

# Battle of Valverde

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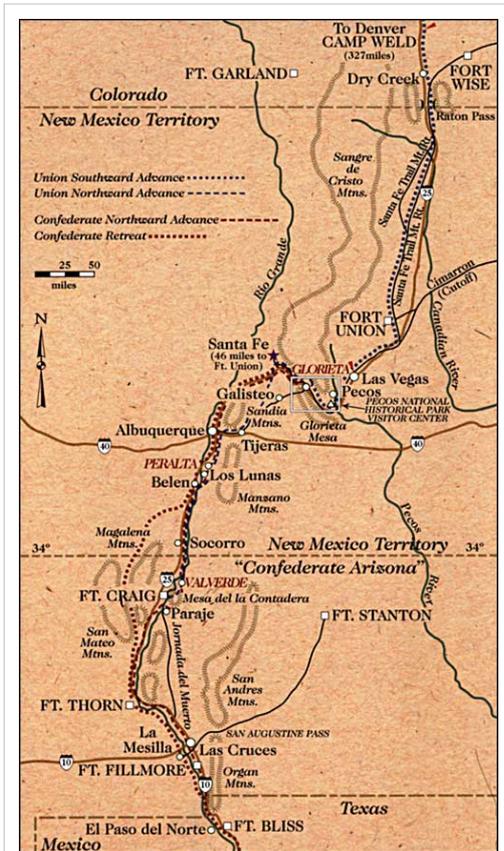
The **Battle of Valverde**, or the **Battle of Valverde Ford** from February 20 to February 21, 1862, was fought near the town of Valverde at a ford of Valverde Creek in Confederate Arizona, in what is today the state of New Mexico. It was a major Confederate success in the New Mexico Campaign of the American Civil War. The belligerents were Confederate cavalry from Texas and several companies of Arizona militia versus U.S. Army regulars and Union militia from northern New Mexico and Colorado.

## Overview

Confederate Brigadier General Henry Hopkins Sibley envisioned that he would invade New Mexico with his army, defeat Union forces, capture the capital city of Santa Fe and then march westward to conquer California and add it to the territory of the Confederacy. Sibley's first step was to gather an army in El Paso, Texas and lead it north along the Rio Grande River with the objective of capturing Fort Craig and the supplies in the fort and defeating the Federal army under Colonel Edward Canby.<sup>[1]</sup> On Jan 3, 1862, Sibley left El Paso with three regiments and one partial regiment of mounted Texans comprising 2,510 officers and men. Fort Craig, 140 miles (225 km) north of El Paso, was the major obstacle in his path. Canby awaited him there with 3,800 men of whom most were infantry. Only 1,200 of Canby's men were seasoned soldiers. The remainder consisted of 2,000 New Mexican volunteers, 100 Colorado volunteers, and 500 militia. Kit Carson commanded the First Regiment of New Mexican volunteers who were almost entirely Hispanics.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Background

Confederate Brigadier General Henry Hopkins Sibley led his brigade to within fifteen miles south of Fort Craig during the evening of February 13. Judging the fort to be too strong to be taken by assault, Sibley deployed his brigade in a line for the next three days, hoping to lure the Federals into the open, but Canby, not trusting his volunteer troops, refused to attack.



Map of the Eastern Arizona and New Mexico campaign<sup>[3]</sup>

As they were down to a few days rations, the Confederates could not wait indefinitely, so at a council of war on the 18th, Sibley ordered the army to cross the Rio Grande and move up the eastern side of the river to the ford near Valverde, six miles north of Fort Craig, hoping to cut Union communications between the fort and their headquarters in Santa Fe.<sup>[4][5]</sup>

By the 20th the Confederate army, under cover of the hills between it and the river, was opposite Fort Craig. [Confederate Col. Thomas] Green attempted to place artillery on the heights overlooking the river and fort, but Canby had anticipated the move forcing the Texans to make a 'dry camp' on the night of the 20th. About midnight, Union Captain James Craydon tried to blow up a few rebel picket posts by sending mules loaded with barrels of fused gunpowder into the Confederate lines, but the faithful old army mules insisted on wandering back toward the Union camp before blowing to bits. Although the only casualties were two mules, the explosions stampeded a herd of Confederate beef cattle and horses into the Union's lines, so depriving Green's troops of some much-needed provisions and horses.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Battle

