The Battle of Cieneguilla, March 30, 1854

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ABSTRACT

On March 30, 1854, near present-day Pilar, New Mexico, Companies from the United States Army's 1st Dragoon Regiment engaged Jicarilla Apaches. The significance of the engagement was that this was the first time United States regular troops engaged the Apache. The Jicarilla Apache, as well as possible Ute allies, were attempting to impede the United States doctrine of Manifest Destiny (Westward Expansion) in order to protect their land and culture. The battle resulted in the destruction of a United States Army Command and the displacement of the Jicarilla Apache.

Keywords: Manifest Destiny, Westward Expansion, Indian Wars, Jicarilla Apache, US Army, Dragoons

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RESUMEN

El 30 de marzo de 1854, cerca de la actual Pilar, Nuevo México, las Compañías del 1er Regimiento de Dragoons del Ejército de los Estados Unidos se enfrentaron a los Apaches Jicarilla. La importancia del enfrentamiento fue que esta fue la primera vez que las tropas regulares de los Estados Unidos se enfrentaron a los Apache. Los Apache Jicarilla, así como los posibles aliados de los Ute, intentaban impedir la doctrina estadounidense del Destino Manifiesto (Expansión hacia el Oeste) para proteger su tierra y su cultura. La batalla resultó en la destrucción de un Comando del Ejército de los Estados Unidos y el desplazamiento de los Apache Jicarilla.

Palabras clave: Destino Manifiesto, Expansión hacia el Oeste, Guerras Indias, Apaches Jicarilla, Ejército de EE. UU., Dragoons

1854年3月30日塞内圭拉战役

摘要

1854年3月30日,在现在的新墨西哥州皮拉尔(Pilar)附近,美国陆军第1龙骑兵团连队与吉卡里拉•阿帕奇部落(Jicarilla Apaches)交战。这次交战的意义在于,这是美国正规部队首次与阿帕奇部落交战。吉卡里拉•阿帕奇部落和可能的犹特盟友试图阻止美国的昭昭天命(向西扩张)主义,以保护他们的土地和文化。这场战斗导致一个美国陆军司令部被摧毁,并让吉卡里拉•阿帕奇部落流离失所。

关键词: 昭昭天命,向西扩张,印第安战争,吉卡里拉·阿帕奇部落,美国陆军,龙骑兵

n March 30, 1854, in New Mexico Territory, Companies from the United States Army's 1st Dragoon Regiment, engaged Jicarilla Apaches in what the Santa Fe Weekly Gazette reported as "one of the severest battles that ever took place between American troops and Red Indians."1 The significance of the engagement was that this was the first time United States regular troops engaged the Apache. The Jicarilla Apache, as well as possible Ute allies, were attempting to impede the United States doctrine of Manifest Destiny (Westward Expansion) in order to protect their land and culture. The battle resulted in the destruction of a United States Army command and the displacement of the Jicarilla Apache.2

The Jicarilla were described as "very poor, very hard to govern, and from their continually roving through the settlements, [and thereby a] danger [and] to be apprehended from colli-

sions between them and the citizens."3 There were some instances between 1848–1849 where peace with the Jicarilla was feasible. However, the idea of peace was washed away due to an incident that took place at a military post in Las Vegas (Nevada). Warriors came to the post in order to trade. Captain Henry B. Judd of the Third U.S. Artillery Regiment commanded a detachment at Las Vegas and was concerned about the licarilla's motives, and ordered them to be seized. A small skirmish broke out killing four of the Jicarilla, resulting in what was considered an unprovoked attack by the Jicarilla. It was believed that the massacring of nearby settlers was being carried out by both the Jicarilla and Utes warriors.4

The Jicarilla were never able to unite as one and therefore were splintered; this was due to the powerful tribes that roamed the plains and prevented any real cohesion amongst the Jicarilla. Therefore, Jicarilla Apaches had no alternative but to move from the plains to Northern New Mexico. As more settlers poured into the region following the United States victory over Mexico in 1848, the Jicarilla were forced to move off their existing hunting grounds in New Mexico. Colonel George McCall made a survey of the department where the Jicarilla's reside in July of 1850 and stated that they [Jicarilla's] were few in numbers, but "committed more murders on our people than all the others together."5 Throughout 1850, the Jicarilla committed more aggressive acts by stealing cattle and thereby, forcing the Army to continue their pursuit in a more active manner and punished them. By 1851, some among the Jicarilla were interested in peace. A treaty was established between the Jicarilla and the United States Government, which allowed U.S. officials to learn more about Jicarilla themselves. Nevertheless, Jicarilla had little understanding of the stipulations of the treaty. By December of 1852, the United States Secretary of War deemed the region pacified of both Apache as well as Navajo aggression. Jicarilla subsisted on United States Government food rations as well as the stealing of cattle when warranted. In 1854, the U.S. Government's Department of Indian Affairs decided to provide provisions to the Jicarilla until they were able to feed themselves. However, due to Washington bureaucracy and differing opinions regarding Indian Affairs, sustenance was cut off. "They believed that the government had broken faith with them and, uncertainly, were uneasy and dissatisfied."6 The result was

