

The Battle of Big Dry Wash
Last of the Big Fights
By James E. Cook, Arizona Republic

It's a sad thing to say about history, but in some respects the Battle of Big Dry Wash resembled a movie script. It was quiet in the territory in the summer of 1882. Most of the "hostiles", as they were called, were acting subdued. The soldiers and the Indians around Fort Apache had got together for one hell of a celebration of the Fourth of July.

But in Cowboys-and-Indians Script A, Scene 47-C, there's one Indian sorehead who thinks the old warriors have gone soft, so he stirred things up. And there's generally a young lieutenant ready to oblige because he was too young for the Civil War and wants to make captain before the Indians give up.

History does not say which of the many lieutenants at Big Dry Wash was a troublemaker. After all, they wrote the history. But the Indian militant was a Tonto Apache called Na-ti-o-tish or Nan-tia-tish.

Na-ti-o-tish gathered a band of 60 or 70 Apaches from various clans and set out to show the old chiefs how to deal with the white man. His lesson in foreign relations ended at Big Dry Wash less than two weeks later, when the Cavalry came down on him like a lead storm.

Most accounts of the battle began on or about July 6, 1882. Although there was a tenuous peace, rumors filtered into Fort Apache and San Carlos that Na-ti-o-tish was putting together a band of White Mountain Apaches who were unable to adjust to a peacetime economy. Sometime between July 6 and 11, the band came out of the bushes and raided the San Carlos Agency, carrying away half a dozen squaws.

Cibecue Charley Colvig led his San Carlos Indian Police after the raiders. But Na-ti-o-tish set an ambush a few miles up the San Carlos River. Colvig and six to ten of his policemen were killed on July 11. The Army considered that provocation. Captain Drew led two troops of the 3rd Cavalry from Fort Thomas, 28 miles east of San Carlos. Despite the heat from pursuing soldiers, Na-ti-o-tish's band did in perhaps a dozen settlers during the next few days.

The Apaches tried to raid McMillanville, now a ghost town alongside U.S. 60 north of Globe. But the miners there were forewarned. They hid the women and children in the Stonewall Jackson Mine and sniped at the raiders until Na-ti-o-tish got tired of that game.

The Apaches crossed the Salt River and swept through Pleasant Valley and the Tonto Basin, killing ranchers and stealing horses. At a ranch called the Hendershot Place, they killed a man named Meadows and wounded his two sons.

Na-ti-o-tish's depredations gave self-appointed Indian fighters around Globe an excuse to form their own army. They called themselves "Globe Rangers", and said that, if the

military couldn't handle this uprising, they could. Their second or third night out, they camped at a cabin on the Salt River. They were awakened by a raiding party from Na-ti-o-tish's band firing into the cabin to let the rangers know their horses had just been stolen.

The Army was better organized, and probably itching for something to do. The West had almost been won and Tombstone was starting its decline. Phoenix had been settled for a dozen years and the Railroad had come to Flagstaff. Fifteen troops of Cavalry were dispatched from Fort Thomas, Fort Apache, Camp Verde, Camp McDowell and Whipple Barracks. Troops from Thomas and Apache were in hot pursuit. The troops from Verde and Whipple would follow Crook's Road to the top of the Mogollon Rim to try to cut the Indians off from Navajo Country. Captain Adna R. Chaffee led Troop D, 6th Cavalry, from McDowell toward the Tonto Basin. Chaffee was accompanied by Al Sieber and his company of Indian scouts.

It all began to come together in the Tonto Basin, somewhere in the Payson area. Major A. W. Evans, leading six troops of the 3rd Cavalry from Fort Apache, could tell by the Apache camp sites that he was gaining on them.

On July 16, he encountered Chaffee, whose scouts had already cut the Indians' trail on the headwaters of the East Verde above Payson. It was obvious now that the fugitives were going to climb the Rim on the old Navajo Trail and either stand and fight near General Springs or break for the Navajo country.

Lieutenant Thomas Cruse, who won the Congressional Medal of Honor at Big Dry Wash, told in his memoirs how Chaffee rode back to brief Major Evans (Cruse called him Colonel).

"I'm sure that the hostiles are just a little way ahead," Chaffee told the colonel. "Sieber thinks they expect close pursuit and his idea is that they'll stop at General Springs to fight. That's a steep cliff where the trail climbs out of the Tonto Basin onto the Crook Road. Sieber feels that they'll expect to cut up even a superior number of troops, because of their position."

Major Evans thought out his strategy. The Indians would probably be watching from the trail or from the Rim itself. Chaffee's troop of Evans' command, Troop E, was headed by a Lieutenant Converse.

