

## Chapter Six

### The Battle of Valverde

#### February 21, 1862

In the predawn darkness, five companies of mounted New Mexico Volunteers under the command of Lt. Colonel José María Valdez arrive at the Fords of Valverde. Without hesitation Valdez sends a detachment across the frigid fords to scout the east bank for Texans. Rafael Chacón (K/1st NM) is the first to cross. He recalls in his memoir, “At the moment we crossed the river we were able to see the sun behind the hills...which many of us would not live to see set.”<sup>1</sup> Behind him follows Captain Deus (I,/1st NM). As they splash across the water, Valdez turns to his own three companies of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Mounted New Mexico Volunteers: Company B, led by Captain Ricardo Branch, Company C, under Captain Pedro Sánchez, and Company G with Captain Juan Sarracino. One of his four companies of the Third, Company A with Captain William Mortimore is guarding the artillery train far behind them. He posts himself and two companies, B & G, to cover the west bank of the fords and sends Company C to follow Chacón and Deus. Chacón’s detachment soon dismounts and advances towards a line of trees in a hollow.



L-R: Captain Rafael Chacon, Company K, Captain Charles Deus, Company I, 1stNMVI, Captain Pedro Sanchez, Company C, 3<sup>rd</sup> NMMV

The battle had been set in motion during the night when 1<sup>st</sup> Militia foot troops reported from their station on top of the 300 foot Mesa del Contadero that a section of the Confederate Army was moving north towards the Fords of Valverde on the Río Grande. They were traveling up the east side of the Mesa. Confederate General Sibley had sent Major Pyron of the Texas 7th Mounted Regiment north around the mesa to scout the fords. The Militia watched them round the northern side and head for the fords to the west. At this point the Confederate move could have been a feint, but Canby responds accordingly. At daybreak he sent a strong force under the command of Lt. Col. Benjamin Roberts of the 5th NM Mounted Volunteers to the fords to reconnoiter. Canby is still holding the 1st and 2nd NM Infantry Regiments as well as the mounted section of the 1st and all of the 2nd Militia Divisions, about 500 militia cavalry, to guard the approach to the fort from the east in case the Texans intend to double back. Behind the Volunteers, on the west side of the river, are posted the Federal Infantry, portions of the 5th, 7th, and 10th Regiments under Captain Seldon. Various miscellaneous companies garrison the fort itself.

Now Major Duncan at the head of four companies of US Cavalry arrives on the west side of the river where Valdez and his two companies are posted. He orders Lieutenant Claflin and his Company (G/1st US Cav) to move up the riverbank on the west side. It is only a few minutes

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<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Dorgan Meketa, Legacy of Honor: The Life of Rafael Chacón, a Nineteenth Century New Mexican (University of New Mexico Press, 1986), 166-167.

before Claflin returns and reports that 1,000 of the enemy had watered their horses at the east riverbank and are now traveling south to a point opposite Thomas' position. The report that the enemy force was larger than his and had good cover, not to mention artillery, convinces Duncan "that it would be folly to move forward and attack him."<sup>2</sup> He doesn't mention the New Mexicans that are already across the river, nor that they are not deterred by the Texans.

Chacón's detachment continues to carefully move forward through the Bosque, searching for the enemy. Each of the three companies had sent out two men ahead of their lines as scouts. Suddenly, one of Deus' scouts calls out in Spanish "There are the Texans. Look out!" The Texans are in the woods directly ahead of them. A volley rings out, but the New Mexicans are already on their guard. They crest the ridge of the hollow and return fire.<sup>3</sup> At about the same time Pedro Sánchez' company piles in beside them and joins the fight. After battle, Lt. Col. Valdez of the 3rd Mounted Volunteers reported that in his battalion, Company C under Capt. Pedro Sánchez, "...did commence the attack against the enemy."<sup>4</sup>

Soon, Colonel Roberts arrives at the fords with the rest of his troops including two artillery batteries guarded by five companies, three Regular, and two Volunteer. Roberts takes in the situation and orders Duncan's and Valdez's remaining men to cross to the east side of the river, not mentioning that he could already hear firing from that quarter. He states that, Duncan promptly crossed and dismounted his men. Duncan reported, "I therefore dismounted my command, had the horses and horse-holders concealed as well as possible behind a low sand ridge, about 80 yards from and parallel to the river, and deployed the remainder of the men behind some small sand hills, logs, and a few scattering trees, about 100 yards in advance of the horses..."<sup>5</sup> He still doesn't mention any firing.



Colonel Benjamin Roberts and Major Thomas Duncan

The Union artillery unlimbers and begins to set up their guns on the west side of the fords aiming their muzzles towards the Texans on the east side. The batteries consist of two sections (four light guns), a mix of 6# and 12# cannons and howitzers under Captain Alexander McRae, and one section of two 24# howitzers comprising Hall's Battery. One section of McRae's guns remains at the fort. His battery is manned by cavalymen of two combined companies, G & I, of the 2nd and 3rd US Cavalry Regiments respectively, and Hall's is staffed by men from Company F of the 10th US Infantry. The artillerymen are supported by two companies: Captain Hubbell's Company (B/5<sup>th</sup> NM), and Captain Mortimore's (A/3<sup>rd</sup> NM) Volunteer Regiments.<sup>6</sup> Roberts

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<sup>2</sup> Official Records, Duncan 2/23/62.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel B. Castello, Captain Charles Deus on the Frontier (self-published, NMSU Library, MSC 3475, Las Cruces, NM), 28. Written at Deus' dictation - a manuscript memoir located by Tim Kimball.

<sup>4</sup> Official Records, Valdez 2/26/62.

<sup>5</sup> Official Records, Duncan 2/23/62.

<sup>6</sup> The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Roberts 2/23/62.

describes the ensuing fight across the river as "...a spirited and sharp skirmish..." The two Federal infantry companies, Captain Brotherton (K/5<sup>th</sup> US), Captain Ingraham (H/7<sup>th</sup> US) Infantry, are also sent across the Rio Grande.<sup>7</sup>

The deep-throated booming of the canons on both sides cuts through the intense small arms fire and shot slashes through the Bosque, rending anything in its path. Pyron, who is easily outnumbered two to one, is just trying to hold on until reinforcements come up. Around 8:00am Confederate Col. Scurry arrives with his 4th Texas Regiment and part of Teel's and all of Reilly's Artillery Batteries. Immediately the 4th Texas charges while the Confederate batteries set up and also commence firing at the Union artillery. A very intense artillery duel is soon in progress. Capt. Pedro Sánchez (C/3rd NM) reported that at this time, "Corp. Antonio Chawn, Privates Jesús Archuleta and Pastor Archuleta did act on that occasion with such encouragement and valor that they killed some men of the enemy's battery."<sup>8</sup> Col. Roberts observed that one Confederate gun and one caisson were destroyed.<sup>9</sup> The Rebels make three charges on the Union line, but to no avail. They are driven back with some loss. Col. Roberts also noted that three times the Confederates tried to retake the Union position in the bosque and they were repulsed each time. The Texans are successfully stalled. During the engagement Col. Roberts sent orders via William Mills to Captain Brotherton (K/5<sup>th</sup> US & H/7<sup>th</sup> US) to charge the enemy guns with his two companies of Regulars, but Major Duncan refused to allow it.<sup>10</sup>



William W. Mills

The Union artillery renews its barrage at 10:00am while long distance small arms fire continues all over the field. By comparison, the Texan return fire is weak. The long range musketry of the New Mexicans who are equipped as mounted rifles (with Harper's Ferry and Mississippi rifles), backed by the superior battery begins to tell on them and by 11:00am Scurry and Pyron are forced to retreat completely out of the bosque. They take cover behind the sand dunes that form the old riverbed before the river had changed course, as it periodically did. The retreat is made with some disorder and the Texans leave behind a cannon that was disabled by the destruction of its horses. Realizing their mistake some men return and haul it off by hand, which must have been very difficult, under fire, and moving through sand.

Meanwhile, also about 10:00am, opposite Fort Craig, the Federal infantry battalions under the command of Captain Henry Selden are ordered to leave their position east of the fort and proceed to the battle site. Shortly after, Kit Carson's 1st NM Volunteer Regiment also receives an order to move to Valverde. The remaining forces, Col. Miguel Pino with his 2nd NM Volunteer Infantry Regiment, his brother, Col. Nicolás Pino with the 2nd Militia Division, and a battalion of cavalry of the 1st Militia under Col. Stapleton, remain on watch in case any

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<sup>7</sup> Official Records, Roberts 2/23/62.

<sup>8</sup> Official Records, Valdez 2/26/62.

<sup>9</sup> Official Records, Roberts 2/23/61.

<sup>10</sup> William Wallace Mills, Forty Years at El Paso 1858-1898, W. W. Mills, 1901, 56.

