan obtained his concurrence on July 16, 1874 on plans that authorized army incursions onto the reservations to pursue hostile natives. The Department of Interior further directed Indian Agents to register all reservation residents to identify the peaceful natives and help the army identify the hostile bands.⁴⁷ Previous campaigns left the burden of determine friend and foe to the frontier army in the field, a complex and problematic arrangement. This confusion, at times, resulted in tragedy. Lieutenant Colonel George Custer’s attack on Black Kettle’s Southern Cheyenne village in

⁴⁶ Augur to Mackenzie, August 28, 1874, Taylor, 80-81.

⁴⁷ Stockwell, 146-47; Wooster, 152-57; Uteley, 213-14 and 219-21; Haley, 105-06.

November 1868 offers such an example.⁴⁸ Black Kettle was a peaceful Cheyenne chief whose village was located near a larger encampment of hostile Cheyenne. He died in Custer's attack, along with many of his followers, and the incident damaged a tenuous relationship between the Cheyenne and the army. Sherman and Sheridan's effort with Delano aided Mackenzie because while on campaign he knew with certainty that the natives in the Staked Plains were hostile.

In addition to expanding jurisdiction over the natives and helping identify those who were at war with the United States, Mackenzie's superiors disregarded departmental boundaries to provide his column freedom of movement in the Staked Plains. General Sherman published General Order No. 4 on July 10, 1874 which states, "In conducting operations against Indians...the Commanding Officers' Departments of the Missouri and Texas may disregard the line..."⁴⁹ Augur's orders to Mackenzie that initiated the departure from Fort Concho stated this clearly: "In carrying out your plans, pay no regard to Department or Reservations lines."⁵⁰ Sheridan, Augur, and Pope did not appoint a senior commander in the field over all of the columns, and they did not mandate communication or coordination between columns. During the Red River War, Mackenzie did not worry about straying into areas where he lacked authority and jurisdiction.

⁴⁸ Black Kettle was a peaceful Cheyenne chief and victim at the Sand Creek Massacre whose village was located near a larger encampment of hostile Cheyenne. Custer and the 7th Cavalry attacked the village in the early morning, before sunrise, and was unable to differentiate the peaceful from hostile natives. Black Kettle died along with many of his followers. Tragically, Black Kettle was awaiting a break in cold weather to send emissaries to reaffirm his intent to keep peace. The army took fifty-three innocent women and children captive and celebrated the attack as a victory on the plains.

⁴⁹ Sheridan's Order Relative to Departmental Boundary Lines, July 10, 1874, Mackenzie and Wallace, 77

⁵⁰ Taylor, 80-81.

Where trust between senior leaders and field commanders was less sanguine, there was less empowerment. For example, the orders of Brigadier General John Pope in the Department of the Missouri to his principal field commander, Colonel Miles, were less permissive. Miles did not have overall command of the columns originating from the Department of the Missouri, though he was the ranking officer in the field. Pope maintained overall command on the expedition from his headquarters in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. In protest, Miles, a self-righteous and ambitious man and a difficult subordinate to manage, brought a traveling correspondent from the anti-Pope *Kansas Daily Commonwealth* with him to document the campaign from a favorable perspective.⁵¹ Furthermore, Miles's column was plagued by supply shortages, and he felt constrained by a lack of energy and resources to aide his advance south. Pope, to his credit, had stripped the department to resource Miles and after the first month was already writing to his superior, Sheridan, to defend his decisions as overall commander.⁵² Mackenzie had no such tension with Augur and had no major logistical problems while his column was in the field. Though some credit goes to the competence of his quartermaster, Lieutenant Henry Lawton, Augur's empowerment of Mackenzie was integral to the formation's success.⁵³

A similar superior-subordinate trust dynamic existed inside Mackenzie's command. Because columns separated into three elements (scouts, main column, supply trains), and often more, commanders had to rely upon the decision-making of their subordinates in the field. The frontier army, by practical and technological

⁵¹This correspondent also published a firsthand account of the expedition: J. T. Marshall, *The Miles Expedition of 1874-1875: An Eyewitness Account of the Red River War* (Austin: Encino Press, 1971).

⁵² Haley, 127, 166-67; Utlely, 219-221.

⁵³ Robinson, 87, 168.

necessity, had a culture of empowering subordinates. Mackenzie exemplified this trend. He favored certain leaders and empowered them accordingly.⁵⁴ Of the 53 officers assigned to Colonel Mackenzie's column, several are mentioned repeatedly in orders, dispatches, and post-engagement correspondence. Mackenzie records the actions of his quartermaster, Lieutenant Henry W. Lawton; scout detachment commander, Lieutenant William Thompson; and E troop commander Captain "Hurricane Bill" Boehm consistently in his reporting. A notoriously concise writer, his detail on their performance suggests that these officers were empowered more than the others. On September 24, 1874 he wrote, "the Q[uar]ter Master was all day moving his train up the Big hill." On the 25th he wrote "Lt. Thompson with scouts was sent out in the morning to protect the Canyon along the edge of the plains – he discovered a great number of trails."⁵⁵ Mackenzie's words to the scouts and A Troop commander Captain Beaumont prior to their descent into the Palo Duro also imply the extent to which he empowered entrusted leaders: "Mr. Thompson, take your men down and open the fight!"⁵⁶ Empowerment of trusted subordinates allowed commanders to federate their authority across their formations, giving them more flexibility and autonomy in the field. The level of trust an army leader had in a subordinate determined the amount of authority and autonomy that junior leader received.