that Jicarilla turned to stealing government cattle. The raids became more aggressive and violent. According to a report from Fort Union, New Mexico dated February 13, 1854, a company of Dragoons were dispatched to the vicinity of the Red River where "information of a camp of Jicarilla Apaches & Eutaws [Utes], some of whom have within three days committed depredations, robbing Mr. Waters of cattle and maltreating his herdsmen."7 The report was signed by Lieutenant Colonel George St. Cooke of the 2nd Dragoons. Cooke called for the surrender of the guilty party and if need be, their chastisement.8

On the 5th of March 1854, a company (troop) of the 2nd United States Dragoons under the command of 2nd Lieutenant David Bell, was given orders to move out of Fort Union and apprehend the Jicarilla raiding party in the northeastern region of New Mexico within the vicinity of Cimarron River. Under the direction of Chief Lobo Blanco, Jicarilla the Apache skirmished with Bell's Dragoons.9 The result of the skirmish included two Dragoons killed and four that were wounded. The Apache sustained four killed as well as Chief Lobo. The death of Chief Lobo brought about a short reprieve. According to the Santa Fe Weekly Gazette "Lobo's small band had caused more trouble, for the last three or four years, than all the other Indians in the Territory."10 The commander at Fort Union, Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cook (Second Dragoons), had a differing opinion as to that of the Santa Fe Weekly Gazette. Col. Cook stated that the engagement involving Bell, "would bring open warfare with some of the Jicarilla and, perhaps, the Utes."11

On the morning of the 29th of March 1857, the commander of Cantonment Burgwin, Major George A.H. Blake of the First Dragoons, received intelligence that after dismantling their encampment, the Jicarilla were on the move west down through the Rio Pueblo Valley. Cantonment Burgwin was a temporary base established in 1852 in order to defend the Taos Valley from the Jicarilla Apaches and the Utes. Major Blake provided orders to First Lieutenant John W. Davidson, to move out with companies F and I of the First Dragoons, (approximately sixty men), locate the trail, and perform a reconnaissance on the Jicarilla. Davidson was told not to bring on an engagement with the Jicarilla. The troopers of I and F companies as well as Assistant Surgeon David L. Magruder moved out of the cantonment on the night of March 29, 1854. The troopers moved in a southerly direction to the Rio Pueblo then turned west toward Rio Penasco, following a trail down into the valley. They then moved across the mountains into the Caliente Canon. As Davidson moved his command through the narrow canon passage in a single file column, his troopers made a prime target for an ambush. Davidson sent out a reconnaissance consisting of Corporal Richard Byrnes and six other troopers.

At 08:00 a.m. on the morning of March 30th, Davidson received a dispatch that the Jicarilla camp was located. The Dragoons approached the Jicarilla near the village of Cieneguilla

(Pillar), which sat about one hundred feet above the southern wall of the canyon. The Jicarilla had established their encampment on a steep ridge above the base of the canon, and in a well-established tactical position holding the high ground of the Embudo Mountains, whereas the troopers would have to negotiate the ground dismounted for the approach was unattainable while mounted. The Apache challenged the Dragoons with the sound of war chants being heard and a veteran of the United States War with Mexico, Sargent William Holbrook, said to his fellow troopers "look out men, that is war whoop and we've got to fight."12

Now having located the village and despite its formidable position, Davidson moved his command into a hollow and halted. Davidson dismounted his troopers. Counting to hear the war cries of the Apache and as stated in Davidson's official report, the Apache stated, "Come on up if you want to fight." Davidson saw no alternative but to attack. Despite Davison being ordered not to attack, he gave the order to his troopers to dismount. Davidson was preparing his command to fight dismounted and had his men tie the reins of their mounts to the trees in the hollow.