Confederates might still try to approach the fort from that direction. Lt. Col. J. Francisco Chaves, second in command of the 1st Regiment, wrote,

*...our regiment, the 1st New Mexico volunteers, was ordered to proceed from the mesa east of Fort Craig, where they had slept upon their arms the night previous, to cross the Río Grande and proceed forthwith to the battle ground. This we did, and we went on the battle ground without having taken any supper the night previous nor breakfast that morning, but our regiment went cheerfully, anxious to meet the enemy.*<sup>11</sup>



L-R: Col. Christopher Carson, Lt. Col. J. Francisco Chaves, Major Arthur Morrison  
Commanders of the First NM Regiment

As the fighting continues on the west side of the mesa, the 2nd Militia Division, stationed on the south side also runs into opposition. Lt. Col. Jesús María Baca's pickets see Confederates probing southwest along a trail that runs along the Mesa's edge. Baca moves his battalion forward to meet them and as they begin to skirmish Col. Nicolás Pino soon arrives with the infantry.<sup>12</sup> In his unassuming style, Major Wesche reported, "We took our positions at the foot of La Mesa (Mesa Contadero). We had a little skirmish with the rearguard of the Rebels; they soon turning their backs on us and joining their main body."<sup>13</sup>



Colonel Nicholas Pino, Major Charles Wesche

In contrast, the Texans who run from them report to their comrades that they had "repulsed Kit Carson and 1,000 Mexicans, who had gone round to cut off the train, by a

<sup>11</sup> Hon. J. Frank Chaves [Lt. Col. Jose Francisco Chaves of the First New Mexico Volunteer Infantry], "Historic Valverde" Albuquerque Daily Citizen, June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1890.

<sup>12</sup> John Taylor, Bloody Valverde: A Civil War Battle on the Rio Grande, February 21, 1862 ( University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 58.

<sup>13</sup> Ed. Jerry D. Thompson, "The Civil War Diary of Major Charles Emil Wesche," Password Vol. XXXIX, No. 1, 1994, 43.

charge...”<sup>14</sup> Second Militia Captains Sena y Rivera, Co. C, and José Merced Sánchez, Co. E, and their men run to retrieve their mounts to pursue them, however, Col. Nicolás Pino soon receives orders to find the Texan supply train instead, which they proceed to do.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, on top of the mesa, elements of the 1st Militia Division are still watching the Confederates at the battle site as well as others who are moving to reinforce them. They begin to fire down upon them causing serious consternation. Both men and horses suffer from this galling fire from which there is no cover. Unable to take it any longer, three Texan companies headed by Lt. Col. Henry McNeil of the 5th Texas, who are just arriving at the Battle site, pull out of line and ride their mounts to the top to stop the snipers. Fifty of Pyron’s men who are armed with minie-rifles follow them up the slope so they can start their own sniping. The NM militia men fall back as the Texans reach the crest. However, the Texans have now become perfect targets for the Union rifles and artillery in the valley below. One Confederate wrote, “They turned every gun on us...How they did hustle us out of there.”<sup>16</sup> The Texans can only hold the position for a few minutes before they scatter back down the slope. At this point, as the battle begins to wind down a light snow begins to fall. It is cold.

Just before noon the battalion of US Regular Infantry under Captain Henry Selden arrives as reinforcements. Selden’s force includes Major Wingate’s remaining four companies of the 5th US, two companies of the 7th US, and two companies of the 10th US under Captain Plympton, as well as Dodd’s Company of Colorado Volunteers. Roberts immediately sends them across with orders to drive the Rebels further from the river. William Mills wrote, “The men received the order with a shout and plunged into the river, which was cold and reached up to their armpits.”<sup>17</sup>



Captain Henry Selden, 7<sup>th</sup>US Infantry

Following them, the foot portion of Col. Carson’s 1st NM Volunteer Infantry also arrives and reports to Roberts, who orders them to guard the northern approach to the fords on the west side of the river in case rebels should cross at the higher ford. Col. Canby states that Carson requested that his men not enter the battle immediately, however Roberts reported, “Having received information that 500 Confederate cavalry had crossed the river above and threatened my rear, I placed Colonel Carson’s regiment in a bosque higher up, near the main road to Valverde, to observe that direction, and to prevent any attempts on my left and rear.”<sup>18</sup> Lt. Col. Chaves noted that the Union troops “had several conflicts with the confederate troops in which our troops

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<sup>14</sup> Don E. Alberts, *Rebels on the Rio Grande* (Merit Press, Albuquerque, NM, 1993), 45.

<sup>15</sup> *Official Records*, Wesche.

<sup>16</sup> Donald S. Frazier, *Blood and Treasure: Confederate Empire in the Southwest* (Texas A&M University Military History Series, No 41, Texas A&M University Press, 1997). 169.

<sup>17</sup> Mills, *Forty Years*, 56.

<sup>18</sup> *Official Records*, Roberts 2/23/62.

had come off victorious.” He confirmed that “The 1st New Mexico Volunteers were stationed about fifty yards from the west bank of the river and parallel thereto in line of battle...”<sup>19</sup>

Seldon’s men soon find that the crossing is necessarily slow. They are forced to advance “step by step their foothold among quicksands and against the strong current of the Río Grande up to their arms in its water.”<sup>20</sup> The water is very cold and chest deep. To ford the river they must take off their leather gear hold it and their muskets up over their heads and step into the icy water, and fumble their way across. Part of the problem is the shoes. The leather soles of their Jefferson Brogans (Army issue ankle length boots) are slippery on wet surfaces and also tend to get sucked into the muck and remain there when the foot is lifted. Knowing this, many men would have removed their shoes, tied the laces together, and carried them above the water. But even barefoot the crossing must have been very difficult. Once on the other side they are required to put their gear back on and form ranks. Eventually all the companies are across. They reform and shivering, step into line to the left of the cavalry. This process takes at least a half hour. The Confederates in turn are forced to extend the right of their line to meet them. Being outnumbered, they are stretched quite thin at this time. Now Col. Roberts decides to send the artillery across the river. Col. Chaves wrote that men of the 1st NM are detailed by Roberts to help McRae’s Battery cross.

*I called for volunteers for that purpose to step three paces to the front, and when the command was given the whole regiment marched to the front with a cheer. I then detailed about 100 men, being about ten men from each company respectively, which immediately took hold of ropes and aided in crossing the battery to its station of the east bank.*<sup>21</sup>

Once across the river Col. Roberts reported his repositioning of the battery as “having posted them on Captain Selden’s right, with the support of Captain Brotherton’s (K/5th US Inf.) and Captain Ingraham’s (H/7th US Inf.) companies of Regular infantry and Captains Hubbell’s (B/5th NM Vol.) and Mortimore’s (A/3rd NM Vol.) companies of Volunteers.”<sup>22</sup> Once in position a new duel breaks out between the opposing artillery units. During the artillery barrage Selden’s battalion (about 630 men) prepares for a charge. At approximately 12:30pm Selden is ordered forward. Confederate Sergeant Petticolas (4th TX) wrote, “We could see the enemy in strength just before us about 600 yards and advancing rapidly as if to force our line in.”<sup>23</sup> The Union fire begins to decimate the horses and mules behind the 4th Texas Regiment. By all accounts, the Union line came on without wavering. Petticolas noted, “About this time the Ab’s [period slang for Abolitionists] had gotten in 300 yards of us...”<sup>24</sup>

Rafael Chacón describes the final onslaught, “All our troops then east of the river – the mounted forces with drawn sabers and the foot soldiers with fixed bayonets – delivered a telling blow on the enemy.”<sup>25</sup> The rebels weren’t prepared for such a spirited assault, but soon they rally and are reinforced. William Mills, of Robert’s staff, describes what happened, “Right gallantly did they obey the order, but they encountered double their number, strongly posted, and were compelled to retire, which they did in good order.”<sup>26</sup> Referring to the Texan short-ranged

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<sup>19</sup> Chaves, Albuquerque Daily Citizen.

<sup>20</sup> Official Records, Roberts 2/23/62.

<sup>21</sup> Chaves, Albuquerque Daily Citizen.

<sup>22</sup> Official Records, Roberts 2/23/62.

<sup>23</sup> Alberts, Rebels on the Rio Grande, 43.

<sup>24</sup> Alberts, Rebels on the Rio Grande, 43.

<sup>25</sup> Meketa, Legacy of Honor, 167.

<sup>26</sup> Mills, Forty Years, 56.

firearms, Sergeant Petticolas wrote, “They began to pay dearly for getting so close to us.”<sup>27</sup> As Seldon’s men are stalled at close range Confederate reinforcements arrive in the form of five companies of the 5th Texas under Col. Green and the remaining section (two guns) of Teel’s battery. It is too much. Seldon’s battalion retreats back to the bosque. Pyron’s exhausted men of the 7th Texas are pulled out of line and placed in reserve as the 5th Texas takes their place.

