

THE INDIAN REGIMENTS IN THE BATTLE OF PEA RIDGE¹

By Roy A. Clifford

With the outbreak of the Civil War the Confederacy immediately sought alliances with the Indian Nations. It was believed by many Southerners that the large herds of cattle of the Indians would be sufficient to feed the entire Confederate army. Also, it was hoped that the Nations would furnish many troops for the Confederate cause.

The Confederacy appointed Albert Pike as Commissioner to the Indians. Pike was well known and well liked by the Indians, and was undoubtedly an excellent choice for this position. Pike took his proposals to the Cherokees but his efforts were unsuccessful because of the desire for neutrality on the part of John Ross and his many followers. Pike then turned to the other Nations where he was successful in obtaining the desired treaties. He then made treaties with the Kiowas, Wichitas, and Comanches whereby the South was to furnish certain goods and the Indians were to stop their depredations against the virtually undefended ranches and farms of Northern Texas.

By the time Pike had negotiated these treaties the weight of opinion in the Cherokee Nation had swung to the South, and Pike then hurried to Park Hill where his treaty with the Cherokees was concluded.

Upon the completion of the treaties Pike reported to the Confederate capital. On November 22, 1861, the following order was issued: "The Indian Country west of Arkansas and north of Texas is constituted the Department of Indian Territory, and Brigadier General Albert Pike, with the Provisional Army, is assigned to the command of the same. . ."² Pike thereupon returned to Indian Territory to aid in the task of raising troops.

In May of 1861 the Secretary of War for the Confederacy had empowered Douglas H. Cooper, a former agent to the Choctaws and Chickasaws, to raise among these two tribes a regiment of mounted rifles with Cooper to have the command of them. The same communication stated the intention to raise similar regiments among the others of the Five Civilized Tribes.

¹ Also called the Battle of Elkhorn Tavern, Arkansas. (March 6-8, 1862.)

² Article 7 of Special Order 234, (*Official Records of the Rebellion*, Vol. III, P. 690).

Cooper found the tribes cooperative and in July reported that his regiment was ready to receive its arms. Recruiting among the other tribes moved steadily forward until it was estimated that there were some six thousand troops under Pike in March of 1862.³

On January 10, 1862, the Trans-Mississippi District was established and Major General Earl Van Dorn placed in command. This district embraced Indian Territory, Arkansas and adjacent territory. This order did not state whether Pike's authority in Indian Territory was to be superseded by that of Van Dorn or that Pike was to maintain authority over his particular territory. This later caused Pike to feel bitter towards some of his fellow officers.

On February 13, 1862, General Samuel R. Curtis entered Springfield, Missouri, and the Southern Army under General Price was forced to retreat hastily into Arkansas. On February 22 word reached General Van Dorn of Price's retreat, and his subsequent encampment in the Boston Mountain district in Arkansas. General Van Dorn decided that he should take personal command of the battle which seemed imminent.⁴

Van Dorn found his army encamped southwest of Fayetteville and the Federal forces located about fifty miles from his army. Van Dorn ordered an attack. On March 3, 1862, he sent the following instructions to Pike:

. . . . press on with your whole force along the Cane Hill road, so as to fall in rear of our army.⁵ The general commanding desires that you will hasten up with all possible dispatch and in person direct the march of your command, including Stand Watie's, McIntosh's, and Drew's regiments. . . . so that your command will be near Elm Springs (marching by the shortest route) day after tomorrow afternoon.⁶

Pike led his regiments toward the Southern forces. He had been held up over the payment of troops and the stipulations of the treaties with the Indians whereby the South was not to use Indian troops outside of the Territory.⁷ On March 4 Pike, with a squadron of Texas cavalry and the Creek regiment of mounted rifles under Col. D. N. McIntosh, overtook the Cherokee Regiment under Col. Stand Watie. On March 6 the Cherokee regiment under Col. Drew was overtaken and a few hours later the regiments caught up with the rear of the advancing army.⁸ Pike encamped within two miles of Camp Stephens, some eight miles northeast of Bentonville.

³ Wiley Britton, *The Civil War on the Border*, P. 214. (This estimate includes the Texas regiment under Pike)

⁴ *Official Records of the Rebellion*, Series 1, 8, 749.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 763, 764.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 764.

⁷ Creek Treaty, Article 36, (Dale and Rader, *Readings in Oklahoma History*, 296.)

