

**CALIFORNIA MILITARY DEPARTMENT HISTORY PROGRAM
2814 B Street
Sacramento, CA 95816**

Nation Building on the Frontier:

The US Army at Fort Tejon

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Scanned 9 October 2018

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A mounted Private of the United States Dragoons sits astride his horse behind a Lieutenant of the United States Infantry while a column of infantry marches by somewhere in the West during the war with Mexico in 1847. By H. Charles McBarron, The Company of Military Historians.

The story of America's frontier army at Fort Tejon is a little known and largely ignored part of California's history that is often squeezed in between the histories of "Gold Rush" and the building of the Transcontinental Railroad, yet these soldiers served to secure a vast part of the continent that had rarely seen stability and peace. The American Soldier and his mostly West Point educated and trained officers ¹were thrust into the position of frontiersmen, trailblazers, policemen and guardians in Army Blue ².

Many of these soldiers found themselves stationed at frontier garrisons like the Army post of Fort Tejon which was located in the mountains between the San Joaquin Valley and the Los Angeles basin of California. The new post of Fort Tejon over saw and nurtured the development of what would

become the vibrant and energetic State of California. In little more than a decade the soldiers and officers there created roads³, telegraph lines⁴, chased bandits, enforced the law⁵, guarded transportation routes and immigrant trails, investigated crimes and were accused of committed them, punished and segregated Native Americans, and feed and protected them.⁶



The United State Army established Fort Tejon, California on August 10, 1854 on *Cañada de los Uvas* or Grapevine Creek, 17 miles from the originally intended location on Tejon Creek. (House of Representatives 1858) Army Major James L. Donaldson, Acting Assistant Quartermaster selected the site for the new Fort at its present location because of the ready availability of water, fuel and forage.⁷ Originally called *Camp Cañada de Las Uvas* for the wild grapes in the area, it was officially christened *Fort Tejon*, (*Tejon* meaning Badger in Spanish), over the objection of Brevet Lt. Col. Benjamin L. Beall, 1st Regiment US Dragoons, who suggested "Fort Le Beck," after a trapper who had been killed by a bear adjacent to the parade ground.⁸

The initial impetus for the establishment of the garrison at Fort Tejon was to protect and control the Indians at the Sebastian Indian Reservation created just a year prior, and to control the major north-south road through Grapevine Canyon.⁹ Fort Tejon was built to accommodate a Headquarters and Band along with two companies of Dragoons, which in 1854 consisted of 86 Officers and Enlisted men each. The Dragoons were the mounted branch of the Army, that is, these soldiers rode horses responsible for providing military commanders a light, fast moving force capable of scouting, reconnoitering, screening, and to use its superior mobility to out maneuver and rapidly engage the enemy in combat.¹⁰ During the first half of the nineteenth century the US Army was comprised of three main combat branches, Infantry, Artillery and Dragoons. Later during the Civil War, pursuant to the War Department's General Order 55, the Dragoons would be reorganized along with the rest of the mounted regiments and renamed the 1st Regiment of Cavalry.¹¹

During the ten years that the Army maintained Fort Tejon it was home to companies and detachments of all three service branches of the Army. From 1854 to 1861 various companies of the 1st Regiment United States (US) Dragoons garrisoned the post. Briefly from late 1857 to 1858 a detachment of the 3rd Artillery from their post in San Diego, serving as infantry were stationed at the Fort. In December, 1856, the regimental headquarters and band of the 1st US Dragoons was moved from Fort Union, New Mexico Territory to Fort Tejon.¹² On June 15, 1861 the U.S. Army left Fort Tejon as it marched off to fight in the Civil War, thus temporarily closing the post.

As the impending secessionist crisis plunged the Nation deeper into all-out war, the rapidly expanding war effort and the urgent need for troops in the eastern United States forced the government to recall the Army to the new seat of hostilities as fast as possible.¹³ This need for troops in the East along with a growing fear of pro-secessionist activities in the Los Angeles and San Bernardino areas, forced the transfer of Fort Tejon's regular army garrison to the Los Angeles area in preparation for embarkation to the eastern United States by ship, in 1862.¹⁴ For the next two years Fort Tejon would sit idle. A small detachment of soldiers was stationed at the almost deserted post to keep guard on the post and prevent what public property remained from be stolen or looted. It is unclear how long this small guard force over watched the post.

