

THE BATTLE OF BIG DRY WASH: Arizona's Last Great Apache Fight

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THE BATTLE OF BIG DRY WASH

Arizona's Last Great Apache Fight

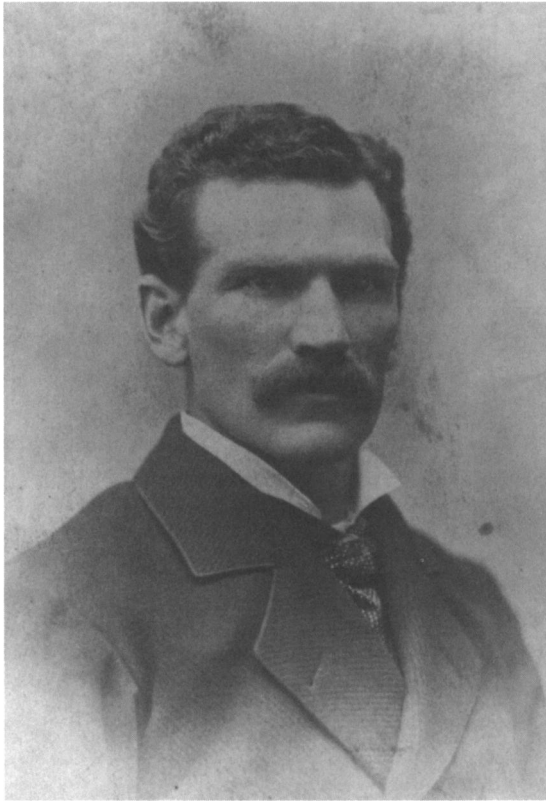
by
Michael R. Meise

ON JULY 17, 1882, two hundred soldiers under Capt. Adna R. Chaffee and Maj. Andrew W. Evans confronted Natiotish and some fifty-four Apache warriors in a "parklike pine forest" on the north side of Clear Creek Canyon about forty-five miles south of present-day Winslow in north-central Arizona. The subsequent fight, known as the battle of Big Dry Wash, lasted nearly two hours and has gone down in history as the last significant action between the regular army and Indians in Arizona Territory. Although the battle's military significance has been obscured by Gen. George Crook's subsequent campaign against Geronimo in Mexico, the battle of Big Dry Wash was a crucial episode in the conquest of *Apachería* and an important turning point in Anglo-Indian relations in the Southwest.

The roots of the Big Dry Wash fight date back to the killing of an obscure Apache medicine man named Nockaydelklinne at Cibecue Creek on August 30, 1881, subsequent Indian dissatisfaction over white encroachment on the San Carlos reservation, alleged corruption on the part of Agent J. C. Tiffany, and rumors that the Apaches would be removed from Arizona. In addition, the San Carlos Apaches also were concerned over the fate of sixty-five Indian prisoners (five of them former Apache scouts) jailed after the Cibecue action.

In April of 1882, a Chiricahua raiding party struck the San Carlos reservation. At Eagle Creek, they met with Natiotish, a heretofore undistinguished warrior, who promised to post guards

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Adna R. Chaffee.
(AHS/SAD #23444)

to warn the raiders against any surprise. The renegades then attacked George Stevens's ranch, killing a dozen people, before moving on to San Carlos, where they killed Albert D. Sterling, chief of the reservation police, and Charles Connell, an agency trader. At this point Loco and 300 of his followers joined the raiders and fled the reservation for the safety of Mexico. Fearing yet another Chiricahua incursion, for a time the Apaches remaining at San Carlos seemed "restless, frightened, and belligerent." Fortunately, a second raid never materialized, and tension on the reservation dissipated.¹

In early summer, though, signs of uneasiness reappeared. During June and early July, Natiotish and his followers, several of whom had been involved in the Cibecue affair, attempted to spark a general uprising by spreading rumors that the whites

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were planning to disarm and then kill the reservation Indians. When the peaceful San Carlos Apaches refused to take the warpath, on July 6 Natiotish and his band opened hostilities by killing J. C. "Cibicue Charley" Colvig and some of his Indian police while they were issuing ration tickets. In the confusion, a loyal Apache turned back two carriages traveling from Globe to San Carlos with the story that everyone at the agency had been killed. The frightened passengers carried news of the massacre back to town. Immediately following the outbreak, Natiotish's warriors, numbering between fifty-four and eighty, paused long enough to strip several hundred feet of telegraph wire that linked San Carlos to Globe. Consequently, it wasn't until the line was repaired the following morning that the alarmed townspeople learned the true state of affairs.²

In the meantime, the Globe *Silver Belt* described how:

The report of the murder of all the whites at San Carlos agency and the sacking of the agency buildings by Indians caused the wildest excitement here and was carried by whip and spur to the uttermost parts of the country. Bells were rung and drums beat in Globe, and persons were seen carrying guns[,] buying cartridges and otherwise preparing for the supposed impending conflict. But happily neither a shot [n]or a funeral note was heard nor a surgeon called to dress a wound. . . . The greatest damage done by the outbreak was freighting the wires with sensational dispatches which have already been read in the various states by at least 25,000,000 of people who swallow them as gospel truth and naturally conclude that hell's broken loose in Arizona.³

The Tucson *Arizona Daily Star* of July 12, 1882, was more to the point when it reported that the renegades numbered "about 25 or 30 men . . . and what they forced to go [with them]." The newspaper added that:

Eight chiefs came to have a talk at the agency last night, including three of the White Mountain chiefs. They said that if this band was not stopped and cleaned out every Indian who had done a bad thing would join them, until finally they would be so strong they would commence killing other Indians, and if some white man would go with them (the chiefs) they would get volunteers out of their own bands and hunt them down.⁴

From the reservation, the renegades proceeded to the Middleton ranch. This was not the first time that Natiotish had visited the ranch. On September 2, 1881, following the Cibecue fight, he had attacked the Middleton place, killing Henry Moody and

George L. Turner, Jr. This time, Captain Lacy, Sheriff W. W. Lowther, and eleven other citizens calling themselves the Globe Rangers set out to battle the renegades and to warn the Middletons and other ranchers of the outbreak.

According to Hattie Middleton Allison's reminiscence, published in 1953, the Rangers left Globe on the evening of July 9 and arrived at the ranch the following morning. Finding no sign of Indians, the party rested and let their horses graze, while Henry and Eugene Middleton, with a man named Grimes, rode out to warn other Pleasant Valley ranchers of the Apache danger. Shortly after they had left, the Indians attacked the Middleton house.