Next morning, February 21, Sibley sent an advance party consisting of four companies of the 2nd Texas Mounted Rifles under the command of Major Charles Pyron to scout ahead to the Valverde ford, with the 4th Texas Mounted Rifles under Lieutenant Colonel William Read Scurry following close behind. The rest of the brigade remained in camp, intending to follow later.<sup>[7][8]</sup>

Union scouts informed Canby of the Confederate movements towards the north. Canby then sent a mixed force of infantry, cavalry, and artillery to the ford under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin S. Roberts of the 5th New Mexico Infantry. The infantry and artillery slowed the column down, so Roberts sent Major Thomas Duncan ahead with the cavalry to secure the ford. Following Roberts' departure, Canby sent additional reinforcements from the fort's garrison, and assigned several companies of New Mexico volunteers to "watch the movements of the enemy, threaten his flanks and rear, and impede his movements as much as possible."<sup>[9]</sup>

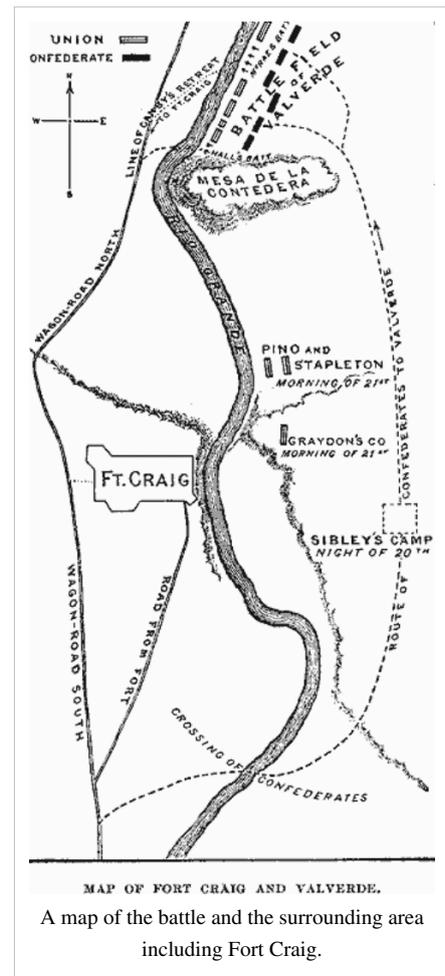
When the Confederates under Pyron arrived at the eastern side of Valverde ford they found that Union forces were already there blocking their passage. Pyron sent for reinforcements from the 4th Texas while his men took cover in an old river bed, which served as an excellent defensive position. At first, despite having a numerical advantage, the Union cavalry deployed in a skirmish line instead of trying to drive the Confederates out of their position. This forced the Union artillery to remain on the western bank of the Rio Grande.<sup>[10]</sup>

When Scurry arrived, he deployed his regiment to Pyron's right, with the regimental artillery on the Confederate left. Although they had gained a numerical superiority, the Confederates were mostly armed with short range shotguns and pistols, which couldn't reach the Union positions three hundred yards away; the Confederate howitzers also couldn't reach the Union artillery on the far bank of the river.<sup>[11]</sup> Meanwhile, Canby ordered most of the remaining garrison at Fort Craig to march to Valverde, leaving behind some militia to guard the fort. When he arrived, Canby moved most of his command, including the artillery, to the eastern bank, leaving the First New Mexico Volunteers under Carson and the Second New Mexico Volunteers under Colonel Miguel Piño on the western bank as a reserve.