With open hostilities already commencing between pro-secessionist and U.S. Army and Naval forces, the War Department began the rapid enrollment of State forces already organized as militia and the recruitment and mobilization of millions of men into new military organizations that would be recruited and lead from local communities in all the States. These troops were designated "Volunteers" and designated by State. The War Department would request each state's governor to provide a varied quota of troops and specificity of how many of each of the combat branches to be raised, with infantry regiments being the vast majority.

In July 24, 1861, California was asked to provide one regiment of infantry and five companies of cavalry to guard the overland mail.¹⁵ A second request for California volunteers was sent on August 14, 1861. This request was responsible for the 2nd through 5th Infantry, and the 2nd Cavalry Regiments. In 1863, and again in 1864, further calls produced three more infantry regiments, and a battalion of native (Californios) cavalry from the Santa Barbara and



Private H Julius Woltersdorf, Company K, 1st United States Dragoons

Los Angeles areas. All total, California provided 17,500 troops for the Union, more troops per capita than any other state.¹⁶

In July 24, 1863, the dry overgrown parade ground at Fort Tejon would feel the footsteps of marching troops. Troops from several companies of California Volunteers would garrison the post. These citizen soldiers would be led by Companies D and E of the 2nd California Cavalry under the command of Capt. James M. Ropes.¹⁷ These soldiers reactivated Fort Tejon and bringing with them approximately 300 Paiute Indians as prisoners.¹⁸



*An Impromptu Band of the 2nd Infantry,
From Los Tulares. Courtesy H. Schutt and W.R. Parker.*

The 2nd California Cavalry had forcibly marched from the Owens Valley to the Sebastian Indian Reservation approximately 1000 Indian prisoners, with a third of them being sent to Fort Tejon. The Indians were kept in a camp down the Grapevine Canyon from the Fort called the "Pot Holes."¹⁹ Later, the garrison provided the Paiutes with a meager ration to keep them in place and to keep them from starving (which the Volunteers were not supposed to do; the new post commander of Fort Tejon, Capt. Schmidt satisfied headquarters by deeming the rations for "Prisoners of War").²⁰

On January 15th and 16th 1864 two infantry companies of California Volunteers relieved the two companies of Cavalry and settled into their new home.²¹ Their time was occupied at repairing and maintaining the Fort's buildings that had fallen into disrepair during the two years that the post had been closed. There were frequent patrols mounted from the Fort to keep track of unruly white settlers in the area and to maintain control over the Paiutes encamped nearby. There were always duties to perform in

the garrison relating to the maintenance of the Fort. There was wood to be hauled and cut, rations to be prepared, inspections and endless drills on the parade ground. In short, "Army Life."

In contrast to the Regular Army soldiers stationed at Fort Tejon and who were subjected to strict and sometime draconian regulations and punishment meted out by equally harsh military courts and councils, the Volunteers truly considered themselves "Citizen Soldiers" and felt that their interests were invested in the cause to preserve the Union and their own duties and position in the Army. One of those soldiers, a private in Company G, 2nd Infantry, California Volunteers and former member of the State Assembly, George E. Young wrote in the Journal of Company G, California Volunteers the following:

"And this military force with the men of arms gathering rank on rank is composed of Citizen Soldiers – men who but a short while since were our resident citizens moving around in our very midst and peacefully framing the various quiet avocations of private life."²²

To many a Volunteer, his enlistment was more of a contract and in many cases these men elected their Officers and Non-commission Officers from among their own ranks. In some ways they were an "Army of Equals." For many the idea of an Officer usurping privileges and benefits due only by their wartime rank and not merit was considered repugnant and a violation of the Citizen Soldier ideal. Despite the low morale of some soldiers when it came to their leadership, Private Young described the Fort Tejon environment thusly:

"We are now in what are called "winter Quarters" – But with deep blue sky bending over our heads as clear cloudless and mild as that of a may day (sic) morning. Just elevated enough to be clear of the dry parching airs of the plains and desert arid not of such altitude as to feel the chilling winds from off the snows of the loftier mountains – a spot more romantic – a climate more salubrious can scarcely be fancied – the thousand ravines about us covered with chapparal (sic) cactus and prickly pear – the hills filled with Deer Elk and Bear while numerous little mountain lakes are alive with Duck Geese & Brant - These furnish hunting parties rewards for their travels while larger herds of Cattle that roam over the plains many of which are wild become the spoils for "good shots" when "foraging" is resorted to – to keep good the reputation of the kitchen –"²³