Hattie recalled that:

Captain Lacy . . . called on volunteers to go out and fight the Indians to protect the three men returning from the Valley. One of these volunteers was Frank Middleton. They gained a little hill a few hundred yards from the house . . . [before] they were forced to retreat[,] making their way back to the house. . . . The men fought the Indians several hours trying to save their mounts, but the horses drifted out of range and the men being greatly outnumbered gave up the fight.⁵

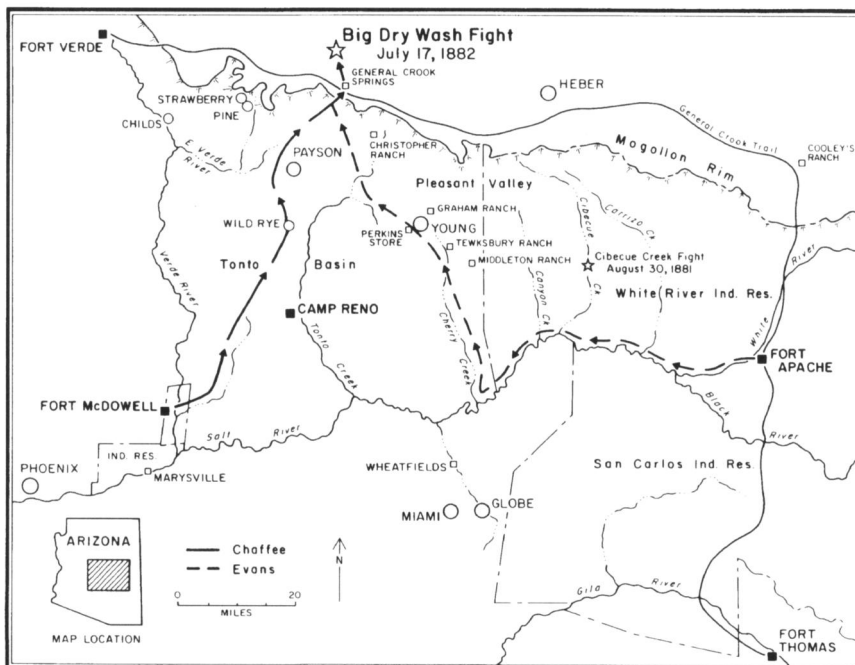
Leaving the Middleton ranch, the Indians circumvented the town of Globe and attacked the small mining community of McMillenville. Luckily the thirty or so residents were warned of the impending raid at about 1 A.M., in time to move the women and children to safety in the Stonewall Jackson mine. Meanwhile, the miners—consisting of “twelve men, three boys, and a Chinaman”—formed a skirmish line at the edge of town. According to the Globe *Silver Belt*, the Indians attacked at daylight and the fight lasted about an hour, “during which time Frank Ross was wounded in the arm.” The newspaper went on to report that “The Indians left McMillan [*sic*] at about 8 o'clock am. . . . Near the mouth of Canyon Creek they attacked Edward Gleason's cattle camp killing him and a Mexican herder.” Gleason was shot four times.⁶

The renegades next entered Pleasant Valley, where they burned Al Rose's house. Fortunately, Rose was away from home but the Indians ran off several of his horses. They then moved on to the Sigsbee brothers' Bar X ranch, west of the valley. Unaware of the Apache outbreak, Will Sigsbee and Louis Houdon, a prospector who had come to the ranch to ask for the brothers' help in developing a gold claim, were killed.⁷

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From the Sigsbee ranch, the raiders continued west to Isadore Christopher's place. Christopher, a Frenchman who was attempting to establish a mining claim, was away at the time. After burning two log houses, the Indians rode on in a westerly direction and camped in the first canyon east of East Verde River.

The next morning, Natiotish and his band struck the John Meadows ranch. Henry Meadows, one of John's sons who was a packer at Fort Verde, had returned home late the previous evening. Unfortunately, because of the late hour and believing that the Indians were still some distance away, he failed to wake the family. At dawn, John Meadows heard the dog barking and, thinking it was alarmed by a bear, grabbed his rifle and went outside. According to Charles, another son, "A shot was fired, [and] Mother saw him running in the direction of the house and heard him moan." Awakened by the noise, two other sons, Henry and John, sprang out of bed and ran outside. The boys called out several times, "but got no answer, only a murderous volley from the Indians, who were lying in a ravine. John's arm was shot through the elbow . . . Henry was shot through the foot." A second volley



broke John's left wrist and struck Henry in the lower abdomen. The pair retreated to safety and barricaded themselves in the house. The Indians, realizing that they could do no more damage, left.⁸

Their next stop was at the Tewksbury home. Although the family was prepared for the attack, the Indians took some of the Tewksbury horses before continuing on to the Stinson ranch, where they ran off some cattle and captured some additional horses. In all, Natiotish and his followers had killed approximately eight people and either captured or ran off over 100 head of horses and cattle.

Following the raid on McMillenville, an alarmed Gen. Orlando B. Willcox, commanding the Department of Arizona, had ordered out military units from five different stations to intercept the Apache raiders and put an end to hostilities. Consisting of nine troops of cavalry from Forts McDowell, Apache, Whipple, and Thomas, it was the largest concentration of army units that Arizona had seen in years. Meanwhile, Willcox's superiors in Washington, tired of his ineptness and mismanagement of Indian affairs in the territory, began making arrangements to send Gen. George Crook to take charge of the situation.