⁸ *Official Records of the Rebellion*, Series 1, Vol. 8 ,287.

Van Dorn ordered a general advance at 8 o'clock but Pike, who was to follow McCulloch's troops, did not receive these orders until 9:30. An engagement between some advance troops from General Price's command and some Federal troops had already been fought.⁹ General Curtis had sent out parties early on the sixth to cut timbers so as to obstruct ". . . the enemy having too many approaches and to erect filled works to increase the strength of my forces. . . ." ¹⁰ Pike, when he received his orders from General Van Dorn, immediately inquired of McCulloch as to when the road would be open to him and was informed the road would be clear by 12 o'clock. Pike overtook McCulloch's forces but had to wait until sunrise until McCulloch's infantry could cross Sugar Creek on a small rail bridge.¹¹ After crossing Sugar Creek, Pike followed closely in the rear of McCulloch until halted at Pea Ridge. Meanwhile Price's advance had been held up by the obstructions placed by the Union troops and he did not reach Telegraph Road until 10:00 on the morning of the seventh.

Pea Ridge, where Pike was halted, was some two or three miles north of Sugar Creek. General Curtis described the area as follows: ". . . The valley of the creek is low, and from a quarter to a half mile wide. The hills are high on both sides, and the worn road from Fayetteville by Cross Hollow to Deetsville intercepts the valley nearly at right angles."¹² Northeast of Pea Ridge a "high mountain" stood out and beyond it ran Telegraph Road. There were "rough and rocky" gorges near the road and Pea Ridge itself was fairly level.¹³ Southwest of Elkhorn Tavern was a heavily wooded tract of land of about one hundred acres.¹⁴ Pea Ridge runs in an east-west direction and fronted on Elkhorn Tavern and Telegraph Road. Between Pea Ridge and Sugar Creek was a broken stretch of ground covered partially by dense thickets of oaks. The Federal forces were camped and had fortifications readied on Sugar Creek.

While Pike was waiting near the west end of Pea Ridge the Ninth Texas Cavalry countermarched to the rear. Pike was told that he was to follow this group. McCulloch was beginning an attack on the Federal flank and the Indian troops followed. The troops moved southward off the Bentonville road into some wooded hills. Pike was told that they were to march some four and one-half miles south to the little town of Leetown which lay some two miles to the south of the Federal position on Sugar Creek. Pike's men were to form behind the infantry, dismount, and charge with

⁹ *Ibid.*, 283.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹¹ Fred W. Allsopp, *Life Story of Albert Pike* (Parke-Harper News Service, Little Rock, Ark., 1920).

¹² *Official Records of the Rebellion*, Series 1, Vol. 8, 197.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 293.

¹⁴ Wiley Britton, *The Civil War on the Border*, 221.

the infantrymen.¹⁵ The troops had marched nearly a mile from the road, following a trail running beside some wooded land and a field, when they came upon a detachment of Federal cavalry supporting a battery of three guns. The battery was 300 yards directly in front of them. Pike formed his command of about 1,000 troops (all Indian but one squadron) behind a fence. The enemy's fire was rapidly wiping out their cover when Col. Watie's regiment on foot and Col. Drew's regiment on horseback with a part of the Texas regiment charged the battery and in a short skirmish succeeded in routing the Union forces and capturing the guns. Pike dispatched the guns into the woods but was unable to send them to the rear due to the loss of battery horses. Pike lost three killed, and two wounded.¹⁶

Meanwhile, Curtis had learned of Van Dorn's strategy and had ordered a change of front and a detachment of cavalry, light artillery and infantry to march towards Leetown. Curtis was worried about the Confederate flanking movement and said that "...The fate of the battle depended on success against this flank movement of the enemy, and here near Leetown was the place to break it down."¹⁷

Shortly after noon Col. Watie discovered another battery with infantry to their front. Pike endeavored to have the Indians milling around the captured guns turn them on the Federal troops, but the Indians would not assist in this effort.

"... At this moment the enemy sent two shells into the field, and the Indians retreated hurriedly into the woods out of which they had made the charge. Well aware that they would not face shells in the open ground, I directed them to dismount, take their horses to the rear, and each take to a tree,¹⁸ and this was done by both regiments, the men thus awaiting patiently the expected advance of the enemy, who now and for two hours and a half afterwards, until perhaps twenty minutes before the action ended, continued to fire shot and shell into the woods where the Indians were, from their battery in front, but never advanced.¹⁹"

Pike reported the value of the Indian regiments in this action in keeping the enemy battery engaged.

