

# **THE NEW MEXICO VOLUNTEERS**

**In the American Civil War 1861-1862**

**By  
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Cover drawing by \_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_ depicts the First New Mexico guarding the left flank of the army on the morning of the Battle of Valverde. They are observing the progress of the battle from their position. Colonel Kit Carson is standing in front with Captain Louis Felsenthal on the left.

## INTRODUCTION

It's possible that history students and Civil War buffs will not understand the American Civil War in New Mexico if they are not familiar with New Mexico itself - its history and cultural heritage, in short – what kind of people lived here. If we read only the popular histories available on the Civil War period we get the impression that the New Mexicans had never volunteered for military duty before...that they were untrustworthy, untried, and their very enlistment was a great experiment of sorts, almost amounting to the controversial use of black troops in the eastern states. This is not quite how it was.

We cannot look at the situation in the southwest with the same political, religious and cultural points of view that existed in the 'mainstream' United States. People here did not have any real experience with the issues of Negro slavery, State's Rights, and economics as they existed east of the Mississippi. This was truly a foreign land – a world apart, so to speak. This failure to take into account a population's unique demographics is not a new phenomenon. Most Americans, who entered New Mexico in the period after its conquest, did not understand the native New Mexicans, and early historians who recorded and recounted those American experiences followed through with many of the same biases. Therefore, this historical stereotype has passed down to today when modern historians take the Territory itself almost completely out of historical context. Part of the reason for this is that we have very few accounts that were written from a native point of view, Hispanic or Native American. But if we discount their point of view we are ignoring the vast majority of the people who lived here at the time.

During the Texan invasion the Union troops were a conglomeration of United States Regular Army troops, NM Volunteer regiments, independent short-term volunteer companies, and NM Militia troops that were raised by the State of New Mexico. The generally accepted version of the Battle of Valverde is that everything went well for the Union until the Confederates made a massed charge on McRae's artillery battery. The failure of the Union troops that day was attributed to the NM Volunteers who ran away in great numbers, and the reserve regiment of 2<sup>nd</sup> NM Volunteers that refused to cross the river and come to the aid of the beleaguered Union Regulars. Official reports give us the understanding that the US Regulars fought the battle virtually alone without any aid from the New Mexico Volunteers and Militia, which, it turns out, is not true. After the short campaign was over, and as if to consolidate the lie, most of the NM troops were summarily dismissed in disgrace. After the battle, the Connelly/Chaves family and many other influential families were completely outraged, a public outcry commenced, and Governor Connelly's voice was among the loudest advocating restitution of the facts.

However, the New Mexican Volunteers were never exonerated from the lies that prevailed and the damage to the people of the fledgling NM Territory was incalculable. They were stigmatized for generations as inferior citizens (they had been called that before, but now it was proven). Consequently most New Mexicans today do not even know there was a Civil War here, or that their ancestors may have taken part in it. Or, if they do know about it, they've only heard the official version of the story; nothing to be proud of. Another subsequent 'collateral casualty' is the fact that the State of New Mexico has had very little interest in commemorating or preserving the battlefields and related historical sites of this time period. It has been a difficult endeavor even to place monuments on the battlefields. What interest there was has been is due to private citizens and organizations, and some Federal agencies. Another consequence is the lack of historical works written from the point of view of the Volunteers.

The NM Volunteers and militia were not perfect. They had many faults and problems. They had not all willingly become US citizens 14 years before, and the authorities in Washington still considered them a 'captured' and 'imperfectly loyal' people. In all the haste and confusion of recruitment, some had not even properly 'volunteered', and others were not exactly clear what they were fighting for, especially with their families at home endangered by constant Indian attacks. Some also had equipment and clothing problems as well as a lack of familiarity with

their arms. But incredibly, despite the hardships, prejudice, suspicion, and ill-treatment, the New Mexicans still served their new country when it counted.

Did the NM Volunteers perform any worse than the US Regulars present at the Battle of Valverde? No. Truthfully, they performed with the same mixture of bravery and caution as the Regulars. Did the NM Volunteers perform any worse than Eastern US Volunteers in their first battle? If we have any doubts, we can consider the Union performance at the First Battle of Manassas (Bull Run). Again, we would have to say, "No." In this book, we'll try to examine the opening of the Civil War in New Mexico, and the first major battle, from a slightly broader perspective. Strictly speaking, this is not a Union story, nor a Confederate one. It is a New Mexico story.