Unaware of this decision by his superiors, Willcox's troops converged on the Tonto Basin. Capt. Adna Romanza Chaffee and Lt. Frank E. West rode out of Fort McDowell at the head of Troop I, Sixth Cavalry, and eight Tonto scouts commanded by Al Seiber, chief of scouts, and 1st Sgt. Mickey Free. Lt. George H. Morgan, Third Cavalry, accompanied the column, along with twenty-six White Mountain Apaches of Company E, Indian Scouts. At the same time, Maj. Andrew W. Evans left Fort Apache with Troop D, Third Cavalry, under Capt. Albert Douglas King and Lt. Franklin Oliver Johnson; Troop E, Third Cavalry, under Capt. Oscar Etting and Lts. Francis Hardie and William Beach; Troop I, Third Cavalry, under Lt. George Leroy Converse, Jr.; Troop I, Sixth Cavalry, under Capt. Adam Kramer and Lt. Thomas Cruse; Troop K, Sixth Cavalry, under Capt. Lemuel A. Abbott and Lt. Frederick Grady Hodgson; and Company B, Indian Scouts, led by Lt. George Allan Dodd. From Fort Whipple, near Prescott, Maj. Julius Mason took to the field with Troop K, Third Cavalry, under Lts. George Chase and Allen Jordan. Capt. George Drew of



*Al Sieber (front row, center), Indian scouts, and visiting dignitary in 1883.
(AHS/SAD #19623)*



George H. Morgan.
(NA #BA-1168)

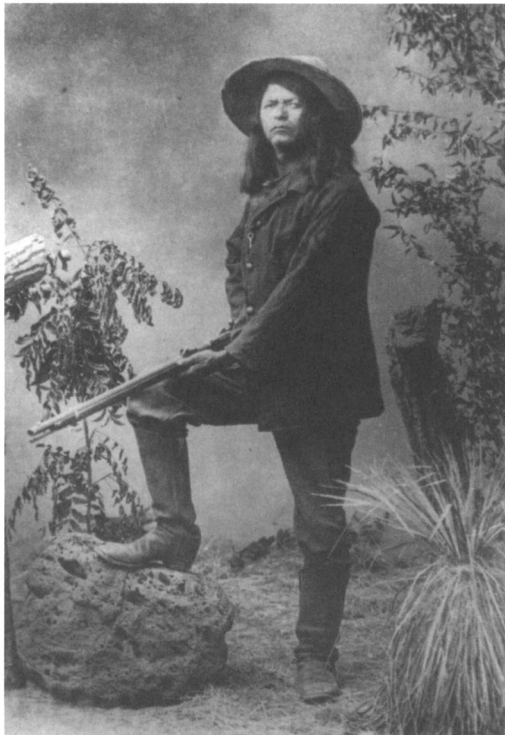
Troop A, Third Cavalry, departed Fort Thomas on the Gila River with a battalion consisting of Troop A, Third Cavalry, under Lt. Charles Morton; Troop C, Third Cavalry, under Lt. James O. McKay; Troop G, Third Cavalry, under Capt. Emmet Crawford and Lt. Parker W. West; and Troop L, Third Cavalry, under Lt. Britton Davis. Finally, two troops of the Third Cavalry from Fort Grant patrolled the vicinity of San Carlos in case Natiotish doubled back to the reservation. In all, thirteen troops of cavalry, consisting of approximately 350 men, two companies of Indian scouts, and 150 fully packed mules with packers concentrated on bringing the renegade Apaches to bay.⁹

Among the two senior officers, Capt. Adna Chaffee had enlisted in the Sixth Cavalry on July 22, 1861, and saw action as a sergeant at the battles of Antietam and Fredericksburg. Commissioned a second lieutenant for gallantry, he earned two brevets for valor at Gettysburg, Beverly Ford, and in Sheridan's raid on Richmond. Posted to Texas and the Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) with the Sixth Cavalry after the war, he was brevetted major for actions against renegade Comanches and to lieutenant colonel for gallantry in leading a cavalry charge over rough terrain. In 1875, Chaffee accompanied his regiment to Arizona, where he served at Forts Verde and McDowell, participated in the

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Victorio campaign, and was assigned briefly as agent on the San Carlos reservation.

A West Point graduate, Maj. Andrew Evans was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Seventh Infantry on March 3, 1855, and was promoted to first lieutenant the following year. He was stationed at Fort Buchanan in southern Arizona with Lt. Col. Pitcairn Morrison's command, and later earned a brevet at the battle of Valverde, New Mexico. In 1864, he became colonel of the First Maryland Cavalry, eventually commanding a brigade and earning a brevet at the battle of Appomattox. Promoted to major, Third Cavalry, as of May 10, 1867, he served with the regiment in Texas and New Mexico, before arriving in Arizona in 1870. In 1876 Evans reported to General Crook in Omaha as inspector general for the Department of the Platte, where he commanded a battalion in the Big Horn and Yellowstone Expedition. In 1882, Evans returned to Arizona as commander of Fort Thomas.



Mickey Free.
(AHS/SAD #19724)

After leaving Fort Apache early on the morning of July 10, Evans's command made a quick march to the lower Cibecue Creek, where it bivouacked until the following morning. During the next two days, Evans traveled over the Verde trail, descended along the north side of the Salt River as far as Cherry Creek, and then proceeded southwest toward the mouth of Canyon Creek. Chaffee, meanwhile, moved toward Wild Rye under orders to pick up the trail of the hostile Indians and then move with Mason's command to McMillenville.

Lieutenant Morgan accompanied Chaffee's command to Wild Rye, where he was ordered to return to Fort Verde to bring up a pack train. Chaffee's movements from this point were guided mainly by reports of Indian outrages; he never joined Mason's column.

While the search for Natiotish's trail continued, lieutenants Morgan and Britton Davis each encountered troubles of their own with the pack trains. According to Davis, the thirty mules that accompanied the Fort Thomas column were in such poor condition that he was detailed to make sure the packers kept up with the command. Trouble began when the pack train entered a creek bottom sprouting reeds and underbrush "higher than a mule's head." "Fifteen minutes after we got into the creek bottom," Davis recalled, "you could not have heard the bells of St. Paul's Cathedral. It seemed to me there were mules scattered all over Central Arizona. They were all lost."¹⁰

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Morgan was experiencing similar problems in bringing the pack train from Fort Verde. Morgan reported that "the worthless civilian train" did not arrive at the post until late in the day, and was delayed in departing until the following noon because the chief packer refused to move until he was satisfied that the packs were in good condition. Consequently, the train only reached Stoneman Grade by nightfall. "The next day," Morgan continued, "we got to Strawberry Valley, thru the terrible Hardscrabble Trail, and my Chief Packer deserted that night. It was understood that he thought he was overworked."¹¹

In the interim, on July 13 Evans joined Captain Drew and the Fort Thomas column on the bank of the Salt River. The following day, the command struck out over such rough terrain that



Britton Davis.
(AHS/SAD #19555)

the pack mules were unable to keep up. Consequently, on the morning of July 15, Evans instructed Drew to wait for his train, while Evans pushed ahead along the trail that led north on the high divide between Canyon and Cherry creeks. In camp that evening near Middleton's ranch, the major dispatched a search party to inspect the deserted house.