Two of the companies that arrived with Col. Green are lancers of the 5th Texas regiment. One of the lancer Captains, Captain Lang (B/5th TX), asks Col. Scurry for permission to charge but he is denied. Undaunted, he asks again and receives approval. Lang then, “made them [his men] a short speech, brought them to attention, and gave the fearful order ‘charge.’”<sup>28</sup> This was the only lancer charge of the entire war and the results were disastrous – especially so, since only one of the companies actually charged. The second lancer company under Captain McCown (G/5th TX) was not ready to assist them because Lang had not coordinated the attack with them. As Lang’s men stepped off some of them noticed this and broke off while the others charged “like an avalanche.”<sup>29</sup> The Coloradans prepared to meet them. “Instantly [the Coloradans] threw themselves in position to ‘resist cavalry,’ the front lines on their knees with braced muskets presented a wall of bayonets.”<sup>30</sup> From an opposing perspective Private Alonso Ickis of Colorado describes the carnage:

*The enemy knew by the dress and movements of our co [company] that we were not regulars and they thought us Mexicans. They then thought they had a soft snap. Three co’s of Mounted Lancier [sic] Rangers made a charge on our co which was but 71 strong in the field. The boys waited until they got within 40 yds of us when they took deliberate aim and it was fun to see the Texans fall. They wavered for a few minutes and then on they came and fierce looking fellows they were with their long lances raised. But when they got to us we were loaded again and we gave them “buck and ball.” After the second volley there were but few of them left and but one of them got away. The others shot, one bayoneted. G. Simpson ran his bayonet through one and then shot the top of his head off.<sup>31</sup>*



Captain Theodore Dodd (L), Private Alonzo Ickis (R)  
Company B, 1<sup>st</sup> Colorado Volunteers

Even though the Coloradans had been issued new blue uniforms a month before, they had apparently elected not to wear them to the battle. Instead they donned their old grey uniforms that had been issued by the state of Colorado. “They were dressed in grey like our militia, and

<sup>27</sup> Alberts, Rebels on the Rio Grande, 44.

<sup>28</sup> Frazier, Blood and Treasure, 167.

<sup>29</sup> Frazier, Blood and Treasure, 167.

<sup>30</sup> Frazier, Blood and Treasure, 168.

<sup>31</sup> Nolie Mumey, Bloody Trails Along the Rio Grande (Old West Publishing Company, Denver, 1958), 76.

the Texans, mistaking them for Mexicans, charged them recklessly.”<sup>32</sup> The New Mexico Volunteers were wearing blue, as were a large number of the Confederates who did not mention who they charged and why. Since the Coloradans were on the extreme left flank it appears more likely that Lang had simply charged at the closest unit after coming onto the field. The Confederates relate that as the charge neared, the Federal companies which supported the Coloradans formed square to meet them though none say that the Coloradans themselves had done that. The Texans also reported that one man was bayoneted. Seeing the red-pennanted lances go down, McCown’s Company wanted to advance to support them but Col. Green stopped them. It was clear to him that the lancer experiment was a complete failure. One Confederate wrote, “This threw a gloom over our entire line.”<sup>33</sup>

About this time Colonel Canby departs from Fort Craig on his way to the battlefield with an ammunition train. He leaves a portion of the 1st Militia, two companies of the 3rd NM Volunteers, Captain Saturnino Barrientos’ Company A of the 5th NM Volunteers, and miscellaneous Regulars to guard Fort Craig. The commander of the 1st NM Militia, Col. Manuel Armijo, is furious at not being allowed to participate in the battle, as is Barrientos. Canby also sends word for the 2nd NM Volunteers to cross the river and to proceed to the Valverde fords. Only two companies of the 3rd NM Volunteers, Stapleton’s mounted battalion of the 1st NM Militia, and Nicolás Pino’s infantry of the 2nd NM Militia are left to guard the crossing.

Also at about 1:00pm Rafeal Chacón captures a rebel gun that had been firing on his location for some time. In his memoir he wrote that at approximately 1pm a Texan gun made its presence known by firing on his company and for some time, “seemed deliberately directed only at the spot where my company was positioned.” He had no recourse but to charge them. As he and his men closed in the Texan gunners retreated. Corporal Leyba and several others lasso the piece and hauled it back to the Union lines.<sup>34</sup> Imagine the small horde of ‘Mexicans’ brandishing weapons and lassos, whooping and hollering as they haul the Texan gun back to their own lines. The Confederates laconically report that due to a lack of gunners, they had already decided to abandon the piece after reloading, hoping to use it later. But whether they left as ordered or ran because of the Volunteers, the result was the same. Also about this time, the militiamen of the 1st NM Division reappear at the crest of the mesa and begin firing at the hapless Confederates again.

About 2:00pm William Mills reports: “The New Mexican volunteers were keeping the enemy from the water and skirmishing briskly at times...”<sup>35</sup> By 2:30 both armies are exhausted and take a break except for some sporadic sniping. Up to this time, the Union troops had fought successfully under the direction of Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin S. Roberts. The anonymous veteran of the First wrote: “... the Confederate troops were driven up against the bluffs, and kept from reaching the water, and it was the opinion of everybody that it was only a question of a short time when the Confederates would be compelled to surrender, or that they would be vanquished.”<sup>36</sup>

William Mills also describes the morale of the Union soldiers as very optimistic. “We had kept them from the water, McRae had beaten their battery, and the Coloradans had gained an advantage. We were well posted and provided; their animals and men were weary and without water. They could not retreat; they must surrender or starve or fight quickly and desperately...”<sup>37</sup> With Gen. Sibley ill and unable to command his army, Col. Green assumes command and begins

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<sup>32</sup> Mills, *Forty Years*, 57.

<sup>33</sup> Frazier, *Blood and Treasure*, 168.

<sup>34</sup> Meketa, *Legacy of Honor*, 168.

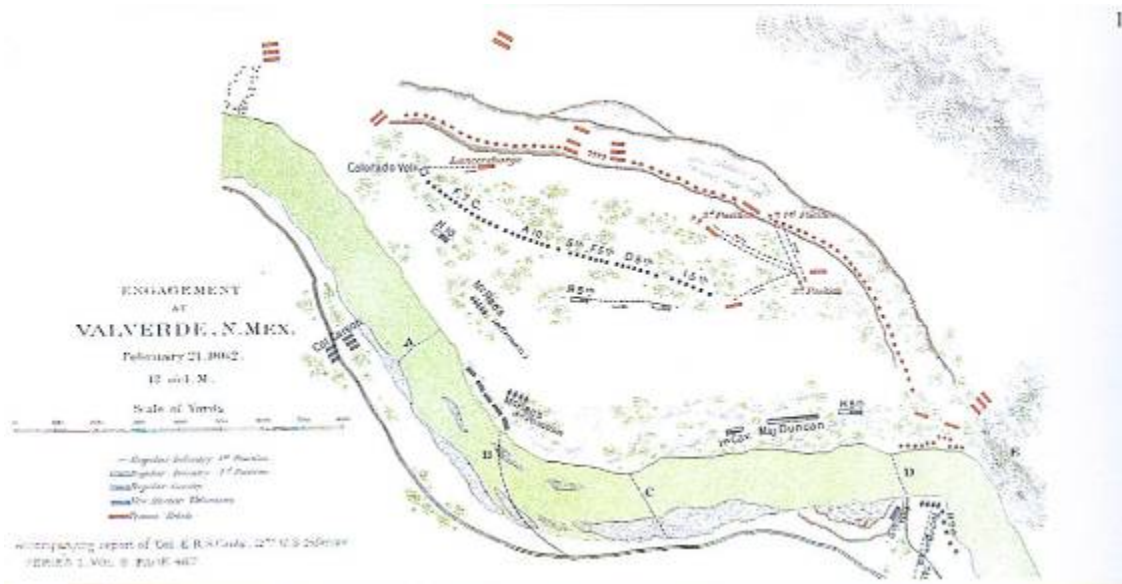
<sup>35</sup> Jacqueline and Charles Meketa, “Heroes or Cowards? A New Look at the Role of Native New Mexicans at the Battle of Valverde,” *New Mexico Historical Review*, (January, 1987), 38.

<sup>36</sup> Anonymous Federal Volunteer, “Battles in New Mexico” *Albuquerque Evening Citizen*, June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1893. An article by an anonymous veteran of the 1<sup>st</sup> New Mexico Volunteer Infantry.

<sup>37</sup> Mills, *Forty Years*, 57.



working on the ‘quick and desperate’ option. Using his own staff and Sibley’s as well he tries to take stock of the overall situation and bring the dispersed units into a cohesive command. He racks his brain as to what to do. From the other side of the field Col. Roberts reported that at 2:30pm he gave his men a break. His men were exhausted by five hours of continuous fighting and for some it had been closer to eight hours. He had been notified that Canby was on his way with reinforcements. The Union batteries, however, continued sporadic fire when targets presented themselves. Canby reached the field with an ammunition train at about 2:45pm.<sup>38</sup>



This is Colonel Canby’s Battle map representing the fighting that occurred in the morning. Except for Carson’s 1<sup>st</sup> NM Volunteers on the west bank and Dodd’s company, he shows only the Regular troops. The New Mexican companies are not represented.