For most of the officers on campaign with Mackenzie, there is little evidence of their contributions in the written record. Already plagued with slow promotion, a

⁵⁴ Robert Goldthwaite Carter, *Record of the Military Service of Robert Goldthwaite Carter* (Washington: Gibson Brothers, Printers and Bookbinders, 1904), 44-45.

⁵⁵ Ranald Slidell Mackenzie and Ernest Wallace, *Ranald S. Mackenzie's Official Correspondence Relating to Texas, 1871-1873* (Lubbock: West Texas Museum Association, 1967), 119-124.

⁵⁶ Charlton and Carter, 107.

stagnant and jealous officer corps, and dysfunctional rivalries among officers, there were limits to the effectiveness of empowerment. For example, Mackenzie and Miles neither trusted nor respected each other, and as a result there was little communication or coordination between converging columns in the Staked Plains. The disparity of officers and men listed in official correspondence and dispatch reporting and those on the campaign suggests that Mackenzie and other commanders did not empower all their subordinates equally.

Instances of specific leaders receiving heightened responsibility and autonomy from their commanders appear in other columns of the Red River War, suggesting that this was common practice. Nelson Miles's November 4, 1874, instructions to scout Lieutenant Frank Baldwin typify the level of authority commanders gave trusted subordinates.

"I want you to take command of the detachment of cavalry, infantry and scouts, one mountain howitzer and a train of 23 six-mule teams... and proceed north and eastward. Should you run across no Indians or trails which you deem advisable to attack or follow, you will convoy the train to the supply camp on the Washita River. Should you find any considerable body of Indians, you will communicate with me, and attack or pursue as you may deem expedient."⁵⁷

Ranald Mackenzie fostered a culture of trust and empowerment in his column that allowed him to surprise Maman-ti's village. Likewise, the level of trust and empowerment he received from senior leadership and his military commanders gave him the authority to gather supply stores, maneuver his column, confront the hostile bands in the Staked Plains, and order the horse slaughter.

⁵⁷ Alice Blackwood Baldwin, *Memoirs of the Late Frank D. Baldwin* (Los Angeles: Wetzel Publishing 1929), 71.

Reliance on Indigenous Expertise

Employing and depending upon local experts while out on campaign was a common characteristic of the army that fought the Red River War. Ranald Mackenzie's column employed Native American scouts, civilian wagon masters, and white frontiersmen to arrive at the Palo Duro and slaughter the captured ponies. While no written records exist of a Native American plan for fighting the columns in the Staked Plains, their tactics and the archeological record demonstrate that "at virtually every battle the primary concern for the native warriors was the protection of their families."⁵⁸ The Red River War encompassed only seven major engagements between combatants in the Staked Plains. The hostile bands fought on their own terms and rarely pressed an offense unless it was to their distinct advantage. They avoided contact with large army formations. To find and engage the natives, the army needed indigenous scouts and civilian frontiersmen.

Across the army, native scouts and frontiersmen helped the army understand the habits and methods of their foes. Scouts allowed commanders to communicate between fast-moving cavalry columns and infantry. Their employment became unwritten doctrine for the frontier army.⁵⁹ They provided local familiarization with terrain and indigenous tribes and helped commanders run messages between their main column, supply trains, and advanced elements. They often carried dispatches to higher headquarters. Most importantly they searched for hostile Indians, pushing the larger army formations in the right direction toward their foe.

⁵⁸ Cruse, 144.

⁵⁹ Utley, 50-55.

During the September 1874 campaign Mackenzie employed a 31-man formation of scouts led by Lt. William Thompson consisting of experienced cavalrymen, civilian frontiersmen, twelve Tonkawa, and thirteen Seminole Indians.⁶⁰ They served as Mackenzie's eyes and ears. A Native American scout named Johnson located Maman-ti's village, twenty-five miles from Mackenzie's column in the Tule Canyon on September 27, the day before the attack.⁶¹ In previous years, Johnson traded arms and buffalo robes with the inhabitants of the Staked Plains. Within Mackenzie's command, Johnson was the only scout with intimate knowledge of the geography of the Panhandle and "his services proved invaluable."⁶² Mackenzie directed Lieutenant William Thompson and his Tonkawa and Seminole Indian scouts to "open the fight" prior to their descent into the Palo Duro. After the battle, scouts John Charlton and Henry Strong managed the captured herd and began roping the ponies to lead them to slaughter. Virtually every critical event leading up to and during the slaughter of 1,000 horses involved assistance from indigenous expertise.