On the evening of July 14, the wounded Bob Sigsbee entered the perimeter of Chaffee's camp at Wild Rye and reported the renegades' attack on his ranch. Chaffee, Sieber, and the scouts immediately set out for the headwaters of Tonto Creek. Arriving at the Sigsbee ranch early in the morning, they discovered and buried the bodies of Will Sigsbee and Louis Houdin, both of whom had been "horribly mutilated by the Indians." After breaking camp, Chaffee picked up the Indians' trail above Payson on the East Verde. Pleased that he had discovered Natiotish's whereabouts ahead of the other troops, he turned his column north in pursuit.¹²

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That same day, July 15, Major Evans camped on the north-east branch of Tonto Creek. His scouts had discovered where some of the hostiles had left the main trail and proceeded to the Sigsbee ranch approximately five miles below. Evans picked up Chaffee's trail on the sixteenth, but at first failed to recognize it. Only when a messenger from Chaffee arrived, did Evans realize that the captain was in fact ahead of him. Evans sent the messenger on to Major Mason farther down the creek. Mason immediately pushed ahead Troop H of the Sixth Cavalry and Troop K of the Third.

By this time, the columns were converging on the Upper Tonto Basin from various directions. Evans broke camp on July 16 and passed by Christopher's ranch, where he observed his first evidence of Indian depredations. While the column established camp that evening, scouts reported back with news of a large cavalry encampment ahead. Evans dispatched several officers, who returned with Chaffee and Sieber.



Julius W. Mason.

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According to Lt. Thomas Cruse, Chaffee reported to Evans his belief "that the hostiles are just a little way ahead." He then went on to explain that "Sieber thinks they expect close pursuit and his idea is that they'll stop at General Springs to fight. That's a steep cliff where the trail climbs out of Tonto Basin onto the Crook Road. Sieber feels that they'll expect to cut up even a superior number of troops, because of their position."¹³

Dissension, however, broke out in Evans's command after Chaffee and Sieber left to return to their camp. "The scouts from Fort Apache were not anxious to go on," Lieutenant Morgan recalled, adding that they "had made Colonel Evans believe that the renegades were too far ahead for our forces to overhaul them." At 3:30 A.M. on July 17, Morgan and his White Mountain Apaches left for Chaffee's camp, where they arrived at 6:30, just as the advance units were moving out.

As they moved up the rim, Chaffee's column passed three different sites where the hostiles had camped. At General Springs, packer C. P. Wingfield observed that "the renegades had built a big fire, killed two mules and a horse, and had a barbecue." The ashes were still smoldering as the soldiers passed by.¹⁴

As Chaffee closed in on the renegade band, Morgan's Indian scouts continued to express their unwillingness to proceed further. As Morgan later remembered:

The chase pointed toward the pass over the Rim Rock below the "General Springs" and guarded by our scouts the troop just made the best time it could over the plain trail of the hostile horses. When my scouts, who were by this time joined by the Fort Apache scouts, gained the top of the Rim Rock, they sat down on a log and, influenced I think by the Fort Apache outfit, told me that the enemy was too far ahead, and it was useless to go any further and also that the country ahead was bad medicine and they did not care for it. As we had that day passed three fortified camps, which showed we were making three of the hostile day's journeys in one, this was nonsense of course. But the officer could do nothing with the scouts, although he was nominally in command, and so he turned to Sieber, who could handle them. Sieber, in his abrupt way, started them along pronto.¹⁵

As Chaffee's column moved forward, Sieber and the scouts discovered that the hostiles had thrown up a fortified ambush about 700 yards in advance of the column. As Evans reported, the Indians "were in a strong position across a deep canyon, which on their side, split up into others, while far in the rear there seemed

a level ridge." The canyon's sheer sandstone walls, estimated at anywhere from 200 to 1,000 feet high, presented a barrier to the troops converging on the scene.¹⁶

"And here," according to Lt. Britton Davis, "the hostiles made their fatal mistake." Both Chaffee's Troop I and Converse's Troop E were mounted on white horses. The Indians had been watching Chaffee the previous day and knew exactly the strength of his command. If they saw Converse's troop at all, they mistook his men for stragglers from Chaffee's command. The Indians were totally unaware of the three troops of cavalry following close behind Converse. Moreover, Natiotish seems not to have detected the army's Apache scouts, who had dogged his trail and were about to foil his ambush.¹⁷

The canyon where the renegades were concealed was along the upper course of present-day East Clear Creek, where it turns east from its source on the Mogollon Rim before flowing north to the Little Colorado. Chaffee probably consulted an old map that still showed the stream's original name—Big Dry Fork of the Little Colorado. At least one army observer mistook the canyon for Chevelon Fork, another tributary of the Little Colorado that flows parallel to Clear Creek, twenty-four miles to the east. It is unclear why later writers have described the site of the battle as Big Dry Wash.¹⁸

As Chaffee began to deploy his column, he stuck a note in a forked stick alongside the trail giving the time as 11:25 A.M. and urging Converse to hurry up because Chaffee was "close on the Indians and would strike them soon." After finding the note, Converse passed it to Evans, who instantly ordered Troop I up the trail to Chaffee's aid. Evans then dispatched a courier with a message to the telegraph station at Fort Verde. Uncertain about the meaning of Chaffee's note, Evans wired General Willcox that Chaffee had reported approximately forty-two hostiles, with eighty to one hundred head of livestock, had left General Springs that morning. Evans added, however, that he believed Chaffee was mistaken and that Natiotish's band must be farther ahead.¹⁹

Following behind Converse, Evans soon arrived at Chaffee's position with the remainder of his command—Troops E and K, Sixth Cavalry; Troop D, Third Cavalry; and Lieutenant Dodd's Indians scouts. Chaffee, who was junior to Evans, expected to

