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Rangers of the Cherokee War

By Stephen L Moore

Although the East Texas Cherokee War does not quickly come to mind as a major Ranger engagement, it was certainly among the deadliest. The Texas Rangers suffered more casualties than they did at the Stone Houses battle, Plum Creek, Uvalde Canyon, or Bird's Creek.

Among the Ranger companies participating were Captain James Edward Box's Houston County Rangers, Captain Greenberry Harrison's Mounted Riflemen, Captain Henry Madison Smith's Nacogdoches County Rangers, Captain Solomon Adams' Houston County Mounted Rangers, and Captain Alexander Jordan's Nacogdoches County Mounted Rangers, and Captain John L. Lynch's six-man spy unit that was attached to the First Regiment of Infantry. Under Lieutenant Colonel Devereaux Jerome Woodlief were two other volunteer Ranging companies under Captain Mark Lewis and James P. Ownby. In addition, Burleson's close friend Chief Placido led twenty-four of his Tonkawa braves as a small scouting company.

The Rangers operating with Colonel Burleson were part of a mounted rifleman bat-talion that had been recruited by Colonel Henry Karnes and Lt. Colonel Devereaux Woodlief. On June 24, 1839, Karnes had advertised for more volunteers, stating that he had been authorized by the president to raise four to six companies. On December 29, 1838, the Third Congress of the Republic of Texas had authorized President Mirabeau Lamar to use \$75,000 to press "Eight Companies of Mounted Volunteers" into service for six months' ranging duty.

Each of these mounted companies was to consist of fifty-six men, who were to be paid in the same monthly fashion "as Mounted Riflemen in the Ranging Service." Major William Jefferson Jones was also commissioned to assist Karnes and Woodlief in raising these men. Jones was told that 450 men were needed "for the Corps of Rangers in which you have the honor of holding a command."

During the time that Karnes' Ranger battalion was being recruited, President Lamar had dispatched Rangers to the Neches Saline in present Smith County, just inside the Cherokees' land claim. Lamar sought to contain the Cherokees and prevent them from rising up against the local settlers. These Rangers established Fort Kickapoo at the site of an 1838

Indian battle in East Texas, and Cherokee leader Chief Bowles saw this as a threat to his people. “No sooner did our little handful of men march into the Cherokee Nation before we was ordered by the Chief of the tribe to return back to the settle-ments,” wrote Peter Rodden of Captain Henry Madison Smith’s Nacogdoches County Rangers.

In response to the Rangers being ordered away from Cherokee Nation, Lamar sent peace negotiators to warn Chief Bowles. He then began building up troops to march back into the area to remove the Cherokees, by force if necessary.

As the tensions with the Cherokees of East Texas started to build in the late spring of 1839, mounted forces were called to assemble at the old Kickapoo Village in present Anderson County. After Edward Burleson’s First Regiment forces departed the central Texas area, Colonel Karnes left the mounted Ranger company of Captain John Garrett in Austin to protect those who were constructing the new capital city. Lieutenant Colonel William Fisher, second-in-command of the regular army’s infantry, was originally or-dered to remain at the Brazos River with a detachment of men to guard against possible hostile Indian attacks on this frontier while Burleson’s troops were east of the Brazos. Fisher was later allowed to join Colonel Burleson for the Cherokee campaign. In his place, Captain John C. Neill of Houston commanded a volunteer Ranging company charged with patrolling the frontiers between the Brazos and Colorado Rivers during the Cherokee campaign.

In the absence of the First Infantry to protect the Brazos and Little River settlements during the Cherokee crisis, Captain Nathan Brookshire’s Austin County Rangers were also assigned to protect this area. They served in this region during June and July. As of July 16, 1839, they were headquartered out of Camp Brazos on the river in present Falls County.

Another company raised by Karnes under the mounted gunmen act of December 1838 was placed under command of Captain Greenberry Horace Harrison on June 28, 1839. These men were self-armed and self-provided, unlike the government-equipped companies mustered in months earlier under Ownby and Lewis. Captain Harrison signed a document for Peterson Lloyd that he had served as a “private in my company of mounted gunmen for the Cherokee Campaign” and was paid at a rate of twenty-five dollars per month.

In the Houston County area, Major John Wortham was serving General Kelsey Douglass’ Third Militia Brigade by mid-June in the role of quartermaster to provide for the troops marching into the area.