By early afternoon, the remainder of the Confederate force, the 5th Texas Mounted Rifles under Colonel Tom Green and a battalion of the 7th Texas Mounted Rifles under Lieutenant Colonel John Sutton, arrived at the battlefield, much in need of water and denied access to the river by the defending Union forces. Sibley, who during the morning had remained with the wagons, relinquished command of the brigade and Green took over, who then handed command of the 5th Texas over to Major Samuel Lockridge. Around 2:00 pm, Green authorized a lancer company to attempt a charge on what they thought was an inexperienced New Mexico company on the Union extreme right; however, the Union soldiers turned out to be a Colorado company which was able to defeat the charge without breaking. Twenty of the lancers were killed and wounded during the charge, with almost all of the horses disabled or killed as well. When it returned to the Confederate line, the lancer company rearmed itself with pistols and shotguns and continued fighting in the battle.<sup>[12]</sup> This was the first and last lancer charge of the American civil war.<sup>[13]</sup>

By 4 p.m., the Union appeared to have the advantage in the battle. Canby decided that a massive frontal assault would fail and instead decided to attack the Confederate left; to do so, he ordered one of his batteries on his right to redeploy closer to the Confederate line and moved several companies to his right, including Carson's First New Mexico Regiment which crossed the river and took its place in line. However, this repositioning of the troops weakened the center of the Union line and the battery on Canby's left.<sup>[14]</sup> Hoping to stall the Union attack, Green ordered Major Henry Raguet to attack the Union right with his battalion; this attack was repulsed by frontal fire and a flank attack from the 1st New Mexico, and the Union right advanced after the retreating Confederates.<sup>[15]</sup>

At this time, Green ordered the Confederate right wing under the command of Scurry to charge the Union center and the battery on its left; the attack force of 750 men was arranged into three successive waves.<sup>[16]</sup> Nor the least of the motivation of the Confederates was their desperate need for water which could only be reached by dislodging the Union troops blocking their access to the Rio Grande. The shock of the Confederate charge caused over half of the battery's supporting force to rout; Lockridge was mortally wounded during the attack. The Federals countered with a cavalry charge, but the main Confederate force continued to press their assault on Canby's left flank, capturing six artillery pieces and breaking the Union battle line, which soon turned into a panic-stricken retreat of both regular troops and New Mexico volunteers.<sup>[17]</sup> Sibley was about to order another attack, when Canby sent a white flag asking for a truce to remove the bodies of the dead and wounded, to which Sibley gentlemanly agreed. Canby managed to reorganize his men, minus about 200 deserters from among the New Mexico volunteers, and ordered a retreat back to Fort Craig leaving the road northward toward Santa Fe open to the Confederates.



## Aftermath

Left in possession of the battlefield, the Confederates claimed victory but had suffered heavy casualties, losing 230 men killed and wounded out of 2,590 men engaged, about nine percent. Although some accounts say only about 150 Confederates were wounded and none killed while the Union sustained about 80 dead and 150 wounded. Others say 46 rebels were killed and just over 150 wounded and the Union suffered at least 500 dead and wounded.<sup>[1]</sup> Canby reported that his forces had 3 officers and 65 men killed/3 officers and 157 men wounded/1 officer and 35 men missing for a total of 263 <sup>[18]</sup> Sibley claimed his losses at about 40 killed and about 100 wounded<sup>[19]</sup> Due to the strength of the fort's walls, Sibley decided to abandon his attempt to capture the fort and instead continued northwards towards Albuquerque and Santa Fe, where he hoped to capture much needed supplies. However, he was severely hampered by the losses in horses and mules from the battle, which forced him to dismount the 4th Texas as infantry and to destroy some supplies and wagons.<sup>[20]</sup>

Canby had also lost heavily during the battle, suffering a 17 percent casualty rate, including deserters, of 475 men out of 2,800 men engaged.<sup>[21]</sup> Considering himself to be outnumbered, he chose not to pursue Sibley, instead sending mounted detachments of New Mexico volunteers against the Confederates' rear for harassment. He would remain with the main body at Fort Craig to cut off the Confederates' supply line and to intercept reinforcements for Sibley, eventually hoping to pin the main Confederate main body between himself and Union reinforcements from Fort Union.<sup>[22]</sup>