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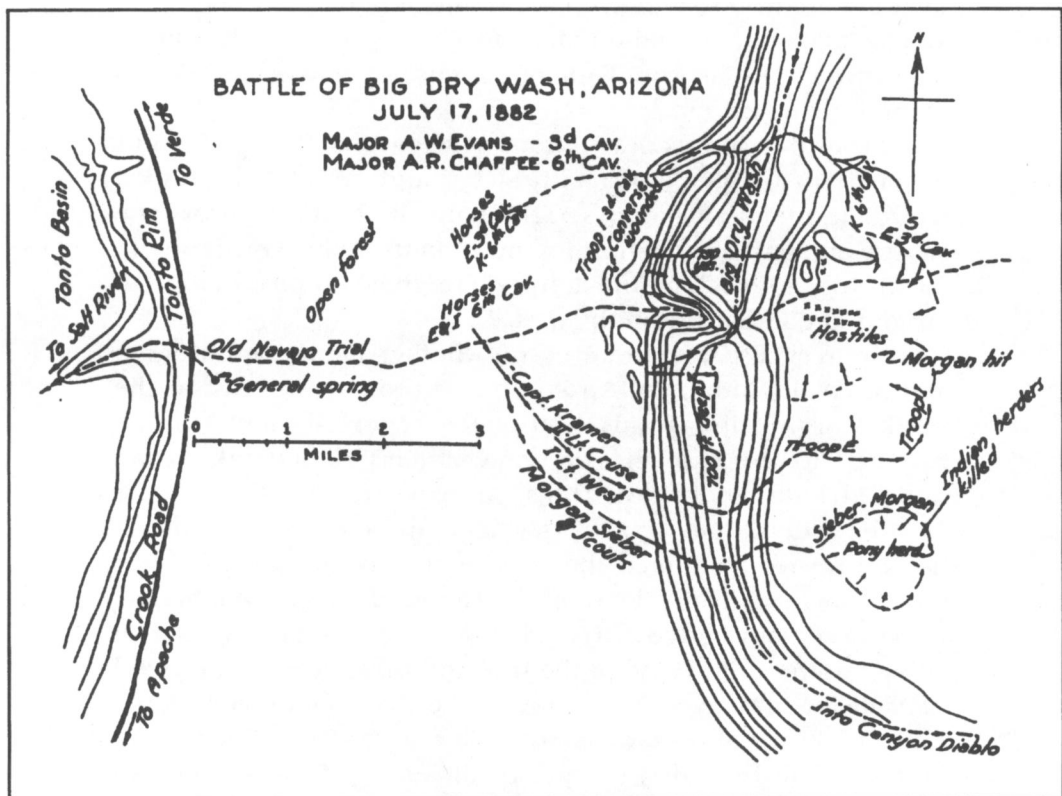
brief the major and then turn over field command. Instead, following the briefing, Evans surprised Chaffee by informing him that since he had found the renegades, he should deploy the troops as he saw fit.

Chaffee reacted quickly. Hoping to exploit the element of surprise, he proposed to keep the soldiers hidden until he could employ maximum firepower all at once. Then, despite the imposing canyon walls, he would attempt to envelop one or both flanks of the Indian position.²⁰

From the various descriptions, it seems that Troops E and I of the Sixth Cavalry, along with Sieber and some of the Indian scouts, moved to Chaffee's right flank in order to cross the canyon and envelop the hostiles' position from the east. Troop K, meanwhile, moved to the left, where they would attempt to envelop the Indians from the west.²¹

Sources disagree, however, on whether Lieutenant Morgan and his White Mountain Apaches moved toward the east or the west. Morgan and Evans both later reported that Morgan marched to the east and toward Chaffee's right flank. In an undated letter to Britton Davis, Morgan recalled that "Major Chaffee ordered me to take a few men and cross the canyon. . . he [Converse] attempted the same move on the left that I was trying on the right." He similarly reported to historian Frank Lockwood that Chaffee "directed me to take eighteen of his men and go down, to the east, of the trail and there cross. . . . I found Al Sieber had arrived. . . . I was not on the south side of the canyon." Evans also pointed out in his report that "Lieutenant Morgan, Third Cavalry, was personally engaged in the fight, in Major Chaffee's line on the right, where Lieutenant Evans was badly wounded."²²

Confusion also arises as to whether Converse stayed on the south side of the rim or attempted to flank the hostiles on the west. Evans stated that "at about the beginning" of Captain Abbott's and Troop K, Sixth Cavalry's movement toward Chaffee's left flank, Converse—"either supposing that he was to join in it, or to cover more the front"—"led Troop I, Third Cavalry, by the left flank, passing down the trail where he was almost immediately struck by a ball." Troop I, now commanded by 1st Sgt. Henry, formed a skirmish line in Chaffee's front.²³



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Evans went on to report that Capt. Albert King and Lt. Franklin Johnson, with Troop D, Third Cavalry, were "sent across the ravine to the left."²⁴

Before Chaffee could complete his deployment, an anxious soldier fired his weapon, alerting the hostiles to the presence of the soldiers and ruining the element of surprise. In the sporadic exchange of gunfire that ensued, Lieutenant Converse was wounded in the head. Oblivious to the extent of his injury, Converse informed Cruse that something was wrong with his eyes, "but it will pass." It did not pass. A .44-caliber slug had split on a rock and a piece of lead had penetrated the lieutenant's eye.

At approximately 3:00 P.M., Chaffee ordered Captain Kramer, Lieutenant Cruse, and Troop E, Third Cavalry; Lieutenant West and Troop I, Third Cavalry; and Sieber with some of the Indian scouts to proceed about a mile to the east, cross the canyon, and then move west toward the center of the hostiles' camp. Soon after, Morgan led some of West's scouts to join the flanking movement. To appreciate the difficulty of traversing the terrain in front of the soldiers, Britton Davis recorded that on the day after the fight it took him forty-five minutes to cross the canyon, and that was without anyone firing at him.²⁵

On the other side of the defile, Sieber's scouts encountered Natiotish's pony herd corralled in an open and level area approximately 800 feet behind and to the east of the hostiles' position. Fortunately, as Sieber approached the herd, the guards' attention was distracted by gunfire on the opposite flank, where Troop K had surprised some hostiles attempting their own flanking movement. Taking advantage of the moment, the scouts opened fire, killed the guards, and herded the horses to safety. Cruse, West, Morgan, and Sieber then continued their assault, moving around the hostiles and swinging in upon them from the right and rear. Simultaneously, on the opposite flank Abbott and Troop K were pushing the renegades back into their own line which was still firing across the canyon.

