

# Lessons from the Past



## DEFENDING THE STRONGPOINT: THE TEXAS REPUBLIC'S VICTORY AT SALADO CREEK, 1842

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*"The passive defense is always pernicious; the active may accomplish great successes."*

— Antoine-Henri Jomini  
*The Art of War, 1862*

The Republic of Texas was wrought in the fire of frontier warfare. Embattled throughout its brief existence from 1836 to 1845, the expanding polity fought a series of bloody conflicts against Amerindians to the north and Mexicans to the south as all sides sought dominance over the lower Great Plains. The Battle of Salado Creek, in particular, emerged as a pivotal event in the contest for South Texas in 1842 when Texian infantry decisively turned back a much larger Mexican invasion.<sup>1</sup> By leveraging a key technological advantage, maximizing terrain, and emphasizing combined arms cooperation, the outnumbered frontiersmen not only repelled the invaders back across the Rio Grande but preserved San Antonio indefinitely as a Lone Star — and ultimately American — possession.

This article examines how an ad hoc militia of 225 Texian volunteers unleashed their single-dimensional overmatch in precision firepower, while defending from a naturally defensible strongpoint, to defeat a Mexican expedition of 1,500 infantry, cavalry, and artillerymen.<sup>2</sup> Using the characteristics of the defense outlined in FM 3-21.20, *The Infantry Battalion*, to guide assessment, analysis reveals that the Anglo defenders' modest combined arms effort incorporated elements of preparation, disruption, security, massing effects, and flexibility to "defend temporarily to create the conditions necessary to resume offensive operations" while minimizing the invaders'

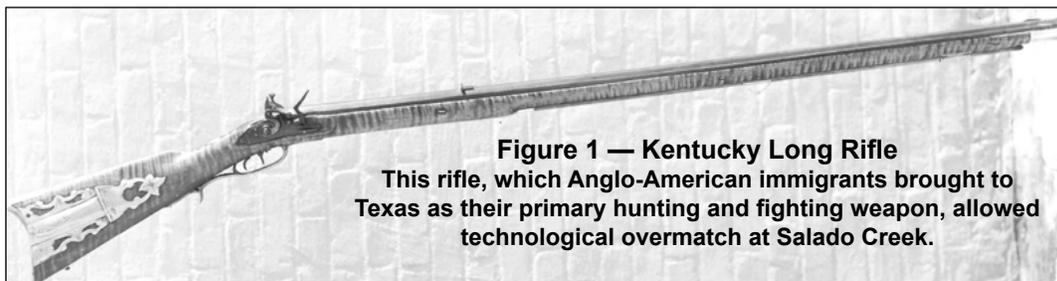
superiority in mass, initiative, and maneuver.<sup>3</sup> This event, though overshadowed by the earlier Battle of San Jacinto and the later Mexican-American War, offers an instructive example for execution of tactical fundamentals.

### The Frontier Environment

The militarization that defined southern Texas throughout the 1840s stemmed from territorial disputes that remained unresolved after Texan independence. Though Sam Houston had defeated Santa Anna de Lopez's reconquest invasion in the 1836 San Jacinto Campaign, Mexico yet claimed the lands between the Nueces River and Rio Grande. The frontier town of San Antonio, serving as governing post for the region, offered an ideal target for Mexican incursions. Since the penurious republic had proven utterly incapable of maintaining a professional army and by 1842 relied upon inactive county militias and small ranger patrols for security, the embattled nation stood strategically vulnerable to invasion.

Despite its dearth of military, industrial, and financial sophistication, Texian society pursued aggressive — and intermittently successful — territorial expansion at the expense of both Indian and Mexican opponents. As a result of intensifying Anglo-Hispanic enmity, exacerbated by the republic's failed attempt to seize Mexican Santa Fe, a vengeful Mexico invaded southern Texas three times in 1842. While the republic utterly failed to defend against the first incursion, and managed to achieve only an inconclusive result during a second near the Gulf Coast, it won a decisive, if improbable, victory near San Antonio against the third and largest invasion.

The Texians' successful employment of advanced firepower and defensive tactics at Salado Creek in 1842 rested on practical infantry tactics learned through years of frontier adaptation. The ubiquitous "Kentucky Rifle," a long-barrel hunting firearm favored by Anglo-American settlers, served as the weapon of choice. As a muzzle-loading, single-shot musket, it fired a caliber between .36 and .45 that offered killing range at 300 meters. In contrast,



**Figure 1 — Kentucky Long Rifle**  
This rifle, which Anglo-American immigrants brought to Texas as their primary hunting and fighting weapon, allowed technological overmatch at Salado Creek.