It was during this time that McCulloch and General McIntosh were killed. McCulloch was shot by a skirmisher of the Thirty-sixth Illinois as he rode through the brush of the northern edge of the field.²⁰ McIntosh was killed near the same place.²¹

¹⁵ *Official Records of the Rebellion*, Series 1, Vol. 8, 287.

¹⁶ *Official Records of the Rebellion*, Series 1, Vol. 8, 288.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁸ Pike, undoubtedly, only meant for the troops to find shelter; not for each to climb a tree as one author asserts. (Abel, *Indian as Participant in the Civil War*, 30.)

¹⁹ *Official Records of the Rebellion*, Series 1, Vol. 8, 289.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 303.

Confederate artillery finally pulled the fire away from Pike's section of the woods and Pike, in order to see more of the battle, went out into the open ground nearer the conflict. Pike had received no orders from anyone since his first engagement was commenced.²²

About 3 o'clock Pike was informed of the death of Generals McCulloch and McIntosh and took command. Pike was at a sore disadvantage since he knew nothing of the terrain nor the position of the remnants of McCulloch's forces. The battle had faded to minor proportions and Pike, finding his position open to attack, decided that the best course to follow would be to organize the scattered troops and attempt to join Van Dorn's main army. Pike was unable to ascertain the whereabouts of other troops who had taken part in the battle and supposed that they had retreated along the line of their advance.

Pike marched to the Bentonville road and followed it "in perfect order" to Telegraph Road. However, his order to retreat had not been received by Col. Drew who had remained in the woods for some time before marching to Camp Stephens.

This action of Pike's was wisely executed but left confusion among those with whom he could not communicate. Col. Greer of the Third Texas Cavalry said that when he was left in command "My first inquiry was for Brigadier General Pike. I was informed that he had left the field, and, as I afterward learned, with a great portion of the division."²³

When Pike reached headquarters late that night, Van Dorn had discovered that the ammunition was dangerously low and that the ordnance wagons could not be found.²⁴ Van Dorn went ahead with his plans for the battle.

Col. Cooper with the regiment of Choctaws and Chickasaws and Col. McIntosh with 200 men of the Creek regiment had not arrived in time to meet the enemy and, when they caught the retreating Southern train at Camp Stephens, they remained with it until it reached Elm Springs.

The morning of the eighth, Pike sent the Texas squadron back to one of the Texas regiments and ordered the Cherokee regiment under Stand Watie to a position behind Elkhorn Tavern. This group was to observe the enemy's actions in that sector.²⁵ Pike accompanied Watie's regiment. After watching the Federal troops which were in open view for two hours, Pike returned to headquarters to report that there was no flanking movement on the part

²² *Ibid.*, 289.

²³ *Official Records of the Rebellion*, Series 1, Vol. 8, 293.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 284.

²⁵ Van Dorn had probably intended using Col. Watie's group as scouts, only, when he ordered them to join him.

of the Federal troops. At headquarters he was informed that both General Van Dorn and General Price were in the field and tried to find them. On his way to their position he met a detachment who informed him that orders had been given to fall back. There had been a fierce artillery battle beginning early in the morning. Van Dorn and Price had placed most of their forces on Pea Ridge overlooking the Federal positions. When the Federal artillery got the range of the Confederate entrenchments, the secessionists had to withdraw for the heavy fire was killing the battery horses, exploding ammunition chests and causing general disorganization. In this action Captain Clark was killed. Curtis had his left battery working over this main force and in the meantime his center and right batteries were shelling the heavily timbered tract in front of Elkhorn Tavern where the Southern infantry were deployed. The battery fire was so heavy that the Southern troops were forced gradually back to the Tavern and then beyond it.²⁶ The army was reorganized and a general withdrawal ordered around 10:00 A.M.

When the infantry marched to the rear, Col. Watie ordered the retreat of his regiment from their observation posts. Pike had heard cheering before he learned of the retreat and supposed it came from the Confederates; upon learning that the "field was full of Federals" and both Van Dorn and Price had not been seen he immediately sent an order to Stand Watie to fall back.²⁷ This order had not reached Stand Watie which accounts for his troops remaining long after there was need for them. Two hundred were detailed to aid with the ammunition train; however, the train left before the Indians reached the site appointed and the Indians hastened to rejoin the rest of the regiment southwest of Fayetteville.²⁸

Pike had fallen in with a party of artillery and had attempted to persuade them to turn their guns on the advancing enemy. The men were confused and many were panic stricken because they supposed that Van Dorn and Price had been lost. The gun crews continued in their flight and Pike was forced to order them into firing position a second time. This brave action was to no avail for a cry of "The cavalry are coming" caused a disorderly rout.