Doctor Magruder stayed in the hollow with fifteen Dragoons as a rear guard for the horses who were now tied to the trees. First Sergeant William Holbrook commanded a troop of around twenty Dragoons and was ordered to advance up the wooded southern slope. Sergeant William Kent was in command of twenty Dragoons and was

placed to the left of Sgt. Holbrook's position would move up the right flank of the Jicarilla village. The Dragoons had to traverse rough terrain as they ascended forward up a 90-foot sloop made difficult by the slippery leather boots that the Dragoons wore. To make matters worse, the Dragoons were weighed down by their equipment as well as their weapons as Davidson ordered his men to advance from a narrow gorge up a hill under arduous conditions.

According to David M. Johnson, it is possible that Davidson, "could have advanced farther up the slope before he dismounted his men or circled around by going up the adjacent ridge and entering the camp from the south or southeast."14 Davidson had opened up his command to possible ambush and gave up his mobility and shock action by dismounting and leaving behind a third of his command to guard their mounts. The dragoons had no tactical advantage as they moved up the side of a mountain with a rather inferior smoothbore. It is safe to say that the dragoon's tactical capability was not only hindered by tough terrain and an inferior weapon but also fatigue. Alcohol was prevalent amongst soldiers' stations on the western frontier. Company commanders such as "Major George A. H. Blake [stationed at Fort Union] had a fondness for spirits and Maj. Philip Thompson, nearly incapacitated by drink, would be soon cashiered for drunkenness."15

The advancing Dragoons grabbed and pulled their way up the treacherous mountainside until they reached the crest. As the Dragoons stopped to catch their breath, they were able to view the Jicarilla village. The Jicarilla village consisted of wickiups (dwelling) which were made out of bark and thatch roofs as well as animal skins to protect from the cold weather. A skirmish line was formed by Sergeant William Kent and began to advance towards the village when a shot was fired from the village which killed the Sergeant outright. The Dragoons began to return fire, killing some of those in the village. With a rapid movement, the Dragoons occupied the village and claimed the spoils of war while others tended to Sgt. Kent's body. The dragoons perceived their brief skirmish as a rather easy victory. As Davidson was preparing to return down the mountainside and bring his command back to Fort Union, a disturbing noise troubled him. The Jicarilla had commenced an attack on Davidson's fifteen Dragoons who were tasked to guard the horses tied to the trees. As the Apaches attacked from several directions, Magruder kept his men focused and calm under fire.

Davidson had to respond, and therefore, redeployed his two companies out of the village in order to aid the horse detail. The Dragoons, tasked with guarding the horses, formed a skirmish line around the horses while using terrain consisting of trees and boulders to provide cover for them. The Apaches moved forward using cover and concealment as they advanced toward the Dragoons horse holders. The Dragoons were armed with the rather cumbersome .69 – caliber Springfield Model 1847 Musketoon; were at a disadvantage due to the weapons range and in-

accuracy as well as the time it took to load. Under the pressure of combat, it wasn't uncommon for a soldier's nerves to unravel and thereby, impacting the loading of such a weapon. Regarding secondary weapons, the Dragoons were armed with a horse pistol, the Aston single-shot. Some of the Dragoons were fortunate enough to be armed with the Colt Dragoon revolvers. However, the Apache were able to utilize their bow and arrows in quick succession, sending a wave of arrows at their adversaries. The Apache were also armed with various long arms as well, such as flintlock muskets.¹⁶ Even though Davidson and his men drove back the initial attack, they were found engaged in a firefight lasting up to two hours. The Dragoons found themselves in a crossfire with no escape possible. The casualties amongst the Dragoons were beginning to mount. The Dragoons were expanding their ammunition at a high rate while showing signs of exhaustion, fatigue, and low morale. A Private in Company "I" stated:

[T]he Indians in a moment, or two, made a charge on us from three sides at once. We repulsed them again and were then ordered to screen ourselves behind any trees or breastwork that we could get. We surrounded the horses in a sort of circle, and while in that position the Indians made two more charges on us from three sides at once. We drove them back each time. There were sometimes 20 minutes, sometime half an hour, elapsed between these charges.

