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**THE  
SAGEBRUSH  
SOLDIERS**

**Nevada's Volunteers  
in the Civil War**

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## CHAPTER VIII

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### EXPEDITION TO WALKER LAKE

In 1865 the Indians of Nevada began their last big effort to resist the inroads made on their territory by the white settlers of Nevada. For the past several years Nevada had been comparatively free from Indian trouble, with only a few minor outbreaks occurring. After the start of the Civil War, California Volunteers had met and defeated hostiles in the Humboldt Valley, and civilians had clashed with the Piutes at Battle Mountain. This had temporarily calmed the Indians, but in 1864-1865 they again took to the warpath.

Nevada was, by this time, fairly well settled and prospected. The frenzied rush of the early Comstock discoveries had passed and mining in the state was the more laborious and slow shaft work. Many newcomers to Nevada had turned to other industries, particularly ranching, and now the nomadic tribesman found his water holes fenced, game scarce, and piñon-nut forests reduced to mine timbers. This put the Nevada Indian in the position of having to steal from the white man in order to survive, for although the United States was supposed to care for and protect the Indian, little was actually done for him, and oftentimes supplies intended for him went to whites instead.

A splendid example of the treatment of the Nevada Indian is the report of Col. McDermit to the Department of the Pacific that he had visited the Indian Reservation on the Truckee River (near Wadsworth) on May 7, 1865. Here McDermit found that the grazing land belonging to the Indians had been leased to white men by the Indian agent, who pocketed the rental money. McDermit also noted that \$25,000 appropriated for the care of the Indians had disappeared without the Indians being helped at all.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, reduced to starve or steal, the Indian had little choice, and began to commit crimes against the white invaders, largely by stealing cattle. However, cattle were not all and soon everything was on the "wanted" list. From here it was but a step to murder, for by killing a white man the Indian had all his possessions. Lone prospectors began to disappear and soon white settlers carried arms at all times and commenced to suspect all Indians, although the majority were friendly.

Isaac Stewart, a young man of twenty-four, had come to Nevada from Ohio to make his fortune. As a partner he chose Robert Rabe, a native of Germany, and a few years his senior. Together the two set out to prospect the region south and east of the Comstock. Early in March, 1865, the prospectors made their small camp some two miles from the head of Walker Lake. As it was still early, Stewart mounted his horse and rode toward the lake to scout the next day's journey. Rabe, left at camp, started to cook supper. As he kneeled to strike a match to kindle the fire, a shot from the brush struck him in the back. Falling forward, the dying man was killed by having his head smashed in with a rock.<sup>2</sup> Stewart, hearing the shot, turned to find himself facing two Indians, trapped between the murderers and Walker Lake. The

young man, unarmed, tried to flee and forced his horse into the lake to swim for safety. He was never seen again.<sup>3</sup>

Word of the murders quickly reached Fort Churchill by means of friendly Indians and the Nevada Volunteers immediately took to the field. A crime such as this could not go unpunished, and capture had to be quick and sure. Uncertain of the reaction of the rest of the Indians in the area prompted the movement of a fairly large force to the region.

On March 12, 1865, Captain Wallace, Company A, Nevada Infantry, left Fort Churchill with what amounted to a small army. To capture two Indians he had thirty-seven men of his own company, fifty cavalry of Company E, N. V. C., twelve friendly Indians, and a white guide, a total force of one hundred men. The following account of his expedition is taken from his official report.<sup>4</sup>

Leaving Fort Churchill at 5 a.m., the column marched eighteen miles south and reached Mason's Ranch on the Walker River. Here Wallace found many of the fears concerning the attitude of the local Indians to be groundless. At Mason's Ranch twenty Indians volunteered their services in catching the two fugitives, but were told there were enough men already on the job.

Believing that the murderers were at the lower, or south, end of Walker Lake, Wallace planned to head on south and cross the mountains near the foot of the lake. Accordingly, he and his men pushed on the next day fourteen miles to the junction of the East and West Walker Rivers, then four more miles up the West Walker where they forded the stream and camped at Wilson's Ranch. The next day, March 14, they traveled back down the West Walker and up the East Walker to Wheeler's Ranch where they again camped.

Here they found the settlers in a state of near panic, saying that three hundred murderous Indians were gathered at the foot of the lake, unaware of the approach of Wallace. The settlers had deliberately misinformed the Piutes, telling them that the soldiers were on the way to Aurora.

Wallace, then, had to cross the steep eleven thousand foot Wassuk Range that lay between his position and the lake. The only other route possible would have been to proceed to the head of the lake and down the flat barren west shore, where his men would easily be seen. Wallace and his men went to work. In order to transport their supplies across the difficult mountains he sent out men who managed to borrow five pack saddles from the local ranchers. Then the men began to cook two days rations in preparation for the crossing.

In the forenoon an Indian messenger arrived from Josephus, a friendly chief, with news that the Indian camp had moved to the head of Walker Lake the day before. This greatly eased the task of the soldiers and an hour after the news arrived they were on the march back down the East Walker River. A mile from Wheeler's they forded the river, which placed them on the advantageous and well-traveled side of the river.