On the morning of July 17, Evans ordered Chaffee's highly visible troop to take the lead. "These white horses showed among the green pines below like a long line of geese," historian Will C. Barnes reported. Lieutenant Converse's white horse troop would lead the 3rd Cavalry troops, in hopes Na-ti-o-tish would overlook all those black and brown horses that followed. If Chaffee got into a fight, Converse could ride to the rescue and Evans could figure how best to deploy the less conspicuous troops.

It was later concluded that the Indians swallowed Evans' strategy. They kept watch from the Rim until dark but counted only Chaffee's troop. Civilian C. P. Wingfield, who was with a 150-mile supply train following the soldiers, wrote later: "If you have been on the rim of Tonto Basin at General Springs, you know you can see pretty well down into the basin. Well, those Indians could look off down there and see what we called the 'White Horse Troop' mounted on gray horses. They supposed that was all that was after them, so they thought they would fortify and the soldiers would ride right into their nest and they . . . would massacre the whole troop. So an Indian said that got back to the reservation."

But the ambush was not to be at General Springs. When Chaffee's troops reached the spring and meadow next morning, they found signs of the Indians' camp. Lieutenant Cruse, who followed with Evans' main troop, reported the same thing.

Cruse wrote, "It looked as if the Apaches were pushing straight on toward the Navajo country and we cursed the prospect of a tedious campaign in that rough, waterless region. But within a mile a courier galloped back to us."

Chaffee had been fired on at the end of what is now called Battleground Ridge. Accounts of the battle and the monument on the ridge disagree as to the location of the fight. Even a map which Chaffee and Evans drew on a piece of oil cloth the next day took the liberty of turning the compass 90 degrees.

Apparently Na-ti-o-tish led his band into the bottom of East Clear Creek and what is now the bottom of Blue Ridge Reservoir, then up the other side. Until the reservoir was built a few years ago, the Rock Crossing Trail still went across the 1,000-foot-deep gorge.

Where one of the fingers of Battleground Ridge juts into the canyon, it narrows to perhaps 700 yards wide. When Chaffee's troops showed up on this point, the Indians fired across the canyon (there's still speculation that the battle was not across Clear Creek, but across a tributary, Miller Canyon).

Whatever the physical layout, the battle was well documented in books by Cruse and Lieutenant Britton Davis. And Will C. Barnes, who was telegrapher at Fort Apache at the time, wrote an exhaustive study of the battle for the January, 1930, Arizona Historical Review.

When the word got back that Chaffee had found the hostiles, Lieutenant Converse's white-mounted troop rode down the ridgetop at a full gallop. The rest of Evans' column spurred up and hurried along, hearing occasional volleys of rifle fire.

Chaffee told Evans that Sieber, as usual, had spotted the Indians. They were lurking on the other side of the canyon. Chaffee had sent a few men forward to draw their fire. Evans told Chaffee, who was not only his junior but also a member of a rival regiment, to take over. "It's your fight," he said. "I give you full control." This may have been the better part of valor, but Cruse described it as an unselfish act.

Cruse's troop, Chaffee's troop and part of Sieber's scouts were told to go right of the trail (east) and try to find another place to cross the canyon. Two other troops and the rest of the scouts duplicated the flanking maneuver to the left. Converse's troop was to remain and keep the Indians' minds off the possibility of a flank attack. Converse was wounded early in the fight when a ricocheting .44 slug sent a piece of rock into his eye, but he lived to retire as a colonel.

The first shots had been fired around 11 a.m. but it was nearly 3 p.m. when the flanking parties started into the canyon.

Cruse said that, as his party finished the strenuous climb through the canyon and formed a line of skirmish, they heard shots from the other flank. The other encircling party, led by Captain Lemuel Abbott, also had made it across the canyon. Abbott cut off a group of Apaches who seemed to be considerably surprised. Na-ti-o-tish apparently still thought he was dealing with Chaffee's single troop and had sent out a party to flank Chaffee on the far rim of the canyon.

Abbott's attack sent the Apaches looking for their horses. But Sieber's scouts had sneaked up on the Indians who were guarding the pony herd. The guards, distracted by the firing from Abbott's direction, weren't paying attention. Sieber killed them and captured the herd.

The battle was now reduced to grueling, close-quarters combat between pockets of trapped Apaches and the soldiers. Cruse, on the right flank with Sieber, wrote: "Our men and Sieber wiped out that whole bunch of hostiles and we pushed on. Sieber was still beside me and I saw him kill three of the renegades in quick succession as they crept over the edge of the canyon to go over and away from the battle. 'There he goes!', he would grunt to me. With the report of his rifle, an Indian I had not seen would suddenly appear, flinging up his arms as if to catch at some support. Then, under the momentum of his rush, he would plunge forward on his head and roll over and over. One man, shot at the very rim, plunged over and it seemed that he continued to fall for many minutes."