The Second NM Volunteers arrive from the Fort, following Col. Canby and the ammunition train, and they are posted on the west bank of the middle ford. There is some discussion as to what time the Second New Mexico actually got there – some people believe they actually arrived later than reported. As cited above, Canby was already departing the fort when he sent orders to Pino across the river, so, unless he waited for them, they probably would not have arrived at the ford until sometime later than he did. They had to ford the river, march back to the fort, restock supplies or ammunition, and then take the road north to the Valverde fords. Other reports say they arrived with him, following the ammunition train. While the two companies of the 3rd NM Volunteers, Stapleton’s 1st Militia mounted battalion, and Nicolás Pino’s 2nd Militia infantry battalion are guarding the fords opposite the fort, Lt. Col. Jesús María Baca and his mounted 2nd Militia battalion is still following the Confederate rearguard north around the mesa, searching for the supply wagons as ordered.

### Col. Canby Assumes Command

“At 3 o’clock that afternoon General [sic] Canby appeared on the field and was received with cheers by the troops.”<sup>39</sup> Col. Canby takes over command of the battle from Roberts and realigns the Union line. He orders Carson’s regiment and Hall’s battery to join Major Duncan on the right side of the battlefield. During the move, the 1st NM Volunteers help Hall’s guns across the river. Lt. Col. Chaves writes:

<sup>38</sup> Official Records, Roberts to Nicodemus 2/23/62.

<sup>39</sup> Mills, Forty Years, 57.

*About 1 o'clock p.m. a battery consisting of two 24-pounder howitzers under the command of Lieut. R. M. Hall, came on to the field from Fort Craig, and the 1st New Mexico volunteers was ordered to take it across the river to its station, and was further ordered to its support. This was done. Subsequently the trail of one of the 24-pounders was broken, and the disabled gun was recrossed to the west bank of the river by men of my regiment.<sup>40</sup>*



Captain Alexander McRae and Lieutenant R. M. Hall  
Union Artillery commanders

Actually the battery that just came up with Canby was the remaining section of McRae's battery. However, Chaves is correct that the 1st NM did help Hall's battery across. Col. Canby also realigns the left flank. William Mills wrote, "... after a brief consultation with Roberts he advanced our battery about five hundred yards, withdrew Seldon from its support, leaving only two companies [Mortimore's A/3rd NM Vol and Hubbell's B/5th NM Vol] to protect it."<sup>41</sup> Canby places a battalion under Captain Plympton consisting of two companies, A & H, of the 10th US Infantry, along with Dodd's Coloradans, and two companies, F & H, of the 7th US Infantry in reserve back at the riverbank, about 500 yards or more behind the battery. Captain Bascom's company C of the 7th US is posted in skirmish formation to the right of the battery, a short distance to the right of the volunteers. The battalion of the 5th US Infantry under Captain Wingate is placed past the 'elbow' of the line, facing north. The right wing of the army is composed of Kit Carson's 1st NM Volunteers, Hall's Battery (now consisting of only one 24 pounder), Duncan's four companies of the 3rd US Cavalry, Valdez' four companies of the 3rd NM Volunteers, and Graydon's Independent Company. The cavalry to the right of the guns are dismounted in a skirmish line. Thus the army is aligned with a short left flank facing east, and a strong right flank facing north.

Suddenly another artillery duel breaks out. The cannonading is unusually fierce and the NM Volunteers at the battery and the men of company C/7th US Infantry lie prone to avoid fire while Plympton's men duck behind the riverbank. To provide additional support for McRae's artillery, Captains Lord (D) and Claflin (G), 1st US Cavalry, are ordered to unite their companies and provide a cavalry reserve for the advanced battery, 100 yards behind and to the right of the battery. Canby then sends orders for the 2nd NM Regiment to cross the river.

### **Raguet's Diversionsary Assault on Hall's Battery**

Desperately searching for a weakness in the Union line, Confederate Col. Green spots the nearly unsupported Union battery and decides that the key to the battle is to take it. He also notes that the firing on his left flank is getting too close for comfort. He orders Raguet with his

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<sup>40</sup> Chaves, Albuquerque Daily Citizen.

<sup>41</sup> Mills, Forty Years, 57.

battalion to charge the Union Left in order to give him time to assemble the remaining men for a charge. Raguet runs to mount his five companies of 300 men and form them up for the charge. Major Duncan, who is in command on the Federal right wing, has been ordered by Col. Canby to advance on the Rebel left flank, but he proceeds much too slowly. Canby's plan is to hold on his left flank while his right advances up the ravine that the Texans are using for cover. It's not a bad plan but the advance on the left needs to be executed vigorously. If Maj. Duncan had advanced properly on Raguet he would have rolled up the Rebel line and ruined Col. Green's preparations for a charge in the process.

Major Duncan reported that as they began their advance "a terrific cannonading and roar of small-arms was heard on our left flank."<sup>42</sup> Col. Carson recalls that his men and the gun to their right had advanced about 400 yards when the Texans were suddenly seen "charging diagonally across our front, evidently with the intention of capturing the 24-pounder gun..." His entire regiment fired a volley into them and continued to fire causing their formation to scatter "in every direction." It was at that moment that a shell exploded in the midst of the Confederates "with fatal effect."<sup>43</sup>

William Mills observed: "Carson's Mexican regiment had been moved to our right and advanced, and with one company of Regulars (7th US) repulsed a charge of Texas cavalry with some loss." He watched Carson in action. "He walked up and down his line, quietly encouraging his men with such words as, 'Firme muchachos, firme' [Steady, boys, steady]."<sup>44</sup> "According to another Regular officer, Capt. Edward W. Wynkoop, it was obvious that Carson 'knew how to lead men into battle and keep them there.'"<sup>45</sup> Duncan, however, despite his success, is panicked by the boldness of the enemy and he sends a courier asking Canby for reinforcements. Canby's initial response is to send Company H of the 7th US Infantry over in that direction.

Rafael Chacón describes what happens next, "We received the order to advance and attack their flank, sabers in hand." The attack was executed "full of courage and almost in a frenzy...through blood and fire, we forced them to flee to the hills."<sup>46</sup> Captain Louis Felsenthal, affirms that at this time, "... a man [Domingo Salazar] of my Company G 1st N. M. Vols. took from the hand of a Texan, a flag of the Confederate States."<sup>47</sup> The anonymous veteran of the First stated, "...the charge was successfully repulsed by the First Regiment of New Mexico Volunteers. It was repeated twice, thereafter in succession by the Confederate cavalry, and as many times gallantly and successfully repulsed by the regiment, and the Confederates drive [sic] in confusion to the foot of the sand hills."<sup>48</sup> Chacón also states that the Confederates made more than one charge against the First Volunteers. "...the same force of rebel cavalry, which we on the right had driven back, reformed and insisently returned again..."<sup>49</sup> Lt. Col. José Francisco Chaves also of the First states also that, "We proceeded in line of battle at the north foot of the Mesita del Contadero, and successfully repulsed ten distinct cavalry charges of the confederate left, which were to capture Capt. Hall's battery."<sup>50</sup> The possibility of multiple charges is backed by the fact that Maj. Duncan sends repeated requests for aide to Canby, who finally orders Wingate's 5th US battalion to move to support the action on the left.<sup>51</sup> During the battle Rafael

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<sup>42</sup> Official Records, Duncan 2/23/62.

<sup>43</sup> Official Records, Carson 2/26/62.

<sup>44</sup> Mills, Forty Years, 57.

<sup>45</sup> Marc Simmons, Kit Carson and His Three Wives, University of New Mexico Press, 2003, 116.

<sup>46</sup> Meketa, Legacy of Honor, 169.

<sup>47</sup> John P. Wilson, When the Texans Came (University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 247.

<sup>48</sup> Anonymous, Albuquerque Evening Citizen.

<sup>49</sup> Meketa, Legacy of Honor, 169.

<sup>50</sup> Chaves, Albuquerque Daily Citizen.

<sup>51</sup> Official Records, Canby 3/1/62.

Chacón noted that the regimental chaplain, Damasio Taladrid, “walked among the dead and injured, helping them and absolving them of their sins without fear of bullets.”<sup>52</sup>

At last, Raguet’s Texans break, and a portion of them veer sharply to their left, away from the 1st NM counter charge, heading towards the black mesa with the mounted 1st NM companies in hot pursuit. Chacón refers to this as, “The supreme moment of the day...”<sup>53</sup> No doubt, they are soon joined by the mounted companies of the 3rd NM who had been posted as skirmishers on the extreme right of the line. Raguet and the other portion of the surviving Texans retreat back to their original point of attack behind Green’s assembly point. The hapless rebels running east had only two choices, climb the mesa or surrender. They climb, and try to escape north along the slopes. It is assumed that the militia men on top continue to fire on them. Carson reforms his jubilant infantry battalion, realigning the unit with Duncan’s slow crawl towards the enemy left flank. At this point, they have no idea another drama is taking place on the other side of the field. Raguet’s diversion worked perfectly. It slowed Duncan’s advance even more, and caused Canby to send six companies of Regulars from the center of the line to the right, just in time to be of no use to either the right or the left – in hindsight, a disastrous mistake.