Pike, Captain Hewitt, and Lt. W. L. Pike, (aide-de-camp), hurried to cut off the batteries in an effort to get them into action. Upon reaching the road where they supposed they would find the artillery, they found themselves cut off by the enemy. While debating what course to pursue they were fired upon by the enemy and quickly rode up the Bentonville road with a detachment of cavalry at their heels. They succeeded in eluding the pursuit and then rode westward between the Pineville and Bentonville roads.

²⁶ Wiley Britton, *The Union Indian Brigade in the Civil War*, (Franklin Hudson Pub. Co., Kansas City, Mo., 1922, 53.)

²⁷ *Official Records of the Rebellion*, Series 1, Vol. 8, 290.

²⁸ *Official Records of the Rebellion*, Series 1, Vol. 8, 318.

A few days later Pike and his companions rode into Cincinnati where the Indian troops were quartered. Here Pike learned for the first time of the fate of the main army.²⁹ Col. Drew had retreated to Camp Stephens where he was later joined by the Choctaw and Chickasaw regiment and 200 men of the Creek regiment. These regiments of Indians remained with the army train until it reached Elm Springs. At Elm Springs the Indian forces united and moved with their own train to Cincinnati. Pike spent several days at Dwight Mission writing his report. It was here that Pike wrote his only message in reference to Indian scalplings during the battle.

On March 11 General Curtis moved his headquarters to "get away from the stench and desolation of the battle ground" and later on March 13 he reported that they (Southern forces) shot arrows as well as rifles, and tomahawked and scalped prisoners.³⁰ When Van Dorn asked to be allowed to send a burying party he was informed of these beliefs. Van Dorn answered:

He (Van Dorn) is pained to learn by your letter. . . . that the remains of some of your soldiers have been reported to you to have been scalped, tomahawked, and otherwise mutilated. He hopes you have been misinformed with regard to this matter, the Indians who formed part of his forces having for many years been regarded as a civilized people. . . . he desires me to inform you that many of our men who surrendered themselves prisoners of war were reported to him as having been murdered in cold blood by their captors, who were alleged to be Germans.³¹

There has been no authoritative support of the report of German murderers, but Curtis secured several affidavits reporting that eight men were scalped. Cyrus Bussey reported: "You will perceive that 8 of my men were scalped. . . . has excited among my men an indignation that will, I assure you, exhibit itself on every field. . . ." ³² John W. Noble, one of Curtis' aides reported: "Hearing it reported by my men that several of the killed had been found scalped, I had the dead exhumed, and on personal examination I found that it was a fact beyond dispute that 8 of the killed of my command had been scalped."³³

There is little doubt that some such actions took place. Although many of the leaders had learned the white man's manner of carrying on warfare, it is doubtful that all of the men had thrown off the age-old custom of taking an enemy's scalp. It was the old story of one people with a set of customs distinct from another people's being censured for what seemed to be barbaric manners. What is savage and barbaric is set by each group as being different things.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 293.

³⁰ *Official Records of the Rebellion*, Series 1, Vol. 8, 99.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 195.

³² *Ibid.*, 235.

³³ *Official Records of the Rebellion*, Series 1, Vol. 8, 236, also see Noble's affidavit to same effect; *Ibid.*, 206-7.

Despite this return to the ways of their fathers, the Indians under Pike must be commended for their adaptability in taking up the white man's ways of fighting. Some of the same troops had participated in the battle against Hopoeithleyohola in 1861 and it was reported in an Arkansas newspaper that around 200 scalps were taken and three-fourths of these taken by the Confederate Indians.³⁴ A short time after the Battle of Pea Ridge, when the North had made use of Indian troops it was said "The fact is noted that when the Indian soldiers were taken out of their country and co-operating with the white troops in operations in Missouri and Arkansas, that they abstained more scrupulously from depredation upon private property than the white soldiers with whom they were associated."³⁵ This would indicate the degree of order which the Indian troops maintained when fighting with their "white brothers."

