

# A Most Curious Corps

by Michael K. Sorenson



*Above: A member of the legendary southwestern “Camel Corps” stands at ease at the Drum Barracks military facility, near California’s San Pedro harbor. Photo courtesy of the Drum Barracks Garrison & Society.*

**T**he ungainly pack train slowly made its way across the horizon. Union teamsters occasionally muttered encouragement to the pack animals in the line, intent on covering several miles that day. It was 1862 and the Civil War was in full swing.

But the territory was not the Shenandoah Valley, or the byroads of Northern Arkansas. It was the desert wilderness of the American Southwest. The road was one of the unmarked trails of the California desert that connected Drum Barracks, Fort Mojave and Fort Tejon. And the animals were not Army mules, but camels.

The strange experiment of the U. S. Camel Corps was spawned in 1855 by Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis. His emissary, Army Major H. C. Wayne completed a brief fact-finding mission overseas, and then set sail from the North African coast on the Federal cargo ship, USS Supply, bound for Indianola, Texas. His valuable cargo was 32 government camels accompanied by three Arabs and two Turks who were to act as drovers. The unlikely payload arrived in Texas with an unexpected bonus, a calf that was born during the Atlantic crossing.

Major Wayne was anxious to put his

dromedary line into action, to display the enormous carrying capacity and stamina of his camels. He knew they would outpack a mule, could walk for miles without water, and were content to graze on almost anything.

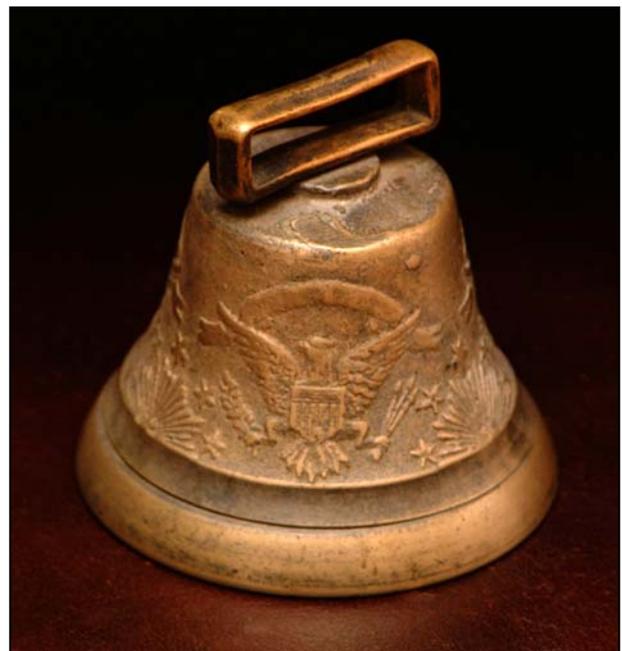
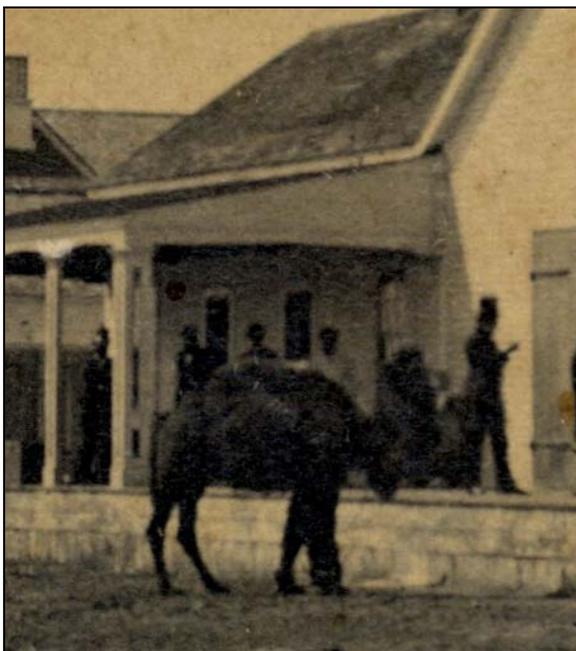
On May 13, 1856 the odd camel line departed for the interior, making the trek toward its first base of operations, Valverde Ford along the Rio Grande, later known as Camp Verde. The procession stopped briefly near Victoria, where the animals were shorn.

A nearby resident, Mary A. Shirkey, spun some of the mangy wool and knitted a gift for the president of the United States, a pair of camel-pile socks.

The Valverde contingent was soon joined by additional camels, as more were imported and others were born to the local herds. For the next seven years, these humpbacked creatures made their ungainly way back and forth across the southwestern deserts of New Mexico, Arizona and

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**Below left;** *A close-up of a U.S. Army camel at Drum Barracks, California during the Civil War. The camel is a one-humped Arabian camel (also called a Dromedary), native to the Middle East, as opposed to a two-humped Asian variety known as a Bactrain. This is the only image known to exist documenting the presence of camels in the U. S. Military. The carte de visite, of which there are two known copies, is attributed to photographer Rudolph D'Heureuse. In 1863, D'Heureuse, a Frenchman, published a series of 41 images entitled "the Photographic Views of the Mohave Route, el Dorado Canyon and Fort Mohave." An identical image to that above is held along with others of D'Heureuse's 41 views by the Bancroft Library at the University of California Berkeley. The French artist made his image studies while accompanying the California Survey Expedition in 1863. the image was made sometime prior to November 1863 when the camels were taken to Benicia Barracks and placed on auction. (CDV courtesy Drum Barracks Garrison Society).* **Below right;** *A bell purportedly used on camels in Army service during the 1850's and '60's. There has long been two schools of thought over the origin and use of these bells, some believing them to be "camel" bells; others discounting the idea altogether. That a small number of specimens exist n museum and private collections in the Western United States, seems to lend some credence to the claim that these bells were used on camels.(Mike Sorenson collection.)*



California, surveying wagon roads, transporting supplies and dispatches, and scouting for the armed forces. For a time, many were assigned to Drum Barracks, the California military headquarters near the port at San Pedro. The above photograph is one of the only surviving images that document the presence of these camels, as seen here outside the Drum Barracks warehouses at the Government Depot at Wilmington, California.

By the beginning of the Civil War, enthusiasm for the Camel Corps was waning, but not due to any lack of performance by the camels, who proved to be excellent transport animals. Rather, it was the nature of the camels themselves, their grouchy demeanor and the overpowering smell that always marked their presence around camp. Furthermore, the camels frightened dogs and stampeded horses, and were not liked by their handlers, who were accustomed to more submissive mules. The plan to utilize camels as a courier line from Drum Barracks to Fort Mojave and other outposts proved less than successful, and they were soon ordered sold by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. The Barracks' camels were

removed to Benicia Arsenal in late 1863 for public auction, with other outlying contingents soon following suit. The odd experiment had officially come to a close in California.

Some of the camels were sold to private teamsters for use in salt pack trains. Others were simply turned loose in the desert. A few returned to Texas after their capture by the Confederate spy, Bethel Coopwood, who forwarded them to the Confederacy, accompanied by two confused Egyptian drovers. One rebel camel, affectionately dubbed "Old Douglas" found its way to the infantry command of Sterling Price, who used the novel creature to carry company baggage until it was shot by an astonished Union skirmisher at Vicksburg.

In the years following the Civil War, folklore arose concerning these animal veterans who had been released into the desert to fend for themselves. Although the last authenticated camel sighting took place around the turn of the century, there are some who claim that the beasts still wander remote desert areas, even today.

#### **Sources and suggested reading:**

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