Confused and in a panic, Natiotish and his followers began moving back to where they had left their pony herd. "It seemed to us that our capture of the herd had roused the Indians to a rush, bent on retaking the ponies," Cruse wrote. "But actually they had no thought of our presence; they only wanted to get

away." With Abbott closing in on the left and Cruse on the right, the Indians began to understand what was happening and sought cover. "We fired into them and saw some fall and others jump to hunt cover behind the pines," Cruse continued. "Shadows were thickening in the forest and it was not easy to see. I had the left flank of our E Troop, at the canyon rim, some two hundred yards in front of what had been the main camp of the hostiles."²⁶

As the fighting progressed, Chaffee grew increasingly excited and shouted encouragement to his men. Packer Tom Horn, who was behind the lines but who talked as though he had been in the thick of the battle, described the captain's manner and the confidence his subordinates placed in him:

Chaffee, in a fight, can beat any man swearing I ever heard. He swears by ear, and by note in a common way, and everything else in a general way. He would swear when his men would miss a good shot, and he would swear when they made a good shot. He swore at himself for not bringing more ammunition, and he would swear at his men for wasting their ammunition and shooting too often. Then an Indian would expose himself, and he would swear and yell: 'Shoot, you damned idiots! What do you suppose I give you ammunition for—to eat?' And his men swore too—they swore by Chaffee and loved him. Sieber and Chaffee had faith in and respect for each other, and they worked together in many actions.²⁷

The gunfire soon began to take its toll. According to C. P. Wingfield, during the thickest part of the fight, "one of Sieber's scouts [evidently Private Pete] saw two of his brothers and his father with the Indians. He threw his gun down and started to run to his folks. Sieber told him to halt. He did not heed him. Sieber raised his rifle and fired shooting him in the back of the head."²⁸

This was Lieutenant Morgan's first big fight with Apaches and he took an active part in the shooting. Although he had won a medal for marksmanship earlier that month, the Indian movements were so quick that he could not be sure that he had hit anyone. When he finally scored a certain hit, Morgan became so excited that he showed himself and was shot in turn. "We thought him sure to die," Cruse said, "but the slug had gone around his ribs and lodged in the back muscles."

Sgt. Daniel Conn of Troop E, Sixth Cavalry, was also wounded. Conn had been ration sergeant at Fort Apache, where he was nicknamed Coche Sergeant, or "Hog Sergeant," because

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pork was a staple of the ration. Some of Natiotish's renegades, who had been scouts at Fort Apache before the Cibecue fight, recognized Conn's voice giving orders and harassed him with shouts of "Aaaaiiah! Coche Sergeant!" An Indian who was well versed in English went further, calling out: "Coward! Hog Sergeant! Come here and I will kill you!" Conn yelled something back and the Indian, firing at the sound of his voice, shot the sergeant through the throat, opening a hole as big as a silver dollar through a size thirteen neck, according to Cruse. As the wounded man dropped, he overheard Captain Kramer observe to 1st Sgt. Tony Hagerup: "I'm afraid they got poor Conn."

Afterward, Conn joked about the incident. "Sure, I heard the Cap'n say I was kilt," he affirmed. "But I knew I was not. I was only *spa-a-achless*!" The bullet had just missed his jugular vein and vertebrae, before passing out the back of his neck.²⁹

Apparently, Al Sieber enjoyed the excitement of battle. Cruse remembered seeing him "kill three of the renegades in quick succession, as they crept toward the edge of the canyon to go over and away from the battle. 'There he goes,' he would grunt at me. With the report of his rifle an Indian I had not seen would suddenly appear, flinging up his arms as if to catch at some support. Then under the momentum of his rush he would plunge forward on his head and roll over and over."³⁰

As the afternoon waned, shadows began to appear and it became more difficult to see the renegades through the darkening forest. From his vantage point about seventy-five yards from the center of the enemy position, Lieutenant Cruse realized that unless they attacked the hostile camp the Indians would escape in the darkness. Disregarding a warning from Sieber, Cruse yelled to his men to advance under cover of fire from Sieber's scouts and Kramer's soldiers. "When we got into the open, I discovered that Sieber had been right," Cruse admitted. Luckily, several of his men were seasoned veterans who could handle themselves in difficult situations, just as long as they had enough ammunition.

At one point during the assault, a renegade Apache suddenly appeared within two yards of Cruse, aimed his rifle, and fired. The Indian was nervous, according to the lieutenant, and jerked as he pulled the trigger, shooting a young private named Joseph

McLernon who was standing on the left and slightly to the rear of Cruse. Cruse shot the Indian and then threw himself to the ground, causing Kramer and Sieber to believe that he had been shot.

Sprawled next to McLernon, Cruse asked the wounded private if he was hurt. "Yes sir," he answered. "Through the arm. I think it's broken." Cruse dragged him, under a hail of fire, to safety. When Kramer's men overran the hostile camp, Cruse secured a Indian blanket to make the soldier more comfortable. Unfortunately, McLernon was more seriously wounded than he realized. The bullet had passed through both lungs and he died within an hour. Cruse received a Medal of Honor for his charge on the Indian camp, and for his rescue of McLernon. Lt. Frank West also was awarded a Medal of Honor for "rallying his command and leading it to the advance against the fortified position of the enemy."³¹

Just as the troops were converging on the Indian camp a raging hailstorm swept over the area. Tom Horn called it "the heaviest hail and rain storm that I ever saw in my life." As he remembered it, "the storm came up suddenly, and it got so very dark that we could not see across the canyon. Then the hail and rain commenced." Although "it was over in twenty minutes," the hailstorm was so intense that the battle was over. It was probably about 6:00 P.M.³²

Natiotish's surviving followers took advantage of the darkness provided by the heavy black clouds to escape. Some made their way back to the reservation. The soldiers, meanwhile, pulled back off the rim and encamped for the night in a canyon west of the battleground. According to Fred W. Croxon, Sr., a long-time forest service employee and student of the battle, "In later years it was known as 'Cracker Box Canyon,' a cracker box having been nailed to a tree."³³

While the battle was still in progress, Major Evans had received a note by messenger from Lt. George Chase who, with Troop H, Third Cavalry, and part of Troop H, Sixth Cavalry, had been pushed ahead from Mason's column. Chase reported that, because he had only one day's ration and no pack train, he would encamp about twenty miles south of Evans's location. If needed, however, he could push ahead and join Evans. Mason, meanwhile, would be stopping at Chaffee's last encampment.



Thomas Cruse.
(AHS/SAD #19620)

Evans immediately sent a note back to Chase informing him of the engagement with Natiotish's band and asking him to hurry up. Traveling over difficult, rocky terrain in the darkness, Chase arrived about midnight, angry that he had missed the fight. Mason and the remainder of his column arrived the next morning.