Here Wallace split his command in order to save time. Lt. G. J. Lansing and the infantry were sent by trail on a shortcut, accompanied by the guide. Wallace and the cavalry continued along the river on the road to the rendezvous point, a tollhouse. Here the cavalry arrived at

8 p.m., March 15, having traveled twenty-five miles. Fifteen minutes later the infantry made their appearance, traveling by a trail which had saved them ten miles. This position now found Wallace eight miles from the head of Walker Lake and the spot where the Indians were camped.

The soldiers were on the move again at 2 a.m. the following morning. Marching together they advanced three miles down the road to the lake where Wallace once again divided his men. Lt. Clark and the cavalry crossed the Walker River to the east side and followed a route parallel to the river and one-half mile from it. Before dawn they had taken a position near the camp, their left flank on Walker Lake, the right on the Walker River. At the bugle signal Clark was to move his men to within fifty yards of the camp and halt. If the Indians fired on the troops, none were to be allowed to escape the circle of soldiers.

Wallace and the infantry continued down the west side of the river and took up a position similar to that of Clark, one flank on the river, the other on the lake shore. This completely encircled the Indian camp which lay on the east edge of the Walker River where it flowed into the lake. The Indians were enclosed in a triangle, infantry on one leg, cavalry on the other, and the lake a natural third. This movement was completed and the troops in place just fifteen minutes before daybreak.

With the coming of daylight the Indians realized their situation, but far from being hostile they proved to be quite the opposite. Josephus rode across the river to inform Wallace that one of the murderers was in the camp, the other at the foot of the lake. The friendly chief then returned to the camp, sending words a few minutes later that he was with the wanted man.

Wallace's bugler sounded the advance and the soldiers tightened their circle as Wallace and four cavalymen spurred their mounts across the shallow river and rode into the camp. Clark's Indian guides, hearing the bugle, ran among the encamped Indians, shouting to them not to fire upon the white soldiers.

Wallace, riding up, found Josephus in the center of the camp and asked him which man was the murderer. As he spoke, a man brandishing a gun, jumped from a nearby *campoode*. Mr. Campbell, the Indian Sub-Agent and guide, immediately covered the Indian. Upon disarming him, Wallace was informed by Josephus that this was not the man he was searching for. The murderer was pointed out to the officer and he was quickly trussed up by the troopers, who removed him from the camp to forestall any general resentment among the tribesmen.

The Captain and twenty-five cavalry started down the lake shore, guided by Josephus, to apprehend the second killer. To insure the surrender of the man, Wallace took the fugitive's brother along as a hostage.

The chief pointed out where the murderer was camped in a small ravine. A mile from the campsite, Wallace split his men, sending ten to the head of the ravine to prevent any possible escape. Then, with these men in their position, the rest of the party approached the camp, only to see the fugitive fleeing up the ravine on foot. Chief Josephus and the man's brother called to him to stop, which he did. He was trussed securely and the bugler sounded the recall.

By 7:30 a.m., Wallace was back at the end of the lake. In just the

short space of time since dawn he had successfully captured the two men without alarming the assembled Indians. The bridge across the Walker River was reached at 10 a.m., the soldiers bringing in their wake the three hundred unarmed Indians. At noon a camp was made three miles above the bridge and named Camp Josephus, after the chief who had aided the expedition. From here an Indian, the murderer's brother, was sent to the foot of Walker Lake with instructions to recover the pistols and saddles of Stewart and Rabe. This he did, returning them to Fort Churchill.

March 17, 1865 found the troopers on the journey home, up the Walker River to the Reservation House where one hundred friendly warriors had assembled to lend the soldiers a hand if they were needed. March 18, another easy day, and the column arrived at Smith's and Mason's ranch. Leaving here at five the next morning the soldiers arrived at Fort Churchill before noon, placing the Indians in the Guard House. They were later turned over to the civil authorities for trial on murder charges.

The Nevada Volunteers had successfully and forcefully managed to capture the men without causing a serious incident. The Expedition to Walker Lake had, at least, several good results. Firstly, it demonstrated to the Indians of the area that the white man's justice was quick and sure, and secondly, it showed the white population that the Indians in the western corner of Nevada were definitely friendly and on the side of the whites. These Indians never troubled the white population again; it was the Indians of Northern Nevada that gave the Nevada Volunteers a fight.

The imprisonment of the two Indians was destined to be short, however. They were turned over to the county officials of Esmeralda County at Aurora, the county seat. In late May, 1865, they broke jail and again were on the loose, killing two friendly Indians and threatening to murder any whites they could.<sup>5</sup> Captain Wallace and Company A with thirty-six men of Company E, Nevada Cavalry, once again made the trip to the Walker Lake region to apprehend them.<sup>6</sup>

Upon his arrival there he met and disarmed one hundred and fifty Indians, releasing all of them except two. These were the brother and uncle of one of the fugitives and were kept as hostages to identify the murderers.<sup>7</sup> By June 1, one of the killers had been recaptured and sent to Fort Churchill,<sup>8</sup> releasing Wallace's command to proceed to active campaigning in the Humboldt District where, by now, a full-scale Indian war was under way.

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Official Records*, Vol. L, Part II, p. 409.

<sup>2</sup>Myron Angel (ed.), *History of Nevada* (Oakland: Thompson and West, 1881), pp. 168-169.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>*Official Records*, op. cit., pp. 404-409.

<sup>5</sup>*Reese River Reveille*, Austin, Nevada. May 30, 1865.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, June 1, 1865.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*