### **Green’s Assault on McRae’s Battery**

Even before the action died down on the left Confederate Col. Green put his plan into motion. His 750 men surged forward. The charge was in three waves, “200 men in the first, 250 men in the second, and a final group of 300.”<sup>54</sup> Although Col. Green mentions three waves of troops many Confederates report the confusion of the chargers, so the truth is probably somewhere in between. Sgt. Peticolas’ drawing of the advance shows orderly but scattered independent companies and skirmishers. However, for the sake of clarity, the charge is described here in three waves. The Texan lines move forward at 30-40 yard intervals, heading straight for McRae’s battery. If the Confederates had been previously fighting in a disordered and ambiguous manner, through the efforts of Col. Green, they are now galvanized into one intent.

### **The First Wave**

As the first wave approaches, Mortimore’s, Hubbell’s, and Bascom’s men provide defensive fire for the battery. “Confederate Lieutenant Colonel Scurry [4th TX] told of his men making a charge ‘into a driving storm of grape and canister and musket balls sent hurling around [them].’”<sup>55</sup> There is so much smoke on the field from the cannonade that it covers the Texan advance for a time. When Col. Canby finally sees the Texans coming he must have understood in an instant the tactical mistakes he had made. It’s painfully obvious that McRae’s battery has only weak support. The 5th US is on the other side of the field and Plympton’s battalion is back by the riverbank. Perhaps realizing there may not be time to save the battery Canby quickly sends a courier to order Col. Pino’s Volunteers to re-cross to the west bank, presumably to cover a retreat. There is no other reason to order them back.

Then Canby notes with horror that Plympton’s battalion is not even aware of the Texan advance. “Perceiving that Plympton’s command was entirely unsuspecting of the danger that threatened the battery, I hastened in person to point it out and make arrangements for its defense...”<sup>56</sup> He rides to the riverbank and gets Sgt. Rockwell’s F/7th US Infantry moving. Col. Roberts also sends a courier to Capt. Lord with orders to charge with his two companies, and he sends William Mills to the other side of the field to bring some of those forces to bear on the Texan charge. Mills sees the charging Rebels and describes them as chaotic. “On they came on

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<sup>52</sup> Meketa, *Legacy of Honor*, 129.

<sup>53</sup> Meketa, *Legacy of Honor*, 169.

<sup>54</sup> Taylor, *Bloody Valverde*, 84.

<sup>55</sup> Meketa & Meketa, *Heroes or Cowards*, 39.

<sup>56</sup> *Official Records*, Canby 3/1/62.

foot, a mass of wild men, without order and apparently without command, with rifles, shotguns, pistols and all kinds of arms, and yelling like demons.”<sup>57</sup> Some of the Union companies responded accordingly. Hubbell, Rockwell, and Mortimore and their men run to support the battery just in time to meet and check the first wave. The Texans in the first wave halt at 20 yards and fire back. Canby reported that the Union battery support, “rushed into the battery and engaged in a gallant and desperate attempt to repel the enemy. The advance of the storming party was driven back...”<sup>58</sup> Company C of the 7th US still remains prone some distance away. Meanwhile, Captain Mortimore and his men run to the undefended left side of the battery. This places them in front of the left half of Plympton’s battalion. William Mills reaches Major Duncan and gives him Robertson’s order to charge, but Duncan refuses. He then gives Captain Wingate of the 5<sup>th</sup> US the same order and he responds by rushing his men back to the other side of the field.<sup>59</sup>

At midstream, the bewildered Col. Pino receives Canby’s order not to cross. He arbitrarily breaks his line of march, halts the rear part of the column, and reverses those men back to the west bank. His men that are already past this cutoff point, Sena’s company B and part of another continue forward. Col. Pino wrote, “while this movement was being executed [fording the river] we were ordered back to form on the western bank...”<sup>60</sup> From their vantage point by the riverbank the Coloradans can see the 2nd NM turn back to the other side of the river and assume that they are running from the fight. Pvt. Ickis notes as much in his diary, “At the sight of such a very large body of Texans Pinos men ran leaving us white men only 250 to hold the section...”<sup>61</sup> Then Canby reaches the Coloradans and they begin to make their 500 yard dash. Next, Canby rides in succession to Company H, and then Company A - all of the 10th US Infantry, and they in turn also begin to move forward in echelon.

### **The Second Wave**

The Union line now consists of McRae’s battery in the center, Hubbell’s Company to their right and Sergeant Rockwell’s Company F (7th US) to Hubbell’s right; and to the left, only Mortimore’s men. Mortimore’s left flank is without support, and is no doubt overlapped by the larger group of attackers who are fast approaching. The Texan second wave rolls over the survivors of the first and crashes into the Union line. A melee free-for-all ensues. We can now assume that the better part of 450 attackers had reached the battery versus 280 defenders, including McRae’s men who are still firing their pieces. Therefore, at this time, the rebels have almost a 2-1 advantage. Although on a smaller scale, the fighting at this point becomes as intense as any of the hardest-fought battles in any theater of the Civil War. Such close combat seldom occurred during the war. It did occur, but it was unusual, exemplifying a high degree of courage and determination. West Texan-style melee was a special variety, involving shotguns and six-shooters at very close range. Except for the officers and perhaps the artillerymen, most of the Union men have single-shot muskets. The Texans had been described as having ‘a brace of pistols’ (2 pistols - 12 shots) each, or even ‘two braces’ (24 shots) meaning they could fire many rounds at close range without reloading while most of the Union men could fire only one. Confederate Sgt. Peticolas states that the Union companies supporting the guns were cut to pieces.<sup>62</sup> The fact that the Union line was still there is one of the most remarkable feats of the

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<sup>57</sup> Mills, Forty Years, 58.

<sup>58</sup> Official Records, Canby 3/1/62.

<sup>59</sup> Mills, Forty Years, 58.

<sup>60</sup> Official Records, Pino 2/26/62.

<sup>61</sup> Mumey, Bloody Trails, 77.

<sup>62</sup> Alberts, Rebels on the Rio Grande, 51.

entire Civil War. At this point, nearby Company C of the 7th US Infantry finally decides to take action; they stand up and run away.<sup>63</sup>

Meanwhile the fighting at the guns is still very bitter. “Lockridge...is said to have placed his hand on one of the cannons and shouted, ‘This is mine!’ ...at that moment he was fatally wounded and uttered his last words, ‘Go on my boys, don’t stop here!’”<sup>64</sup> McRae falls, mortally wounded, and his Lieutenant, “Lyman Mishler, is shot through the chest ‘while ramming the last charge into one of his pieces.’”<sup>65</sup> Lewis Roe of Company F reported: “I heard no orders, no shouting, no yelling. Everyone was busy fighting.”<sup>66</sup> Some of the men begin to give way but amazingly, the Union line still holds. The Coloradans reach the scene and Pvt. Ickis reports: “Canby was by us cheering the men. Our battery boys played the canister into the enemy and at every shot you could see their ranks open and pieces of men flying in the air, but on they came.”<sup>67</sup>

It was perhaps at this point that Capt. Mortimore’s exposed company is overwhelmed and begins to fall back. Mortimore is wounded three times, four of his men are killed, and almost half his men including his sergeant are captured or missing. Captain Lord’s squadron of the 1st US Cavalry, ordered by Roberts to counter-charge, fails to get there. Canby wrote, “Lord’s squadron coming up from the right...was ordered to charge, but on approaching the battery became exposed to the fire of our own men as well as that of the enemy, turned to the left, and for reasons that are not entirely satisfactory fell back without making the charge.”<sup>68</sup> Back at the fords, Captain Sena’s Company B of the 2nd NM reaches the east side of the river. He reported that, “...while in midstream he found himself in a shower of bullets fired by both friend and foe.”<sup>69</sup> Obviously, this was a good enough reason for Lord’s men to retreat, but not for Pino’s. Sena forms up his men and heads for the fighting.

### **The Third Wave**

When the third wave hits the Union line, the defenders are outnumbered three to one. Another 300 loaded shotguns and six-shooters arrive on the scene, and it is too much for them. William Mills saw the retreat:

*I returned to the battery. The small support was giving way; Canby whose horse had been shot, was on foot. He had taken a musket from a retreating soldier and was urging the men to reform and charge. It was too late.*<sup>70</sup>

After taking 50% casualties all the Federals begin to give way. Private Daniel Robinson of the Seventh US Infantry recalled: “Men were breaking to the rear and I thought of the low bank from which we had deployed... I broke for the bank and to my surprise found it was quite steep and I was up to my waist in the water... quite a number of men were under it, unsure whether they should cross [the river] or remain.”<sup>71</sup> Coloradan Pvt. Ickis wrote: “...it was no go. There were too many of them and we could not retreat with our battery for the Rio but we did not leave it until the enemy was around and on it.”<sup>72</sup> Just as all was sure to be lost, an artillery

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<sup>63</sup> Taylor, Bloody Valverde, 162, footnote 9.

<sup>64</sup> Taylor, Bloody Valverde, 89.

<sup>65</sup> Taylor, Bloody Valverde, 91.

<sup>66</sup> Taylor, Bloody Valverde, 91.

<sup>67</sup> Mumey, Bloody Trails, 77-78.

<sup>68</sup> Official Records, Canby 3/1/62.

<sup>69</sup> Ralph Emerson Twitchell, Esq., Leading Facts of New Mexican History, Volume 2 (“The Torch Press, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1912), 388, footnote 314.