Photo courtesy of the West Point Museum

the outdated Brown Bess smooth-bore musket utilized by the Mexican Army could strike less than half that distance with even less accuracy. This qualitative differential, though precariously conditional, allowed a narrow tactical advantage over opponents.<sup>4</sup>

Despite its superior qualities, the frontier rifle suffered from a crucial limitation: it was slow to reload and unwieldy, especially on horseback. The weapon consequently required dismounted, supported, and graduated rates of fire to prevent exploitation of loading intervals by Amerindian arrow flights and close combat assaults.<sup>5</sup> Noah Smithwick, an early Texan colonist, attested that “an Indian could discharge a dozen arrows while a man was loading a gun, and if they could manage to draw our fire all at once they had us at their mercy unless we had a safe retreat.”<sup>6</sup> These limitations compelled the settlers, who often fought isolated against larger Comanche warbands on western plains and prairies, to develop tactics that maximized their technology while negating vulnerabilities.

An instructive event that foreshadowed Texian methodology at Salado Creek occurred on 10 August 1838, when rangers under the command of veteran cavalryman Henry Karnes executed a strongpoint defense against a larger Comanche force. The incident began when a Native warband surprised the Texians as they paused to rest and water their horses while on patrol west of San Antonio, near the Seco River. As reported by the *Telegraph and Texas Register*, “a party of about 200 warriors made an attack near the Aronjo Seco, upon a company of 21 men.”<sup>7</sup> The Amerindians’ forceful maneuver, exemplifying audacity prized in FM 3-20.971, *Reconnaissance and Cavalry Troop*, compelled the Texians to form a hasty defense.<sup>8</sup>

Karnes, a veteran soldier of the Texas Revolution, immediately fortified his outnumbered company along a defensible ridge. Understanding the capabilities of his musketry, he dismounted his men and organized them into sections. The frontiersman then controlled their fire through alternating volleys, thereby preventing any lapse during reload cycles. Settler John Henry Brown recorded that the rangers’ “aim was deadly, and warriors rapidly tumbled to the ground.” He also called it “successful defense against immense odds,” while the *Telegraph* boasted that the Indians “were completely defeated and driven from the field with the loss of several of their best warriors and a number of horses.”<sup>9</sup>

This encounter reflected the culmination of defensive tactics favored by outnumbered Lone Star infantrymen that yet relied upon single-shot firearms prior to adoption of Colt revolvers. Through two decades of unconventional fighting, Texians had learned to concentrate massing effects from covered positions that were “synchronized in time and space,” as defined in FM 3-21.20, thereby mitigating Plains Indian mobility and close combat skill.<sup>10</sup> Brown emphasized this method by describing how the rangers “fired in alternate platoons, by which one-third of their guns were always loaded to meet the attack at close-quarters.” Finally, in an action that foretold his future as

the premier Texas Ranger, young Indian fighter John Coffee Hays won special distinction at Arroyo Seco by killing the Comanche chief with a long-ranged rifle shot.<sup>11</sup>