Other columns in the Red River War employed native and civilian scouts. Miles's scout detachment commander, Lieutenant Frank Baldwin, led the second largest engagement of the Red River War. On November 8, Baldwin, the scouts, 23 six-mule teams, Troop D of the 6th Cavalry, and Company D of the 5th Infantry patrolled an area near McClellan Creek. There he located and attacked an encampment of Grey Beard, a southern Cheyenne Medicine Man. The fight resulted in the rout of 300 warriors, destruction of the camp, and the rescue of settlers Adelaide and Julia Germain, two

⁶⁰ Charlton and Carter, 103.

⁶¹ Utley, 50-55; Paul Magid, *The Gray Fox: George Crook and the Indian Wars* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015); Charlton and Carter, 106.

⁶² Hatfield, 2.

captive children.⁶³ In one of the most famous events of the Red River War, a small detachment of civilian scouts (Amos Chapman and Billy Dixon) and four cavalymen from Miles's column held off hundreds of attacking native warriors for several days from a buffalo wallow. The civilian scouts and four soldiers involved received the Congressional Medal of Honor for their actions.⁶⁴ These incidents demonstrate the importance of native and civilian scouts and the dependence of Mackenzie and other commanders on the indigenous expertise that they provided.

Conclusion

Three important attributes reveal what made Ranald Mackenzie's column succeed in the field against a fierce and irregular foe: discipline and individual grit, the empowerment of trusted leaders in the field, and a reliance on indigenous expertise to understand the complex environment and irregular foe. Mackenzie learned through continuous campaigning against the Indians, and his command adapted to the conditions on the Southern Plains and the behavior of their Native American foe.

Does today's small and professional army possess the same attributes as Mackenzie's column to confront the next wave of irregular threats in a complex and difficult environment? A brief survey suggests that two are present in army culture, doctrine, and practice. Unit discipline is trained, evaluated, and cultivated at army training centers, schools, and centers of excellence. The army celebrates the discipline

⁶³ Baldwin, 70-76.

⁶⁴ A thorough first-hand account of the Buffalo Wallow Fight is in Billy Dixon and Frederick S. Barde, *Life and Adventures of "Billy" Dixon, of Adobe Walls, Texas Panhandle; a Narrative in Which Is Described Many Things Relating to the Early Southwest, with an Account of the Fights between Indians and Buffalo Hunters at Adobe Walls and the Desperate Engagement at Buffalo Wallow, for Which Congress Voted the Medal of Honor to the Survivors* (Guthrie: Co-operative Publishing Co., 1914), 254-280.

of elite units like the 75th Ranger Regiment. Recent implementation of the Army Combat Fitness Test, a more vigorous physical evaluation of each soldier, suggests that individual grit is an important characteristic of modern soldiery. Hard physical activity and a culture of fitness that the new test will stimulate makes the American soldier more comfortable with being uncomfortable – a critical component of individual grit.

Likewise, today's army maintains a culture of empowering trusted subordinate leaders, and it is inherent in the army's doctrine of mission command. Technology that provides geographically distant leaders near real-time awareness of events on the ground makes the concept of empowering subordinate field leadership difficult in practice. In December 2016, General Stephen Townsend, acting as the Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve commander, published a tactical directive that pushed the authority to release munitions and the collateral damage risk down to the ground commanders who assumed personal risk while engaging ISIS fighters. This same directive gave permission for U.S. advisors to locate forward with their Iraqi counterparts to better enable partner forces against the Islamic State fighters. Prior to his publication of the tactical directive, requests by on-the-ground commanders for fire support flowed through multiple mission command cells and culminated with the approval of a general officer.⁶⁵ Gen. Townsend's example demonstrates how today's leaders trust and empower subordinates in the field.

While discipline and grit and a culture of trust and empowerment persist in today's force, the third critical attribute of Mackenzie's column at Palo Duro is less

⁶⁵ For an unclassified summary of the CJTF OIR tactical directive, see Susannah George and Balint Szlanko, "Us Changes Rules of Engagement for Mosul Fight in Iraq," February 24, 2017, 2017, <https://apnews.com/f084b4f094f440058e6b58318a67adce>.

obvious. From Mackenzie's frontier scouts to the WWII army's enlistment of locals from war-torn countries in Europe, contract translators in Afghanistan, and professional engineers at the Mosul Dam, experts and indigenous people have enabled U.S. Army commanders in the field.⁶⁶ Though today's army has formations designed to partner with and enable indigenous forces (Security Force Assistance Brigades and Special Forces formations), these units exist principally to impart American expertise on partnered military and paramilitary organizations. Though our military is familiar with contract support from experts, with the exception of translators these personnel typically do not work "in the field." Mackenzie's experience in the Palo Duro shows that his soldiers and unit alone did not navigate the Staked Plains and find Maman-ti's village. They needed local expertise, and they had an openness and a culture of employing it in their fighting units. Wherever the army deploys, there are people there who can assist them in understanding the local terrain, infrastructure, and inhabitants. Does today's army have the mindset, culture, or process to incorporate and employ indigenous expertise into general purpose or special units in the field? Mackenzie would certainly hope so.

⁶⁶ The author's grandfather, a Pole who fled his country and fought with the French Resistance Forces, joined the U.S. Army's 191st Tank Battalion shortly after it invaded Southern France. He spent the rest of war translating for his commander and identifying Nazis and Nazi sympathizers hiding among the local population.