For some Volunteer soldiers used to the freedoms of civilian life, soldiering at Fort Tejon was less than satisfying. 1st. Sgt. Curtis Greenleaf, Co. G, complained that Fort Tejon was worthless because the local town was devoid of a whorehouse.²⁴ Of some intrigue, however, Pvt. James Anderson of Co. B, was murdered one evening while returning from a night out in town. The investigation turned up one James Conrad, Co. G, as a suspect, but the subsequent court-martial could not confirm guilt.²⁵ The Volunteer soldiers assigned to Fort Tejon considered themselves as citizens and resented the fact that they were forced to perform manual labor, they felt some of their officers had gained authority through political connections and used their position to enrich themselves at the expense of the common soldier.

A Fort Tejon soldier, under the pen name "Veritas" (possibly Private George E Young,) wrote to the "The Delta" newspaper in Visalia, California on May 16, 1864 with this to say on the relations between the officers and enlisted men:

"As regards the garrison here, I cannot do otherwise than state that matters are about as bad as they well can be, though I must positively deny that it is in a state of mutiny; as this is certainly not the case. Most of the soldiers here have at present only three or four months to serve, and they have determined to bear every imposition, rather than run the risk of forfeiting their hard-earned pay and bounty or leaving the service with apparent dishonor.

The present officers of this battalion always have been bad enough, God knows, but for the last month or two they have been worse than ever before. I cannot account for this state of things otherwise than that they are endeavoring to get revenge upon the men for their refusal to re-enlist, which they did to a man, simply because they did not like their officers, and could not by re-enlisting either indorse their past acts or consent to serve under them any longer. In speaking of officers I do not intend to include the Doctor here, as he longs, I believe to the 2d Cavalry, and in common with most officers of that favored regiment, is every inch a gentleman and a soldier, but I intend simply to confine my remarks the present Commander of the Post, and Lieutenant Hill. Of the quality of the latter you can judge something yourself as you say that he did you the honor of letting you have a peep at his phiz, and when I tell you the other is more than twice as mean a man as *he* dare be, you will have a pretty good idea of the two men in question. Governor Downey in appointing these men, in common with many other officers of this regiment who have already been expelled the service, must have intended to spite the people for refusing to re-elect him to office, and the volunteers for enlisting in the cause of the Union."

But you requested me to state some of the principle causes of complaint, which I will now do. Soon after the enrolling officer was here, finding that none of the men would re-enlist, Capt. Schmidt was heard to say that he would "put them through." How well he has kept his word you can judge by what follows. He commenced by increasing the fatigue to eight hours a day, and then put the whole garrison on fatigue and daily duty, and besides their hard fatigue duties they were compelled to stand their regular guard with only two and three nights in bed. The work consisted of moving adobe buildings, digging ditches, sweeping in about the enclosure of the barracks and building fences. It has been pretty severe on the men as they had supposed until now that they had enlisted as soldiers and not as hirelings to work for \$13 in greenbacks per month, fencing and improving land for a grant-holder who is well known to be of rebel proclivities though he has, I believe, two or three times taken the oath.²⁷

After enduring the monotonies and manual labor of serving garrison duty and dealing with low morale, the Volunteer soldiers at Fort Tejon would finally march away to other posts and duties. The two Infantry Companies would leave for Southern California and the large and growing logistics base at Drum Barracks in Wilmington, California. On June 4th 1864 Company G, 2nd Infantry, would march for Drum Barracks followed by Company B, 2nd Infantry on September 11, 1864, ending the last period of military occupation of the Post.²⁸

From the Regular Army to the citizen soldiers of the Volunteers, the men that garrisoned Fort Tejon anticipated and trained to fight a similarly trained and equipped opposing army as the U.S. Army had in Mexico only six years prior to the establishment of Fort Tejon.²⁹, however these soldiers patrolled a vast frontier often finding themselves enforcing civil law between competing claims and interests from many different groups. Fort Tejon's soldiers would ultimately find themselves fighting battles against a harsh and sometimes austere environment, boredom, and themselves. The soldiers and garrison of Fort Tejon were a very visible and active manifestation of the national will to create order and enforce the United States' claim to new territories while ensuring American interests and security.

Notes

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