<sup>70</sup> Mills, Forty Years, 58.

<sup>71</sup> Taylor, Bloody Valverde, 92.

<sup>72</sup> Mumey, Bloody Trails, 78.

caisson was purposely exploded by one of the Union artillerymen, either using lit fuses or pistol shots. It was a massive explosion and the nameless artilleryman was killed by it.

While still advancing, Captain Plympton witnesses the loss of the battery and the retreat. He wrote "...the enemy assembled in force and charged the battery, pistol in hand, after the gunners had all been killed or driven from their guns....At this time, a body of Volunteers (Mexican) were seized with a panic who broke from their positions immediately in front of a portion of my command and rushed precipitously into the river and, I regret to say, took with them a portion of the left of my battalion in spite of my individual efforts to stop that flight."<sup>73</sup> Plympton reveals here that the battery had already been lost when half of his men retreated. Canby also concedes that he got to Plympton too late. "...but before this could be dully accomplished [preparations for Plympton's defense of the guns] the volunteers that formed a part of its support gave way, and in passing through Plympton's battalion communicated their panic, and carried with them a part of his men."<sup>74</sup> While trying to avoid admitting their own failures, both Canby and Plympton attempt to place blame on the New Mexicans who were actually in the fighting.

Regardless, the aura of what had just occurred was stamped indelibly in the minds of the men who witnessed it. Plympton was moved to comment, "Here I must make mention of the gallant conduct of all connected with the battery, who manfully stood their ground..."<sup>75</sup> Col. Roberts wrote:

*McRae's battery, though held with unexampled determination after the loss of every horse and more than half the gunners disabled and killed, was carried, and fell into the enemy's hands. Captain McRae, Third Cavalry, and Lieutenant Mishler, Fifth Infantry, were killed at their pieces, and illustrated a courage and conduct that will render the battle of Valverde memorable among the glories of American arms. It is due to the memories of the dead who served this battery and to the survivors, whose gallant and heroic service commends them to the praise of the country, to mention them as deserving honor and thanks.*<sup>76</sup>

The Texans had won the guns, capturing some of the Federal defenders in the process. Confederate Sgt. Peticolas' estimates that 30-40 men were taken prisoner,<sup>77</sup> including some 'Mexicans' who "were released on oath not to fight against the Confederacy."<sup>78</sup> No doubt these were some of the men listed as missing from Mortimore's and Hubbell's companies. The four companies at the guns, Rockwell's, Hubbell's, Mortimore's and McRae's, had lost 57% casualties: 66 killed, 60 wounded, and 34 missing/captured out of 282 men; with Rockwell's F/7th US taking a whopping 71%. Dodd's Coloradans, having many more wounded than dead appear to have been in a close range fire fight rather than in actual melee. Now the companies of the 5th US Infantry begin to form up at their original spot in the center of the Union line and volley at the jubilant Confederates.

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<sup>73</sup> Wilson, When the Texans Came, 243.

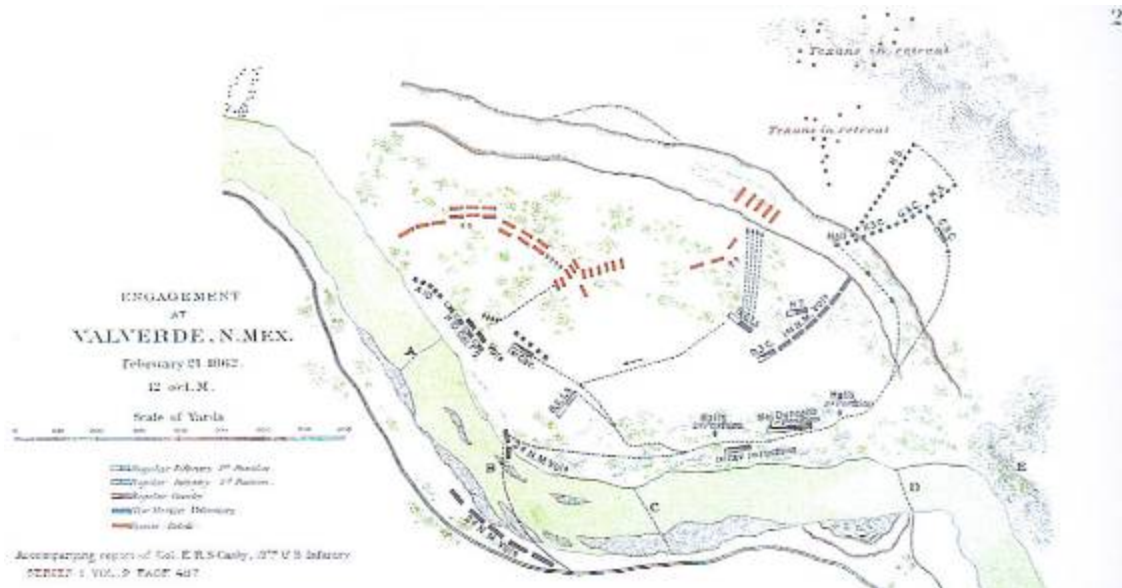
<sup>74</sup> Official Records, Canby 3/1/62.

<sup>75</sup> Wilson, When the Texans Came, 242.

<sup>76</sup> Official Records, Roberts to Nicodemus 2/23/62.

<sup>77</sup> Alberts, Rebels on the Rio Grande, 51.

<sup>78</sup> Alberts, Rebels on the Rio Grande, 49.



Canby's battle map representing the fighting in the afternoon. Note McRae's exposed position in the left center. To be accurate, Plympton's battalion should be shown closer to the river bank. Mortimer's and Hubbell's companies are correctly shown just behind McRae's battery. On the Union right it is misrepresented that the Regulars repelled Raguet's charge and not the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> NM Regiments and the 3<sup>rd</sup> US Cavalry. Canby did not witness the action on that side of the field. Pino's 2<sup>nd</sup> NM Volunteers are correctly shown in the center rear with two companies across the river and the remaining companies covering the fords exactly as ordered. Also note the proximity of the Confederates to McRae's battery and that the 5<sup>th</sup> US battalion is over on the right side of the field.

### The Attempt to Retake the Guns

In the midst of all this Canby suddenly gives up. He decides to commence a general retreat. He sends couriers to order the remaining troops to retire, but some of the Regulars and Volunteers are now fired with a renewed vigor and try to retake the guns. He is defeated but his men are not. John W. Ellis, Company K, 5th US Infantry: "...Ben Wingate and Col. Selden with 5 companies of the 5th made repeated charges to retake it [the battery], though Canby had three or four times sent his aide-de-camp to tell him to retreat. But he returned the answer that he would never retreat until he again took those guns."<sup>79</sup>



Captain Benjamin Wingate, 5<sup>th</sup> US Infantry

"For a moment, it seemed as if the men of the Fifth Infantry might have saved the day. However Captain Wingate was badly wounded by an artillery round and the Confederates were

<sup>79</sup> Meketa & Meketa, Heroes or Cowards, 36.



quickly reinforced and came on again.”<sup>80</sup> Sena’s men of the 2nd NM took part in this final charge. “Confederate reports verify that troops earlier stationed across from Fort Craig [the 2nd NM Volunteers] took an active part in the final charge of the day.”<sup>81</sup> Meanwhile, back on the west bank, Col. Miguel Pino forms the remainder of his men into line of battle to cover the ford. They can see many more men taking cover on their left at the riverbank, or struggling to get across the water. Others are streaming across the fords in front of them. With Wingate wounded and the officers hampered by orders to retreat, the Union counter-offensive breaks down and a general retreat begins. The men trapped at the riverbank have no choice but to swim. Apparently the retreat across the river was not as deadly as the Texans supposed. The 5th US Infantry retreats across the middle ford in good order. The right wing of the army, which was composed of 14 companies of Volunteers and 3 companies of Regulars is still advancing at this time. They have no idea what has happened on the left wing. Soon, dispatchers from Canby reach them with the order to retreat. Kit Carson is very displeased with the situation and apparently tries to ignore the order. The anonymous veteran of the First wrote:

*...and the order [to retreat] was disobeyed [by Col. Carson], because neither the officers nor the soldiers of that regiment believed that they were defeated, and because as against the force the Confederates had to bring against them, they were confident that they could remain upon that battlefield until doomsday. But another, and preemptory order was brought by one of the aides de camp, and the regiment was ordered to march off the field left on front to the river... ”<sup>82</sup>*

J. Francisco Chaves writes:

*...to our infinite surprise and chagrin, believing what we were victorious, Lieut. W. B. Mills, aide de camp to Col. B. S. Roberts, came to me with orders to abandon the field without delay, and that McRae’s battery on the right had been captured and our troops in flight across the Río Grande. I ordered Lieut. Eben Everett, regimental adjutant to look for Col. Carson, and I informed Capt. A. H. Pfeiffer [Co. E] of the order to withdraw. That brave old warrior was dumbfounded and as incredulous as myself.”<sup>83</sup>*

Ignoring his feelings, Kit Carson merely reported, “...the column supported by the gun on the right, was moving forward to sweep the wood near the hills, when I received the order to retreat and recross the river.”<sup>84</sup> Rafael Chacón wrote, “At the hour the sun went down the order was given to retreat. I, who already found myself very deep into the enemy zone because of the violence of our attack, did not understand the order at first for we considered that our charge upon the enemy’s main cavalry had won the battle.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Taylor, Bloody Valverde, 91.