Supervision of Ranger companies under Captains James Box and Solomon Adams passed from Wortham on to Major Baley Walters.

The First Regiment of the Third Militia Brigade was directly commanded by General Douglass, the senior regional commander of the militia between the Trinity and Sabine Rivers. He would supervise Major Walters' Ranger companies of Captains Box, Adams, and Henry Smith. To this would be added Captain Harrison's mounted gunmen and another mounted volunteer company formed July 1 under Captain Benjamin Vansickle.

Indian commissioner Tom Rusk and the Nacogdoches militia companies reached camp during the first days of July and were joined by General Douglass' regiment. From Fort Kickapoo, Rusk and the other commissioners immediately resumed the negotiations with Chief Bowles and his Cherokee leaders. The additional forces under Colonel Willis Landrum from San Augustine and Burleson were still en route as of early July. This mass assembly of army, militia, and Ranger forces that would gather at Fort Kickapoo had not been equaled since Sam Houston's forces had gathered at San Jacinto.

The breakdown of the Texas Ranger units that would serve in the Cherokee War campaign:

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Ranger Detachment Commander & Men:

Capt. Box	31
Capt. Smith	68
Capt. Lewis	97
Capt. Ownby	77
Capt. A. Jordan	47
Capt. Adams	53
Capt. Harrison	25
Capt. Lynch	6
Total:	404

Tom Rusk and his commissioners attempted to negotiate peace with the Indian tribes during early July. When the negotiations failed, the Indians began withdrawing from the area on the afternoon of July 15. A portion of the Texian forces engaged them late in the day and a sharp skirmish ensued during which the Texas Rangers suffered five casualties. The wounded Rangers were George T. Slaughter of Captain Box's Houston County Rangers and John A. Harper of Captain Henry Madison Smith's Nacogdoches County Rangers. The third Ranger wounded was

Private John S. Anderson of Lieutenant Colonel Woodlief's regiment, which was part of Colonel Henry Karnes' "corps of rangers." Captain Harrison's mounted riflemen, also recruited by Karnes for his Ranging corps, suffered two men killed: Henry Crowson and John Crane. Peter Rodden, one of Captain Smith's Rangers, recalled the intensity of the action: "We sustained a heavy fire from the enemy while crossing upon them through a prairie. We at length drove them from their concealment."

The main battle of the Cherokee War, commonly known as the Battle of the Neches, occurred on July 16. The initial Texas forces to engage were under Edward Burleson and Lt. Colonel Woodlief, including the volunteer Ranger units under Mark Lewis and James Ownby. General Douglass, Colonel Rusk, and Lt. Colonel James Smith joined the battle with their militiamen and Rangers. Captain Madison Smith, leading his Nacogdoches County Rangers to the charge, fell with a bad wound and turned his company over to Lieutenant Albert Corbin.

The battle at the Neches River continued on into the late afternoon. During this time, another private from Smith's Nacogdoches Rangers fell wounded and one more was mortally wounded, as was another Ranger from Captain Harrison's company. Five additional Rangers from the companies of Captains Lewis and Ownby of Lieutenant Colonel Woodlief's regiment were also listed on the July 16 casualty reports.

By the time a halt was called in the late afternoon on the Neches battlefield, an estimated 100 Indians had been killed, including Chief Bowles of the Cherokees. He was shot several times, including by "buck and ball" by Private Henry Conner of Madison Smith's Nacogdoches County Rangers. Former Ranger Captain William T. Sadler was also among those who fired a musket shot which hit the 83-year-old chief. One of the militia captains, whose father-in-law had been killed by Indians, then placed his musket to Bowles' head and dispatched the Cherokee leader.

Veteran Ranger Henry Stout later commented to a reporter for the *Weekly Gazette* of Fort Worth: "We did not do Bowles right." Rusk had demanded that they give up their gun locks and depart Texas. "Bowles was willing but his braves rebelled and would not do it."

In two days of fighting the Cherokees and their allied bands, the Texas Rangers had thus suffered fourteen casualties: four killed and ten wounded. By comparison to the other bloodiest 1830s Indian conflicts involving Texas Rangers, thirteen Rangers had been killed or wounded in the 1837 Stone Houses fight, and another thirteen casualties had been suffered during the October 16, 1838, battle at Kickapoo Village.



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