Afterwards they would charge together from, sometimes one side, and sometimes another. The men from one side would go to the other where the Indians were charging to assist in repelling them every time. We repulsed them every time. We fought at that place for an hour and a half, to two hours, we lost some men there and killed some Indians. I saw two Indians fall.¹⁷

As the battle raged on, 1st Lieutenant Davidson ordered his Dragoons to retreat to a small hill that sat about one hundred and seventy-five yards away. Davidson placed his Dragoons in a rather precarious defensive perimeter and found himself being attacked on all sides. Davidson ordered his men to abandon the position and move across the creek and make their way up the slopes of the ridge to the northeast. The Dragoons took with them any surviving horses and re-armed themselves as best they could with the weapons and ammunition from the horse-holders. As the Dragoons went up the slope, they halted. According to one of the Dragoons, they had to rest for a few minutes at which time they noticed the Apaches crossing a ravine in order to seize the high ground before they did. The Dragoons reach the top only to find the Jicarilla Apache surrounding their position on three sides.¹⁸ As Davidson's Dragoons moved along the ridge, they found themselves engaged in a firefight that lasted about ten minutes or so and were subjected to a series of attacks. Davidson, despite having been wounded by an arrow, kept up the elan and esprit



Image 1. Cenotaph marking where the body of a killed dragoon was found. © Carptrash, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=56841048

de corps in order to try to maintain discipline, morale, and cohesion. Davidson realized his command was in a desperate situation and ordered his men to leave the dead and prepare the wounded to be moved down along a ridge to a nearby canyon. As the Dragoons began their descent down the ridge leading to the nearby canyon, along with taking their wounded with them, they continued to sustain losses. According to a trooper of the 2nd Dragoon Regiment:

the moment we reached the summit of the mountain [ridge], they [the Apache] attacked us, [and] there was an engagement of ten minutes. The command after this engagement changed its direction to the left, we were then moving on the ridge of a

mountain. We had moved but 20 or 30 rods from [where] we had our first engagement, on top of the mountain, when the Indians attacked us in [the] rear. The wounded men were then placed with the horses & the others defended the flanks & rear. We moved slowly in that manner for nearly half a mile, being attacked several times by the Indians, in going that distance but they were repelled each time by the soldiers.¹⁹

The hardships that Davidson's Dragoons endure moving down the ridge were many, for the Dragoons were weary and fatigued as they tried to seek refuge. The Dragoons were stopping frequently and formed a skirmish

line in order to fight off their attackers during their retreat. This is confirmed by the findings of spent percussion caps, arrowheads and other discarded accouchements that were discovered during an archeological dig.20 According to Archaeologist David Johnson, he states that due to the findings, the line of retreat was littered with arrowheads, percussion caps as well as other accouterments. Johnson concluded that the soldiers were likely weary if not frantic during the push down the narrow ridge.21 The Cieneguilla Apache now had to make a decision whether or not to continue the pursuit and possibly decimate the entire command. The Dragoons were in a precarious state for they had just about depleted all their ammunition.

The Dragoons were approaching the trail through the canyon that led to Cieneguilla. It is important to note that the slope was less steep allowing the Dragoons to continue their retreat. Private Peter Weldon, a trooper and veteran soldier in "F" Company, described being "so tired from climbing, running and fighting that he "could stand up no longer."22 Morale was becoming low, due to the precarious nature of the engagement in which the troopers were taking part. One trooper, James Strawbridge, asked Sergeant Holbrook if he could remove the saddle from his dying horse. Holbrook told the trooper to wait until victory was theirs and "then [their] will be enough time to take the kits off the dead horses."23

Battlefield debris began to accumulate with arrows and cartridges strewn all over the place as well as

wounded men and horses. Exhaustion and anxiety had taken its toll on the combatants due to the "constant climbing, dodging, running, and fighting."24 Having tried to establish a defensive position, both Davidson and Sergeant Holbrook held a council of war and came to the conclusion that their position lacked stability and that they must move. As they held their council, a projectile from a rifle struck a tree having passed between their faces. It was becoming apparent that they must move quickly. Lieutenant Davidson had his horse brought to him by Bugler Henry McGrath and gave the order to mount up so that his dragoons could save their own lives. Unfortunately, many horses were lost and the Dragoons found themselves having to double up in the saddle.