<sup>81</sup> Meketa & Meketa, Heroes or Cowards, 43.

<sup>82</sup> Anonymous, Albuquerque Evening Citizen.

<sup>83</sup> Chaves, Albuquerque Daily Citizen.

<sup>84</sup> Official Records, Carson 2/26/62.

<sup>85</sup> Meketa, Legacy of Honor, 169.

## Behind the Mesa

Lt. Col. Jesús María Baca y Salazar's battalion of the 2nd NM Militia had been searching for the Confederate wagon train all afternoon. At about 5:00pm they finally found it. Major Wesche reported:

*Marched in the given direction, found the wagons without a guard. Not being able to take the wagons with us, I set fire to the ammunition we found in two of the wagons. It was a beautiful explosion. Other property was found and destroyed.*<sup>86</sup>

It's ironic that the much-castigated militia troops had delivered the most damaging blow that the Confederates had received all day. The loss of the supplies coupled with the loss of horses that put the 4th Texas Regiment on foot, and the previous loss of mules that caused wagons to be abandoned, really hurt an army that was already almost destitute. They had only five days rations left. For posterity, however, the worst of it was that the first volume of Peticolas' diary also went up in the flames.<sup>87</sup> In addition to this feat other Militia men at the top of the mesa had also contributed to the battle with some very effective sniper fire. Canby's assertion that the battle had been fought, "...almost entirely by the regular troops... with no assistance from the militia, and but little from the volunteers..."<sup>88</sup> was entirely without merit. Speaking of supplies, it is a good idea to remember that almost all the supplies the Confederates had used to get this far, not to mention their many rifle-muskets and cannon, had been furnished to them by the US Regulars – Federal supplies in central Texas courtesy of General Twiggs, the supplies at El Paso courtesy of Col. Paul, the cannon, muskets and supplies at Fort Fillmore courtesy of Col. Lynde, the supplies and cannon at Fort Stanton courtesy of Col. Roberts - and everything, in general, courtesy of Col. Canby who spent his time whining instead of taking them back. As noted earlier, they even got some of their horses from the Regulars – the glorious Regulars had failed.

## The Retreat

One Confederate who witnessed the Union debacle reported that Kit Carson's 1st Regiment was covering the retreat<sup>89</sup> but actually, as the reader knows, it was Miguel Pino's 2nd Regiment. Col. Pino states that they "...fired upon the enemy until ordered to return to Fort Craig."<sup>90</sup> The same Confederate wrote that a shell landed in their ranks killing and wounding many and they fled. However, they did not flee; they were still there when Col. Canby reached the west bank. Canby characteristically noted that the 2nd was "in the wildest confusion"<sup>91</sup> perhaps they were, due to the artillery fire as well as to the hundreds of refugees streaming through them, but they were still there, firing away. Once again, Canby was more interested in the failure of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Volunteers than he was in winning the battle.

The 1st NM joined the retreat and remained cool under fire. Lt. Col. J. F. Chaves stated, "The 1st N.M. Vols. which was marching in regular order..." was fired upon by one of the captured guns that only had three shots left. "One shot each falling in front, rear, and over their [the 1st NM] center." Undaunted the First continued their march. "Not having obtained the range, and receiving no more ammunition, the firing ceased."<sup>92</sup> Rafael Chacón verifies this: "We were crossing the river when they fired on us with one of our own cannons, but without doing us

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<sup>86</sup> Thompson, Civil War Diary, 43.

<sup>87</sup> Alberts, Rebels on the Rio Grande.

<sup>88</sup> Official Records, Canby 2/22/62.

<sup>89</sup> Anonymous, Albuquerque Evening Citizen.

<sup>90</sup> Official Records, Pino 2/26/62.

<sup>91</sup> Official Records, Canby 3/1/62.

<sup>92</sup> Meketa, Legacy of Honor, 379, footnote 13.

any damage.”<sup>93</sup> According to the anonymous veteran of the First this was the first inkling they had that something was wrong, as they, “...were not aware that the Union cause had suffered defeat, until fired at by the Confederates with the selfsame guns which they had captured from us.”<sup>94</sup> Lt. Col. J. F. Chaves also wrote, “The confederates fired their round shot at our regiment from their captured battery, which fortunately did not strike us, otherwise many of our soldiers would have been killed or wounded.”<sup>95</sup> Thanks to McRae’s anonymous sacrificial gunner, the Texans were not able to mount a full cannonade on the retreating units. During this march the 1st NM lost their trophy Texan flag. Captain Felsenthal reported, “Before leaving the Battle Field, this flag was obtained by Captain Graydon from the man who took it, and was by Captain Graydon turned in to the Department Commander as having been captured by him or his Company.”<sup>96</sup> The anonymous veteran of the First also reports that the march to the river, was not only done in good order, the troops had time to help the artillery across, sink a captured canon, and prepare to cross the river:

*The marching of our regiment in retreat from the field of battle in such order drew expressions of encomium from the Confederates in their description of the battle, and of the retreat of the Union troops, by the statement that the federal troops had marched off the field as if upon dress parade, mistakenly believing that our regiment must have been necessarily a regiment of regular troops to have preserved such order under such trying circumstances. It was nevertheless the fact, for the first regiment of New Mexico volunteers [sic] was assigned to the support of Hall’s battery at the extreme right of the field, and they marched off as stated and brought over Hall’s battery safely, and sunk a small mounted howitzer captured on the field in the river before crossing [this must have been the gun captured by Chacón earlier]. ...many of the soldiers of the regiment failed to go into the river in their clothes, and divested themselves of them before taking to the water...<sup>97</sup>*

Chacón’s unit, first on the field that morning, was the last to cross the ford that night. “I was so loath to leave the field that my company was the last of our army to retreat and cross the river.”<sup>98</sup> No less than four officers reported that Carson’s regiment, “retreated across the river and marched back to Fort Craig ‘in good order, almost as if they were on parade.’”<sup>99</sup> “We marched off the field as if on dress parade... and when we reached the west bank, we formed in regular column and marched south to Fort Craig, about three miles, without breaking ranks.”<sup>100</sup> Why did they march three or four miles in step? This is not normal procedure as it is very tiring to the men. One can only imagine that Kit Carson had heard the rumors about the NM Volunteers running from the fight, and livid with silent rage at the time, was making a statement to the Regulars. This is the Kit Carson and he knew the character of both the Regulars and the New Mexicans as well as anyone did. One thing is for sure, based on the number of times that Kit’s name is mentioned by the Texans his aura was all over that battlefield. Even at this point many of the men of the First did not know they had lost. Lt. Col. J. F. Chaves reports: “The great

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<sup>93</sup> Meketa, Legacy of Honor, 169.

<sup>94</sup> Anonymous, Albuquerque Evening Citizen.

<sup>95</sup> Chaves, Albuquerque Daily Citizen.

<sup>96</sup> Wilson, When the Texans Came, 247.

<sup>97</sup> Anonymous, Albuquerque Evening Citizen.

<sup>98</sup> Meketa, Legacy of Honor, 169).

<sup>99</sup> Meketa & Meketa, Heroes or Cowards, 45.

<sup>100</sup> Chaves, Albuquerque Daily Citizen.

majority of our men knew nothing of the loss of the battle and of our retreat until after they were taking their supper.”<sup>101</sup>

### **It was all over but the shouting...**

Once the Union soldiers were all safely back at Fort Craig the rumors and the blame began to take over. Stunned by their defeat and perhaps shamed by some of their own actions the Regulars sought to find a scapegoat. There had to be a reason they had lost. Two rumors and one fact quickly gained ascendancy. Men by the riverbank had seen the 2<sup>nd</sup> NM Volunteers turn around in midstream and return to the west bank. They concluded that Pino's men had run from the fight. Canby knew they had been ordered to do so but he did nothing to dispel the rumor. It suited him. He was so confident he never disputed Pino's report to the contrary. His first official report of February 22<sup>nd</sup> states that, “The immediate cause of the disaster at Valverde was the refusal of one of the volunteer regiments to cross the river and support the left wing...” This is referring to the 2<sup>nd</sup> NM Volunteers, stating that they were unwilling to cross the river. The fact that they were already crossing proves that they were not unwilling – a fact which Canby himself illustrates on his own battle map. Canby also accused the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of “failing to obey orders,” and softened it with, “...or in obeying them too slow.” Canby attempted to give veracity to his claims by promoting Captain José D. Sena of Company B to Major for bravery in crossing the river as if to illustrate the failure of the other companies.<sup>102</sup> This was Canby's punishment for the humiliation he had suffered a year earlier. And it was a lie. If the 2<sup>nd</sup> NM had truly been running from the fight they would not have been present on the west bank when the battle and the flood of refugees came to them. They would have kept going – out of harm's way. Yet, amidst fleeing troops, shot and shell, they were there volleying at the enemy and taking fire as ordered. Thus Canby catches himself in his own lie. In addition, he further contradicts himself when he states that “Colonels Pino and Carson, Lieut. Cols. J. F. and Manuel Chaves, and many other officers of the New Mexican Volunteers, were noted for their zeal and energy.”<sup>103</sup>

Another point needs to be considered. By the regulations and tactics manuals of the day, a regiment is deployed ‘in battalion’ with its Company B on the left of the line and Company A on the right. There are reasons of military science that a regiment always marches ‘by the right’ and deploys its rank and file in the correct order. Otherwise the men can become very confused. The fact that Sena's Company B was leading indicates that the Regiment was marching ‘by the left’ which would only be done in cases of extreme haste. Regular US regiments would not have done that and would have performed a time consuming countermarch to get the men in the correct order so that Company A would be the first to cross the river. Col. Pino and his men had shed official procedure in order to meet the situation.