On the morning of July 18, patrols scoured the battleground, counting the dead and searching for equipment. Although no one really knows how many hostile Indians were actually killed at the battle of Big Dry Wash (estimates range from six to twenty-two), Evans reported fourteen dead bodies. Others may have been concealed among rocks and crevices in the canyon. In addition, the soldiers captured about eighty head of Indian ponies, as well as a variety of utensils and blankets, some 500 metallic cartridges, and canisters of gun powder. According to Cruse, immediately after the fight some "local cowboys" showed up to claim the captured pony herd. Chaffee drove



Adam Kramer

them off, however, when they attempted to claim Chaffee's horse as one of theirs. Sigsbee later retrieved the horses the Indians had stolen from his ranch.³⁴

While on guard duty along the north side of the rim on the night after the battle, Lieutenant Hodgson heard noises as though someone was hurt. The next morning three shots rang out when Hodgson and a detail went out to investigate. Observing the smoke from the rifle, the soldiers discovered a young Apache woman with her baby. The woman was wounded in her thigh and the leg had to be amputated. She endured the operation without a sound. The soldiers then placed her on a mule for the trip back to Fort Apache, where she eventually recovered.

The army's casualties at Big Dry Wash included Lieutenants Converse and Morgan, wounded. Among the non-commissioned officers and enlisted men, 1st Sgt. Charles Taylor of Troop D, Third Cavalry; Sgt. Daniel Conn, Troop E, Sixth Cavalry; and Pvs. John Witt, Timothy Foley, and James Foley of Troop K, Sixth

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Cavalry, were all wounded. Pvt. Pete of Company E Scouts, Third Cavalry, and Pvt. Joseph McLernon of Troop E, Sixth Cavalry, were killed.

Lieutenants Cruse, West, and Morgan, along with 1st Sgt. Taylor, all received the Medal of Honor for their heroic actions during the engagement.

On July 20, the soldiers left the battleground. Major Mason with Troops H and I, Sixth Cavalry, and Troops H and K, Third Cavalry, crossed the canyon and scouted to the north and east. Captain Crawford with Troops C and G, Third Cavalry, escorted the wounded part way to Fort Verde, while the remainder of his command scouted through the Tonto Basin en route back to Fort Thomas. Captain Drew took Troops A and L, Third Cavalry, back to Forts Apache and Thomas by way of Crook's Road, while Evans's column scouted north and east along the branches of the Little Colorado.

It is obvious that the army won a tactical victory at Big Dry Wash. In addition to the fourteen Indian dead versus two soldiers killed, the renegade Apaches were so completely routed that they could not regroup to continue their depredations. Instead, Natiotish and his band slowly returned and blended back into the reservation population.

The battle of Big Dry Wash was, as soldier and historian Will C. Barnes claimed, "the Apaches' last stand in Arizona." The army had broken their will to fight and, in so doing, the government had finally achieved its objective of controlling the hostile Indians in Arizona. Although small bands would periodically break out from the reservation, the era of widespread Indian depredations had ended.

NOTES

1. It is difficult to obtain information about Natiotish, who appears to have been a previously unknown Indian from the San Carlos reservation. Britton Davis, *The Truth About Geronimo* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1929), p. 13; Will C. Barnes, "The Apaches' Last Stand in Arizona," *Arizona Historical Review*, vol. 3 (January 1931), p. 36; and Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1973), p. 376, state that Natiotish was a White Mountain Apache. Frank C. Lockwood, *The Apache Indians* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1938), p. 248, and Thomas Cruse *Apache Days and After* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1941), p. 158, both claim he was a Tonto Apache.
2. See Dan L. Thrapp, *Al Sieber, Chief of Scouts* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964) and Davis, *The Truth About Geronimo*. Colvig received the sobriquet "Cibicue

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Charley" from his attempt to carry a message from Fort Apache to Fort Thomas during the Cibecue battle. The number of renegade Indians said to have left San Carlos varies widely, but most authorities agree it was between fifty-four and sixty. For the purposes of this article, we will assume the number was fifty-four, not including the women and children who accompanied the renegades.

3. *Silver Belt* (Globe), July 8, 1882.
4. *Arizona Daily Star* (Tucson), July 12, 1882.
5. Hattie Middleton Allison, "An Indian Raid," *Arizona Cattlelog*, vol. 9 (November 1953). Britton Davis to Thomas Cruse, "Memorandum of the Fight at Chevelon Fork," p. 5, Charles B. Gatewood Collection, Arizona Historical Society, Tucson, declares that the Globe Rangers "camped for the night, stacked their guns outside the log ranch-house, left two men on guard and went inside for a poker game and celebration. They were well supplied with whiskey. . . . While all were asleep the hostiles stole their guns and ran off with their horses." Cruse answers, "Good. I had forgotten that. Saw some of them [Globe Rangers] after the fight." The reader is given the impression that the military had slight regard for the Globe Rangers, who seemed to have been formed only as an excuse to party. Newspaper accounts, however, seem to support Hattie Allison's remembrances of the Globe Rangers. The *Arizona Daily Star* of July 19, 1882, reported that the Rangers left Saturday night and arrived the following morning. Two of the Middletons and Mr. Grimes left the ranch to warn other citizens and then gave an account similar to Allison's. In the July 8, 1882, issue of the *Silver Belt*, Thelma B. Towle writes "Col. Flandine saw them approaching and said, 'They looked like the rear of Sheridan's army when it came into Richmond.' . . . The Rangers suffered an hilarious ribbing by the citizens of the bar rooms, but actually our citizens approved highly of the Rangers. They took up a collection of \$400 to replace their horses . . . and their boots." It appears that the "drunken party" at the Middletons' ranch was only hearsay that was reported by Thrapp in *The Conquest of Apacheria* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), p. 255.
6. *Silver Belt*, July 15, 1882.
7. Fred W. Croxen, Sr., "Dark Days in Central Arizona," *The Smoke Signal*, no. 34 (Tucson Corral of The Westerners, Fall 1977), says that "Bob Sigsbee heard the shots and knew what they meant. He grabbed a bucket, ran to the spring, and secured a bucket of water. As he went back in the door of his cabin, an Indian arrow whizzed into his shoulder. He slipped and the Indian thought he was dead. This made the Indians careless and Bob was able to kill one as he raised his head. . . . Bob Sigsbee was besieged for three days during which time he killed another Indian . . . the Indians evidently learned that there were troops after them and broke off the siege."
8. Northern Gila County Historical Society, *Rim Country History* (Payson: Rim Country Printery, 1984), p. 154.
9. William H. Carter, *The Life of Lieutenant General Chaffee* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1917), p. 94.
10. Davis, *The Truth About Geronimo*, p. 11.
11. Col. George H. Morgan to Frank C. Lockwood, July 8, 1938, Big Dry Wash file, U.S. Forest Service, Flagstaff.
12. *Arizona Daily Star*, July 26, 1882. Thrapp, *Al Sieber*, p. 248, states his column turned up north, "which was an open book to the scouts."
13. Cruse, *Apache Days and After*, p. 161; Col. George H. Morgan to Britton Davis, n.d., Box 5, Gatewood Collection.
14. C. P. Wingfield to E. G. Miller, August 18, 1929, Big Dry Wash file.
15. Morgan to Davis, n.d.
16. Andrew W. Evans "Report of Major A. W. Evans, 3rd Cavalry, Commanding Fort Apache and Expedition," in *Report of the Secretary of War 1882*, RG 94, National Archives.
17. Davis, *The Truth about Geronimo*, p. 14.