Mule packer C. P. Wingfield, who later helped carry some of the casualties back to Camp Verde, reported: "Right in the thickest part of the fight one of Al Sieber's scouts saw two of his brothers and his father with the Indians. He threw his gun down and started to run to his folks. Sieber told him to halt. He did not heed him. Sieber raised his rifle and fired, shooting him in the back of the head."

The fighting continued until dark. Cruse doesn't mention it, but other sources say that one of those unholy mountain thunderstorms came up late in the afternoon, complete with hail. That may have brought darkness on early. Whatever the case, the surviving Apaches slipped away in the dimness after the battle had continued for perhaps four hours.

The cavalrymen spent the night carrying their two dead soldiers, two dead scouts and several wounded men back across the canyon (some historians, including Barnes, reported only one dead soldier and one dead scout).

Cruse said that the soldiers from Camp Verde arrived on the south rim of Big Dry Wash at daylight "much out of temper" because they had missed the fight. They may have sensed that the monument erected 50 years later would list only the names of those who actually participated. A courier was sent back to tell Captain Drew, the original pursuer from Fort Thomas, to camp at General Springs.

The soldiers found the bodies of 22 Indians, including Na-ti-o-tish. The Apache braves had forced four or five squaws to accompany them and the soldiers found three or four of them in hiding the morning after the battle. One had been wounded below her knee. A Dr. Ewing, who had been summoned from Camp Verde, amputated the leg without anesthetic and she returned to Fort Apache where she was fitted with a peg leg.

Lieutenant Davis, in his book "The Truth about Geronimo", told about the arrival of some of the "Globe Rangers" after the battle was over: "The morning after the fight two of these men appeared in our camp looking for their horse stock. They began claiming every good horse in the herd that our troops had captured from the Indians. I was standing beside Chaffee who, with his hands in his pockets, was letting them go as far as they would but betting madder and madder every minute. Finally one of them claimed Chaffee's own saddle mare and his companion backed him up in the claim. Then the air took on a blue tinge..."

Other civilians, who had heard about the battle, showed up to loot and scalp the Apache bodies and scavenge the soldiers' leavings, but they didn't get away with much until Chaffee left. That was on July 20, after some of the horses and mules had been reshod and rested.

Barnes reported that the troops returned to Fort Apache on July 28, some of them riding Apache ponies which had replaced their crippled mounts. "The 6th cavalrymen rode western horses of California stock," he explained. "Small, active, surefooted animals with good hard hoofs... I think every 6th cavalryman came back to Fort Apache on the same mount he left with. On the other hand, the 3rd Cavalry, which had but recently come to Arizona from Fort Hayes, Kansas, were mounted on big fine-boned Kentucky bred animals. They had huge and very brittle hoofs. Let one of them lose a shoe and, unless reshod at once, they went dead lame and had to be left behind... In the command that passed us, a number of men and at least one officer of the 3rd Regiment were riding Indian ponies captured from the hostiles."

Barnes also reported, "Within a week after the troops had returned to Fort Apache, scouts reported the presence in nearby White Mountain Indian camps of a number of Indians badly wounded in the fight."

The post commander wired General George Crook at Prescott, who wrote Washington, which replied that, if the Indians were peaceable, they should not be punished for past deeds. "Within six months we were discussing the fight with Indians living around Fort Apache who took part in the fight."

Well into this century, artifacts from the battle were still being found in the Rim country. Crackerbox Canyon, which parallels Battleground Ridge on the West, was named for hardtack boxes the soldiers nailed to trees for storage in the days after the fight.

The monument on Battleground Ridge, erected by the Forest Service and the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930's, is probably within a mile of where Converse's troops lay to aim diversionary fire across the canyon. On one side, it gives a 99-word summary of the fight and on the other it lists all the soldiers and scouts who actually participated.

In the canyon below, trout fishermen flip their lures from aluminum boats. Across the canyon, a power line goes through what is probably the area where the flanking soldiers trapped the Apaches.

There were guerilla-type skirmishes on the Rim Road (Crook's Road) at the gap where the Apaches and the troops climbed out of the basin. The gap has had an unsettled history. It was known for decades as the Tunnel Trail. A railroad company tried in 1885 to tunnel through the Rim at that point to build a Globe-Flagstaff railroad.

Phelps-Dodge had the same idea in the early 1960's. It tried to tunnel from a point near the battle site to the gap in the Rim to deliver water from Blue Ridge Reservoir to the East Verde below the Rim. That didn't work either, so now a power line and a pipeline go where Na-ti-o-tish's followers paused to count the white horses below them.

There were guerilla-type skirmishes until Geronimo surrendered four years later. But the Battle of Big Dry Wash is regarded as the last major battle between whites and Indians in Arizona.