As the Dragoons began to move out of the canyon, many casualties were left behind. An account of the retreat is provided by Private James Stowbridge:

> The last time we faced it was just before we went down on the other side of the hill. We kept our position there for nearly twenty minutes, I think, fighting the Indians, intending to hold the position. I was sitting behind a tree to get a shot at an Indian, a shot struck the ground by my side, and another passed between Private Newhand's legs as he was squatting down, he said it wasn't best for us to stay there as we were not sheltered. The Indians at this time commenced firing arrows very fast,

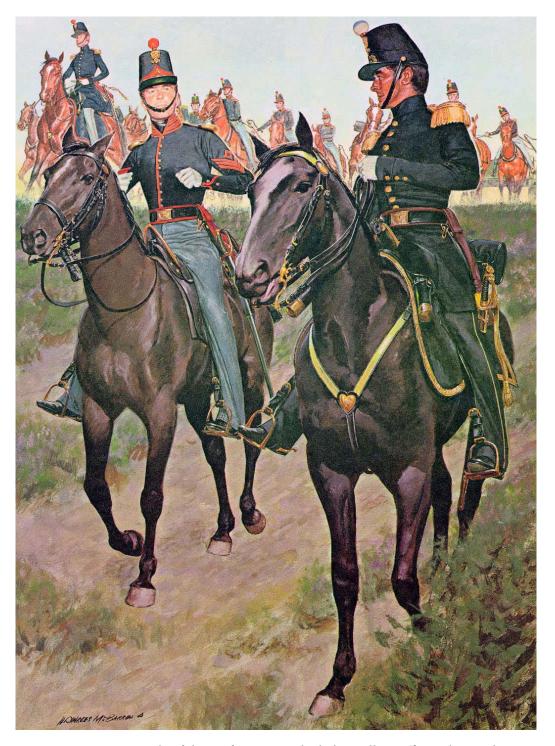


Image 2. An example of the uniforms worn by light artillery officers during the time of the Battle of Cieneguilla. H. Charles McBarron, *The American Soldier*, 1855, U.S. Army Center for Military History, https://history.army.mil/html/art photo/pripos/amsoldier1.html.

you could see fifteen or twenty falling on the ground at once. As we raised up to change our position I heard somebody say the Lieutenant was wounded. I turned around and saw an arrow sticking in his shoulder, he said never mind it is nothing. Corporal Dempsey, I think, pulled the arrow out.²⁵

Davidson began to move his command out of the hollows at the base canyon while they fired their revolvers and single-shot horse pistols, which was having an effect on their foe. The Dragoons continued to move and crossed a stream so that they could obtain an adequate defensive position. As the Dragoons made their way up a steep embankment on the opposite side of the canyon, it seemed as if the Jicarilla had stopped their attack.26 As the troopers continued their retreat, George Breenwald of F Company, had sustained a serious wound and could no longer keep up with his fellow Dragoons. He asked not to be abandoned at which point Davidson ordered his shattered command to halt. The Dragoons tended to their weapons, themselves and mounts as best they could. Having finally reached the top, the Dragoons proceeded to move forward along the ridge on the opposite side of the canyon. Many of the Dragoons were on foot by this point and continued along the ridge for about 700-to-800 yards. The Dragoons began to move down the ridge in the hopes that they could make their way onto Cieneguilla. Nevertheless, the Dragoons continued their arduous fight.

Davidson was keeping his composure while trooper Peter Weldon received an arrow wound in his arm. Sergeant Halbrook also received a wound and stated "I am shot and cannot go any further on foot." Holbrook tried to mount a horse but was so weak that he was unable to. Holbrook had two arrows protruding from him and was extremely bloody from his wounds. Due to his wounds and the loss of blood, Sergeant Holbrook had succumbed to his wounds.²⁷ Captain Davidson ordered his men to mount and place the wounded on to the horses prior to moving through the canyon. The Jacarilla had called off the pursuit and began to comb the field of battle for any booty that could be found. The Dragoons continued several miles before regrouping and taking a much-needed rest. The Dragoons had reached Taos -Cieneguilla road and continued to make their way back to Cantonment Burgwin.

The Apache were successful in routing Dragoons of the U.S. Army in a well-executed tactical engagement. The Apache engaged their foe under the command of Flechas Rayada with about 100 to 130 warriors.28 The casualties amongst the Apache are unclear; however, the U.S. Army estimates the loss to be up to fifty warriors. The Dragoons sustained twenty-two killed and twenty-three wounded as well as the loss of a significant amount of the horses.²⁹ Davidson makes the claim that there were members of the Ute tribe that took part in the engagement, however, there was no evidence to substantiate this claim. Also, it is believed that Davidson exaggerated the number



Image 3. Metal points from the Cieneguilla Battle Site. Johnson, Adams, Hawk and Miller, Final Report on the Battle of Cieneguilla: A Jicarilla Apache Victory Over the U.A. Dragoons March 30, 1854, United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Southwest Region, June 2009, Report No. 20, cover illustration.

