

VOL. 5
NO. 304

NEVADA HISTORICAL SOCIETY QUARTERLY



THE SAGEBRUSH SOLDIERS



Civil War
Centennial
Fall-Winter
1962

Volume V
Numbers 3-4

**THE
SAGEBRUSH
SOLDIERS**

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

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CHAPTER IX

EXPEDITION TO PYRAMID LAKE

At the same time the killing of Stewart and Rabe prompted Colonel McDermit to send troops to the Walker Lake region, word was received at Fort Churchill that a band of hostile Indians were camped in the vicinity of Pyramid Lake. Thus, on the same day that Captain Wallace led his men out to the south, Captain Almond B. Wells, Nevada Volunteer Cavalry, led Company D in a north-easterly direction. The following account of his trip is taken from his report to Col. McDermit, dated Camp Nye, Nevada, March 19, 1865.¹

The first day in the field, March 12, 1865, the cavalry made only ten miles, the fifty men of the command pausing early to rest for the next day's journey. Leaving camp at 6 a.m., Wells pushed his men a long forty-eight mile ride to Pyramid Lake, reaching that body of water at six in the evening.

Here they were informed that a band of hostile Smoke Creek Indians was camped at a point only eleven miles away, from which base they were continually stealing cattle from local settlers. To keep the Indians from being warned of the presence of soldiers in the vicinity, Wells placed a guard over the Pyramid Lake Indians camped nearby. This, however, proved entirely unnecessary, as this was the camp of Chief Winnemucca himself, always friendly to the whites.

At three the next morning, March 14, the Captain and twenty-nine men left their campsite and guided by two civilians, W. H. Wilson and T. W. Murch, headed for the Indian camp located on Winnemucca or "Mud" Lake. Sighting the Indians at five-thirty, the soldiers split into three groups to surround the hostiles. Wells and ten men advanced straight toward the camp while two other squads under Sergeants R. D. Wadleigh and H. Besat encircled the Indians. At a distance of one hundred and fifty yards the soldiers were seen by the Indians who commenced to fire on the soldiers.

Corporal (later Sergeant) John Dolan, Company D, Nevada Cavalry, was wounded by the first shot fired, while the second ball aimed at the soldiers passed through Captain Wells' overcoat. As firing began, Wells ordered a saber charge upon the camp, at which the Indians fell back into the surrounding underbrush. With both sides having the same number of men, a running fight ensued, the soldiers chasing the Indians for some ten miles. Engaged in hand-to-hand combat, the troopers killed twenty-nine Indians, while one solitary warrior made good his escape.²

The Captain, in his official report of the skirmish, broke with the usual tradition when he did not hesitate to compliment the Indians on their ability to fight, noting that they fought well.

Sounding the recall, Wells found that he had captured a supply of guns, powder, and beef, which he destroyed. Nine horses were taken, but were in such poor physical shape that Wells did not even bother to bring them in.

The Captain was honored by a visit from Chief Winnemucca upon the return of the soldiers to Pyramid. The old chief expressed his approval at the results of the fight, as the Indians involved were not from his people, but "bad" Indians.

This little skirmish on March 14, 1865, is carried in the annals of the Civil War as a "Skirmish, Mud Lake, Nevada," although in the West it has been reported as an "Expedition to Pyramid Lake." Mud Lake is a large dry lake immediately to the north of Pyramid, and it was near here the fight actually began.

Their mission accomplished, Company D returned to their base at Camp Nye to rest until more Indian outbreaks would send them to Northern Nevada. At the Fort, Wells was asked for an accounting of his actions on the expedition by Col. McDermit.

McDermit had adopted the policy, which came under much criticism from others, of trying to settle the Indian problem peacefully and without bloodshed. In accordance with this Wallace was praised for his actions at Walker Lake in capturing the Indians without a fight. Wells, on the other hand, had charges brought against him by McDermit and a court of inquiry was set up to investigate the skirmish at Mud Lake.⁴ Wells was acquitted and allowed to resume the field with his men as the court found that the Indians had fired first, wounding Corporal Dolan, before Wells ordered his saber charge.

This "go easy" policy of McDermit was severely criticized by some of Nevada's leading citizens. Indian outrages were occurring all over the state and the loss in goods, livestock, and life were mounting rapidly. Of course, one must realize that the average Nevadan was violently anti-Indian, and many openly advocated their complete annihilation. The editor of the *Reese River Reveille* scathingly blasted Col. McDermit and Capt. Wallace for their attitude toward the Indians on May 20, 1865, stating that the local military were "unworthy the name of soldier."⁵ This was largely due to the seeming inaction of McDermit and his apparent reluctance to take the field personally against the red man. The writer went on to state that only by taking the initiative himself could McDermit redeem his name. On May 30 the same man wrote again, largely repeating his charges, but especially lauding Captain Wells for fighting at Mud Lake, and criticizing McDermit for holding a court of inquiry when he could better be chasing Indians.⁶

FOOTNOTES

¹*Official Records*, Vol. L, Part II, pp. 403-404.

²Dr. Effie Mona Mack, in her book *Nevada*, states that all the Indians were killed. This is in error, as Wells definitely states in his report that one Indian managed to escape. Effie Mack, *Nevada* (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1936), p. 317.

³*Reese River Reveille*, Austin, Nevada, May 20, 1865.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*, May 30, 1865.