The second rumor sprang from Plympton's excuse that Mortimore's men had infected the left half of his battalion (two companies) with fear and surely many of his men were already pointing that out to anyone who would listen. He may have gotten the story from them when they were accused of running away. Soon most of the Regulars concluded that the battery had been lost because the New Mexicans had run away. They told themselves that it was true although many of them must have known the bitter truth. One account states that the volunteers lay prone and refused to rise.<sup>104</sup> This was Company H of the 7<sup>th</sup> US that did not move forward, not the Volunteers. Another account by a member of the Fifth US Infantry describes that: “The New Mexican volunteers fired a volley in the air, and with a yell similar to that of an Indian war cry,

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<sup>101</sup> Chaves, *Albuquerque Daily Citizen*.

<sup>102</sup> Twitchell, *Leading Facts Vol II*, 388, footnote 314.

<sup>103</sup> *Official Records*, Canby 3/1/62.

<sup>104</sup> Marion Cox Grinstead, *Destiny at Valverde: The Life and Death of Alexander McRae* (The Socorro Historical Society, 1992), 36.

fled in every direction, and would not be got into fighting position again.”<sup>105</sup> However, if the reader will recall, the Fifth was busy with their wild errand to the other side of the field, from which point the battery could not be seen. They were reporting rumors, not documenting an actual incident. In his initial report of February 22<sup>nd</sup>, Col. Canby does not mention anything about New Mexicans running from the battery. He was there, yet he didn’t see it, neither did Roberts. It appears that Canby does not get such an idea until he reads Plympton’s report. Then he takes it out of context and includes it in his second report of March 1<sup>st</sup>. Plympton’s report states that the battery was already lost at the time, but Canby doesn’t mention that. His report is written so that people will believe that the New Mexicans had run first, causing the Regulars to do the same, and thus the battery was lost. Because of this it was established for history that a few New Mexicans had lost the battle. Thirteen companies of Regulars, one of Colorado, and two from New Mexico had originally been posted on the left wing of the army – and it was the New Mexicans who were blamed for the loss even though both companies had been in the group that took 50% casualties – the group that was actually fighting. The awful truth was that five companies of US Regulars had failed to do their duty. Lord’s two companies of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry had refused to advance, as did two companies of Plympton’s 10<sup>th</sup> US Infantry, as well as Company C of the 7<sup>th</sup> US, which ran from the fight. It was the Regulars who seriously weakened the Federal strength on the left wing, not the 20 or so New Mexicans from Mortimore’s Company.

That night, the New Mexicans were aware of the accusations. In response, many company commanders reported that their company had not run from the field. Lt. Col. Valdez reported:

*Capt. Pedro Sanchez, Third Regiment New Mexico Volunteers, reports that his company (C) fought gallantly during the battle without making any retreat without orders...*

*Capt. Juan A. Sarracino, Third Regiment New Mexico Volunteers, reports that Company G, under his command....did not make any retreat without orders.*

*Capt. Rafael Chacón, First Regiment New Mexico Volunteers, reports that....when the company was ordered to retreat they were satisfied of having obliged the enemy to retreat in all their charges...*

*Capt. Ricardo Branch, Third Regiment New Mexico Volunteers, reports that his company (B)....did not make any retreat without orders.*

*The commander of the company of Capt. William Mortimore [A], Third Regiment New Mexico Volunteers, reports that the following non-commissioned officers and privates, viz, First Sergt. J. W. Lewelling, Sergts. Edward Watters and Trancer Moore; Corps. Biter Terreme, Jose Leyra, S.C. Miller, C. A. Reidsen, George Beker, Henry York, Marceline Martínez, and Jose Anartaico Crespin, with others that are killed and missing, fought in the battle the 21<sup>st</sup> instant gallantly and sustained the battery to the last moment.*

*I certify in honor that the above is correct and just.*<sup>106</sup>

The third item, the only real fact in this mess, was that Canby himself was the third scapegoat. Many soldiers felt that he had given up far too early. Indeed, even after leaving the field he could have posted his army on the west bank of the river. The Confederates still had to cross it. The Federals could have slept on their arms and opposed the crossing in the morning. But Canby himself was defeated. He dragged his men back to the safety of the fort thus giving the Confederates undisputed possession of the fords and the rest of New Mexico to the north. His men fumed with rage and disbelief that the battle was actually lost. John W. Ellis, quoting the

<sup>105</sup> Grinstead, Destiny at Valverde, 36.

<sup>106</sup> Official Records, Valdez 2/26/62.

wounded Ben Wingate's words to Canby that night at the fort wrote, "Leave me. You are a traitor. Could I but live to get to Washington!"<sup>107</sup> Wingate died before he could report anything. William Mills wrote, "...I admired General Canby alike for this courage as for his amiable character, but I believe that if Col. Roberts had been left to carry out his plans that day, Valverde, would have been a Union victory and the campaign closed."<sup>108</sup> Alonzo Ickis observed, "The padre told Col. Canby he was a traitor. Canby had him placed under guard for two hours and then released."<sup>109</sup> Ickis also notes, "The battle was lost by bad management."<sup>110</sup> Rafael Chacón wrote, "...the regiment of Colonel Carson....would have retaken the guns that the enemy had captured if the retreat had not sounded just as they were advancing on the enemy for that purpose."<sup>111</sup> The anonymous veteran of the 1<sup>st</sup> asserted that: "The volunteers are firmly of the belief that if Col. Canby had never come on the field, that the Confederate troops would have been defeated, and that at his arrival on the battle field they were in fact and in truth defeated."<sup>112</sup> Captain Deus stated, "What was the feeling of Canby's men later towards their General can better be imagined that told. The most ignorant in his command said a blind man could easily see that Canby's sympathy was with the South....It was rumored that Canby had concluded to surrender to Sibley on the following day." Deus also mentions the rumor that Canby and Sibley were brother-in-laws, which actually wasn't the case.<sup>113</sup> But these men were correct that Canby, along with the US Regulars, shared the blame for the defeat. He had weakened the left flank and exposed the battery without adequate support. He desperately needed someone else to blame or he would lose credibility with his men, so he lied, twice, and many historians have conveniently followed suit, by taking Canby's report and the associated rumors as fact while completely ignoring the testimony of the New Mexicans.

*It should be noted that historians tend to feed on each other when sources are scarce. Too often an original error, rather than being corrected by further research, is repeated as the gospel truth of a statement or allegation.<sup>114</sup>*

*But we cannot blame the historian, for he is following his sources. On the other hand, writers and historians have a choice in the material they use.<sup>115</sup>*

No one alive today knows exactly what happened during those few fateful minutes at McRae's Battery. It's impossible to determine from reports if all of Mortimore's company proceeded to the fighting or if part of it ran the other way. Taylor states that Mortimore had about 65 men, but Charles Meketa notes that about 20 or so had been detached to guard horses. Since 19 were captured and 4 killed, that leaves approximately 20 men who could have run away, but when? The only undisputable fact is that everyone ran, eventually. But even if, at worst, some of Mortimore's men did run too early, they were not the only ones, they were not the cause of the

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<sup>107</sup> Meketa & Meketa, Heroes or Cowards, 36.

<sup>108</sup> Meketa & Meketa, Heroes or Cowards, 38.

<sup>109</sup> Mumey, Bloody Trails, 82.

<sup>110</sup> Mumey, Bloody Trails, 81.

<sup>111</sup> Meketa & Meketa, Heroes or Cowards, 36.

<sup>112</sup> Anonymous, Albuquerque Evening Citizen.

<sup>113</sup> Castello, Captain Charles Deus, 29.

<sup>114</sup> Joe S. Sando and Herman Agoyo, Po'pay (Clear Light Publishing, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2005), 134. This quote is from an Española newspaper article published on 11/5/98 by editor/publisher Robert Trapp.

<sup>115</sup> Ed. LeRoy R. Hafen, French Fur Traders & Voyageurs in the American West (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, First Bison Books printing, 1997). This excerpt is from the Introduction by Janet Lecompte, 1993.

loss of the battle, they were not any kind of excuse for Plympton or Canby, and, if true, they should not distract us from the men who stayed.