of enemy combatants killed to be in the vicinity of 30–to–50 warriors. The following day, Lieutenant David Bell was sent out to the field of battle. Lt. Bell reported his findings:

[five] men only were found dead upon the side of the hill up which Davidson advanced, and it is by no means certain that they were dead when the retreat was ordered, while 14 men were found on the hill side down which the flight took place, and two or three more in the ravine below. This cannot be denied and it proves that a command of 57 Dragoons retreated without an attempt to preserve order when they had lost 5 of their number.³⁰

Following the engagement which brought about the destruction of Davidson's command, a Court of Inquiry was held. Davidson stated the following in his report:

After a desperate fight of nearly three horses I was compelled to withdraw with my wounded whom I succeeded in bringing to Taos. The melancholy duty now revolves on me of reporting twenty-two of my gallant command killed upon the field, and twenty-three wounded, and upwards of forty-five horses killed and lost in action. I refer to the accompanying list of killed and wounded for details. There were from my own observation and that of the Pueblo Indians who went out with Major [George A.H.] Blake to bring in the dead, upwards of three hundred Apache and Utah [Ute] warriors who opposed me.³¹

Davidson states that he engaged 250 to 300 Apache. Davidson went on to state that he was engaged in combat for over three hours against a force of Jicarilla and Utes. Most likely, there must have been around one hundred and twenty to one hundred and thirty Jicarilla minus the Utes who were not involved in the engagement. Also, a prolonged firefight for three hours has also been disputed for "a Cartridge Box (cavalry) holds some 30 to 50 rounds. How long would it take a man to fire this number of Cartridges assuming that he fired all of them? But in the excitement of action, most men will lose a large portion of their ammunition.³² Therefore, a reasonable conclusion is that the firefight most likely lasted about thirty minutes. Bell's chief complaints from his investigation were supported by an Indian Agent in the vicinity known as Christopher "Kit" Carson. Carson had only recently met with the Jicarilla and stated that they numbered around one hundred warriors as well as family members. An agent to the Indians, a Mr. Head, stated that

Chief Fleches Rayada commanded the Apache in battle, there were 150 warriors, and they suffered only three killed. The Chief sent a message via [Mr. Head] that he would fight again if he could draw the Dragoons into bad terrain, but was willing to give up the captured arms and horses if peace could be made. It was not to be. The defeat of Cieneguilla was the main event that led to a concentrated campaign against the Jicarilla- a campaign the United States eventually won.³³

A week passed before the U.S. military launched an offensive in order to chastise the Jicarilla. A force of about 200 dragoons and 100 infantrymen from the Third U.S. Infantry accompanied by about thirty or so scouts under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke defeated about one hundred and fifty Jicarilla under Chief Chacon during the Battle of Oio Caliente Canyon. Following the engagement, many of Jicarilla found themselves dispersed from their camps and endured a rough winter where many of them perished. Any further operations conducted against the Jicarilla were minor at best.34

APPENDIX: The U.S. Dragoon

Traditionally speaking, the U.S. Dragoon employed a different set of tactics from that of the U.S. Cavalry. The Dragoon horse was a mode of transportation and often, did not play a role in battle. Dragoons often engaged their enemy dismounted which required their mounts to be handled by a holder. A horse holder would often care for four horses at a time.

Dragoons were relatively well armed and deployed an array of weaponry such as the .54 cal. Model 1817 Derringer percussion rifle, the Hall Breech loading carbine, the 1847 Musketoon and later on the Sharps rifle with a "box lock" mechanism. The Apache were able to fire more arrows than the Dragoon was able to fire his musketoon, due to the laborious steps in having to load the weapon. In terms of side arms, the Dragoons were issued the 1842 percussion horse pistol.³⁵ However, there were some individuals who deployed the Walker–Colt revolver .44 caliber. The Dragoons were also equipped with the 1840 Prussian Dragoon Saber.

In terms of uniforms, the Dragoons wore a Fatigue cap or model 1851 Shako. A fatigue jacket made of blue wool with orange (1st Dragoon Regiment) or yellow (2nd Dragoon Regiment) piping was worn. Pants of light blue wool with piping were also worn. Boots of black leather with fringed boot covers were worn at times. A cap box for percussion caps and saber belts made of leather in white were worn.

Endnotes

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