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18. Perhaps there was no water in the stream bed in July of 1882 and the soldiers, uncertain where they were, called the fork—a term implying a living stream—a dry wash, a common localism in arid Arizona.
19. Col. George L. Converse to Britton Davis, n.d., Box 5, Gatewood Collection. Various descriptions have been given of the height of the canyon walls at Big Dry Wash. Both Barnes, "The Apaches' Last Stand in Arizona," p. 40, and Davis, *The Truth about Geronimo*, p. 14, cite Cruse's *Apache Days and After*, p. 164, description, "about one thousand feet deep." James W. Walker, "Battle at Big Dry Wash: Twilight for the Apache Hostiles," *Shariot Hall Gazette*, vol. 8 (February 1981), writes of 800-foot canyon walls. In a letter to Senator Carl Hayden, Fred Platten, a member of H Troop, Sixth Cavalry, states that the walls rise about 300 feet. Fred Platten to Carl Hayden, April 19, 1934, Battle of Big Dry Wash Collection, MS 74, Special Collections, Northern Arizona University Library, Flagstaff. In General Willcox's report to the secretary of war, which is contained in the *Report of the Secretary of War 1882*, he describes the walls to be two or more hundred feet. But whether 200 or 1,000, the canyon walls were a barrier to the units converging at Big Dry Wash.
20. Accounts concerning which direction the consolidated units deployed at the south rim of East Clear Creek vary, except that both Britton Davis, *The Truth About Geronimo*, p. 18, and Will C. Barnes, "The Apaches' Last Stand in Arizona," p. 41, cite Cruse's book, *Apache Days and After*. Their accounts are identical, but not necessarily correct.
21. For troop movements, see Cruse, *Apache Days and After*, pp. 162–65; Barnes, "The Apaches' Last Stand in Arizona," p. 40; Davis, *The Truth About Geronimo*, p. 18; Converse to Davis; Croxen, "Dark Days in Central Arizona," pp. 87–88; Thrapp, *Al Sieber*, p. 251; Walker, "Battle at Big Dry Wash," p. 2; Evans, "Report," pp. 5–7; Paul I. Wellman, *The Indian Wars of the West* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1947), p. 417. Wellman mentions that Troop K, Sixth Cavalry, moved in a westerly direction to flank the hostiles.
22. Morgan to Davis, n.d.; Morgan to Lockwood, n.d.; Evans, "Report," p. 8. Contrary to this, Thrapp, *Al Sieber*, p. 251; Cruse, *Apache Days and After*, p. 163; Barnes, "The Apaches' Last Stand in Arizona," p. 41; and Wellman, *The Indian Wars of the West*, p. 417, all state that Morgan moved west (left). When Cruse later drew a sketch of the battle for Lockwood in 1932, he contradicted himself, depicting Morgan going east with Al Sieber. Immediately following the battle, Evans ordered Cruse to draw a sketch of the battlefield, a fact that adds some credibility to Cruse's 1932 effort, which, we may assume, is fairly accurate.
23. Evans, "Report," pp. 5–6. Morgan to Davis, n.d.; and Converse to Davis, n.d., all support the theory that Converse started a westward enveloping movement. Lockwood, *The Apache Indians*, p. 252, and Walker, "Battle at Big Dry Wash," p. 2, contradict this and both state that Converse remained on the south side and fired across the canyon. Evans's report should resolve the discrepancy.
24. Evans, "Report," p. 8.
25. Thrapp, *Al Sieber*, p. 252, writes that as units went into the canyon on the east side, the defile became so narrow at the bottom that someone gasped and, looking up, everyone saw stars shining in the broad daylight. C. P. Wingfield later commented, "I have been in [East] Clear Creek most all times of the day but never remember seeing stars in the day time." Wingfield to Miller, August 18, 1929.
26. Cruse, *Apache Days and After*, p. 165.
27. Tom Horn, *Life of Tom Horn* (Denver: Louthan Book Co., 1904), pp. 108–109.
28. Wingfield to Miller, August 18, 1929.
29. Cruse, *Apache Days and After*, pp. 166–67.
30. Ibid.
31. Cruse, *Apache Days and After*, p. 163.
32. Horn, *Life of Tom Horn*, p. 111.
33. Croxen, "Dark Days in Central Arizona," p. 90. Although Croxen saw a cracker box nailed to a tree, there is no proof that it was from one of Chaffee's units. Looking at a map and walking the terrain, it is hard to believe that Chaffee would order the units back

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four miles over the difficult area, particularly at night with the chance of units getting lost and especially after these same units had just fought over the rough and difficult terrain at Big Dry Wash. If the cracker box was placed by a unit, more than likely it was placed there by one of Maj. Julius Mason's units, who camped behind Chaffee's units and arrived the next morning.

34. Walker, "Battle at Big Dry Wash," p. 3, lists twenty-two hostile Indians, including Natiotish, killed; the *Silver Belt*, July 22, 1882, reported six, while the *Arizona Daily Star*, July 20, 1882, listed twenty; Lockwood, *The Apache Indians*, p. 254, writes twenty-two; Cruse, *Apache Days and After*, p. 170, reports twenty-two; and Paul I. Wellman, *Death in the Desert, The Fifty Years' War for the Southwest* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1935), p. 418, counts twenty-one. Evans, "Report," p. 8, states fourteen and is presumably the most accurate.

CREDITS—The photographs on pages 30, 34, and 44 are courtesy of the Fort Verde State Historic Park. All other photographs are courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society, Tucson.