No apology need be made for the Indian behavior in this battle. If fault is to be found, it lies in the use of the troops outside of Indian Territory. By the treaties of alliance with the Indians the regiments were not supposed to be used outside of Indian Territory. Pike was rather bitter over the use of the Indians in the Battle of Pea Ridge and felt that they had had their treaties infringed upon. He also wrote to Secretary Benjamin deploring the fact that Van Dorn had made no mention of the Indians' part in the battle. Pike had ample reason to complain about this lack since his troops had behaved courageously on the battlefield and had given him trouble only when they became elated over the capture of the three guns. At that time they had become excited and were uncontrollable for a time. It was during this time that the scalplings were supposed to have occurred. Even this incident was not caused by cowardice but rather by too much enthusiasm.

It may be that Curtis feared a reprimand about the reported scalplings and, hence, refrained from all mention of the troops except to say that he had ordered Pike and his men to join the other forces. However, from the attitude taken by General Pike it would seem more likely that the General of the Southern army in this battle had little respect for the Indian troops and purposefully ignored any mention of their bravery in this battle. This would be strengthened by the fact that Van Dorn looked upon the Indians as being useful only as scouting parties.³⁶ It is regrettable that Van Dorn felt this way.

It is true that Van Dorn had a superior force and brilliant commanders under him. Also it is true that Pike's forces retreated in every instance only after regular troops had broken and run. Under

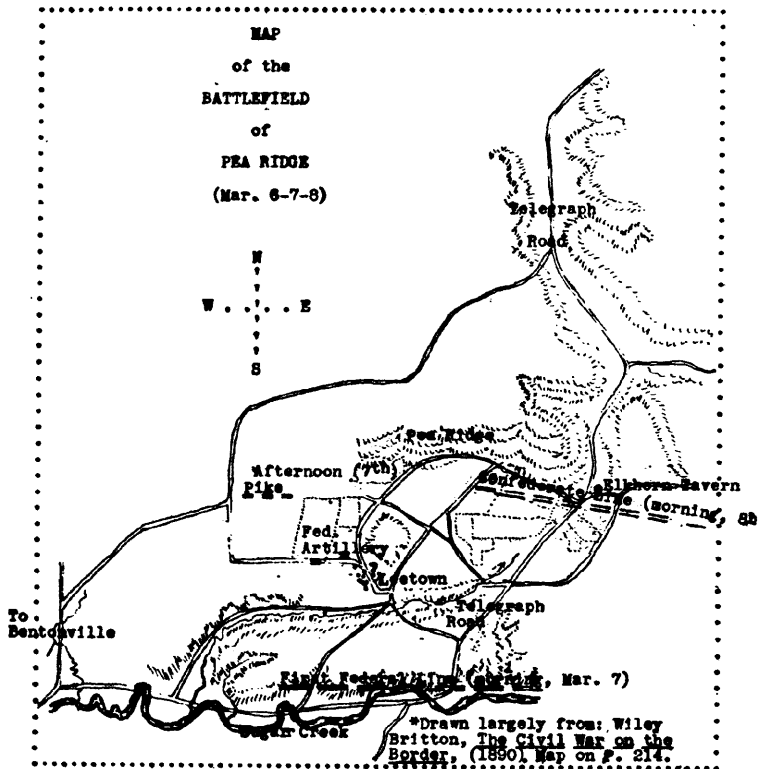
³⁴ From "Ft. Smith Times and Herald," Dec. 15, 1861 (Given in *Storke's History of the Great American Rebellion*, Vol. 1, 570.)

³⁵ Wiley Britton, *The Union Indian Brigade in the Civil War*, *op. cit.*, preface, 9.

³⁶ *Official Records of the Rebellion*, Series 1, Vol. 8, 750.

fire the Indians remained cool and fearless. It is little wonder that Pike was angry when Curtis sent page after page of detailed reports to the Confederate Adjutant with no mention of Pike's men. The Indians could have been very useful but for the early disorganization within McCulloch's command. However, they should have been left in Indian Territory where their methods of warfare would not have been questioned. It is interesting to note in this respect that General Pike admitted that the Indians insisted on the right to fight as they wished.³⁷

This baptism by fire makes a very interesting story and the entire report by Pike should be read by all interested in Oklahoma history and the effects of the Civil War in Oklahoma.



MAP OF THE BATTLE OF PEA RIDGE

³⁷ *Ibid.*, Series 1, Vol. 13, 819.