Neither Sibley nor Canby received high marks for their generalship during the battle. Sibley was indisposed by alcohol and illness and spent most of the day riding in an ambulance. Col. Green was the defacto commander and it was his aggressive attack on Canby's center and left that won the battle. Canby blamed the New Mexican volunteers for his loss but his decision to reinforce his right while weakening his center and left was the real cause of the Union defeat.<sup>[23]</sup> On Canby's right wing, Kit Carson's regiment of New Mexican volunteers saw only limited action but comported itself well. The volunteers were advancing and thought they were winning the battle. They were incredulous when Canby gave the order to retreat.<sup>[24]</sup>

The battle represented Canby's low point in his military career and Sibley's high point. Both men would go opposite directions to the terms of reputation after the battle. It was rumored following the battle that the two commanders of these battles, Canby and Sibley, who had been allies and trained together earlier, might have actually been brothers-in-law. However, research showed that there is little if any evidence that they were related by marriage.<sup>[25][26]</sup>

## Notes

[1] Foote, Shelby *The Civil War: A Narrative: Fort Sumpter to Perryville*, p 294

[2] Edrington, Thomas S. and Taylor, John. *The Battle of Glorietta Pass* Albuquerque: U of NM Press, 1998, pp.13-17

[3] Frazier 1995, p. 150.

[4] Frazier 1995, pp. 152–153.

[5] Taylor 1995, p. 31.

[6] Kerby 1958,1995, pp. 66–67.

[7] Taylor 1995, pp. 40–42.

[8] Frazier 1995, p. 156.

[9] Whitlock 2006, pp. 113–115.

[10] Taylor 1995, p. 46.

[11] Frazier 1995, p. 163.

[12] Taylor 1995, pp. 67–70.

[13] Edrington and Taylor, p. 21

[14] Whitlock 2006, p. 130.

[15] Frazier 1995, pp. 173–174.

[16] Taylor 1995, p. 84.

[17] Taylor 1995, p. 92.

- [18] Official Records of the War of the Rebellion .p.493 (<http://books.google.com/books?id=hKx3AAAAMAAJ&pg=PA631&dq=1st+New+Mexico+Volunteers&lr=&cd=4#v=onepage&q=1st+New+Mexico+Volunteers&f=false>)
- [19] Official records of the war of the Rebellion.p.506 A breakdown of losses show them to have been 36 killed/150 wounded/1 missing ibid.p.521 (<http://books.google.com/books?id=hKx3AAAAMAAJ&pg=PA631&dq=1st+New+Mexico+Volunteers&lr=&cd=4#v=onepage&q=1st+New+Mexico+Volunteers&f=false>)
- [20] Frazier 1995, p. 182.
- [21] Taylor 1995, p. 104.
- [22] Josephy 1991, p. 74.
- [23] Taylor 1995, p. 114.
- [24] Sides, Hampton. *Blood and Thunder.* " New York: Doubleday, 2006, pp. 289-292
- [25] Taylor 1995, p. 100.
- [26] Whitlock 2006, pp. 147–148.

## References

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- Taylor, John (1995), *Bloody Valverde: A Civil War Battle on the Rio Grande, February 21, 1862*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, ISBN 0-8263-1632-8
- Whitlock, Flint (2006), *Distant Bugles, Distant Drums: The Union Response to the Confederate Invasion of New Mexico*, Boulder, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, ISBN 0-87081-835-X

## External links

- National Park Service battle summary (<http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/abpp/battles/nm001.htm>)
- Fort Craig National Historic Site ([http://www.blm.gov/nm/st/en/prog/recreation/socorro/fort\\_craig.html](http://www.blm.gov/nm/st/en/prog/recreation/socorro/fort_craig.html))
- Civil War Today: Fort Craig and the Battle of Valverde (<http://civilwartoday.net/valverde.aspx>)
- VALVERDE, NEW MEXICO, 20 February 1862 (Sibley's New Mexico Campaign) or Fort Craig, OR - Series I, Volume IX, Chapter XXI, Pg 482 ([http://www.fortunecity.com/victorian/pottery/1080/valverde\\_nm\\_20feb62.htm](http://www.fortunecity.com/victorian/pottery/1080/valverde_nm_20feb62.htm))

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