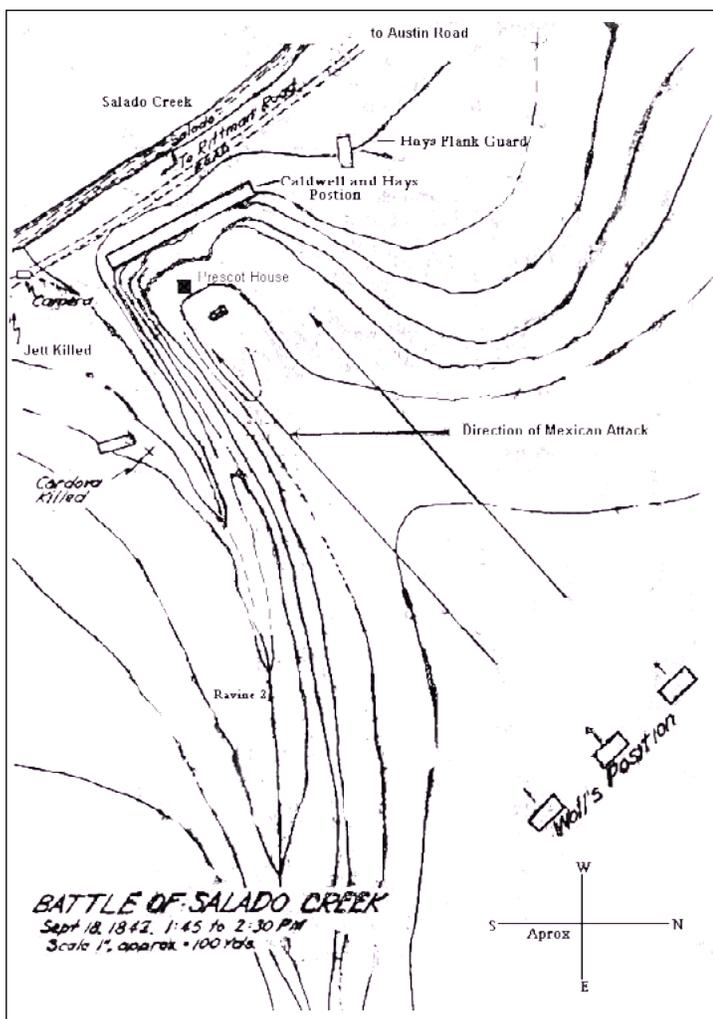
### **The Battle of Salado Creek**

By the fall of 1842, when the Mexican Army again seized San Antonio, Texian infantry tactics had achieved full maturity. Thousands of veteran frontiersmen now served in inactive county militias or in active ranger companies that patrolled contested spaces. Yet despite limited capacity at the tactical level, the struggling republic remained strategically unprepared for conflict beyond small-scale raiding and interdiction. The *New Orleans Bulletin* dramatically emphasized the nation’s vulnerability to conventional attack, lamenting that “never since the declaration of independence was Texas more unprepared for a vigorous contest than at this moment.”<sup>12</sup>

Seething with frustration over territorial provocations, and yet bitter from defeat in the Texan War of Independence six years prior, Mexico elected to punish, and potentially reconquer, its former colony. In September of 1842 French mercenary general Adrian Woll led elements of the Second Division of the Army of the North across the Rio Grande and seized San Antonio with almost no resistance. The combined arms brigade comprised approximately 1,000 regular infantry and 500 irregular cavalry, with field cannon to support. One hundred local Tejano volunteers and 40 Cherokee scouts joined the army, offering “light” infantry mobility. The size of the invasion and density of infantry indicated that Woll intended a permanent occupation until follow-on forces could expand the Tejas campaign.<sup>13</sup>

As the Mexicans advanced, Hays — now commanding mounted Texas Rangers — directed surveillance by two companies (one Tejano and another Anglo) but failed to locate the invaders. Woll skillfully advanced undetected by marching overland and then approaching San Antonio circuitously from the north while the rangers patrolled the expected roads from the south and west. Moving with surprising alacrity, the Mexicans captured the town and its citizenry on 11 September, inflicting a heavy cost for the scouts’ lapse.<sup>14</sup> The Texians’ inability to disrupt the invaders’ advance — doctrinally defined as the requirement to “subvert an attacker’s tempo, formations, and synchronization by countering his initiative” — had cost the republic the town without a fight.<sup>15</sup>

With San Antonio occupied by a formidable garrison, the whole of South Texas was lost. Realizing any consolidated militia stand would now be made closer to population centers at Austin or Houston, Hays and his rangers rode northeast to unite with the gathering defense. A participant named Zachariah Morrell recalled the militia mobilization: “We gathered what ammunition we could at Gonzales and left for Seguin with instructions that recruits coming from the east should follow our trail.” The volunteer then noted their movement towards the expected site of confrontation, citing that “on Tuesday morning we marched on within 20 miles of San Antonio.”<sup>16</sup>



**Figure 2 — Battle of Salado Creek**

While the Texian militia gathered to contest the invasion, Morrell transferred from the riflemen to join Hays's mounted scouts. He described how the ad hoc ranger unit formed and deployed: "In a few minutes we were off, and soon men with Henry McCulloch joined us with 13 men, swelling our numbers to 27." The militiaman also noted that, "the command was organized on the spot, with Jack Hays as captain."<sup>17</sup> Now unified and democratically commanded, the company rode south to San Antonio and captured a stray Mexican soldier. The rangers then brought the prisoner to the militia command at Seguin, where he confirmed the threatening posture and composition of Woll's army.<sup>18</sup>

By 17 September the Texians had assembled just 202 men under the command of a veteran soldier named Mathew Caldwell. Realizing his limitations, Caldwell selected Salado Creek, a defensible position seven miles north of San Antonio, as an ideal location for confrontation. Given the vast numerical disparity between the Mexican and Texian forces, the colonel aimed to maximize his advantages in weaponry with a reverse-slope defense. The fact that the defenders were willing to offer battle under such disproportionate circumstances indicated their confidence in rifled firepower. The ranger company, which would prove critical in provoking

the general engagement on favorable terms, supported with cavalry mobility.<sup>19</sup>

Morrell, again riding with Hays, described how the rangers clashed with enemy horsemen that night. After making visual contact, the settler narrated: "We retreated until they were drawn from the timber, when, under the order of our gallant leader, we wheeled, and 40 Mexicans failed to stand the charge of 13 Texians."<sup>20</sup> The invaders retreated without casualties on either side. This action, encompassing the defensive characteristic of security, facilitated crucial counter-reconnaissance that denied Woll information about the defender's numerical limitations and the strength of their prepared position. Representing ideal use of the Texians' limited mobility, it further exemplified the doctrinal necessity to "prevent the enemy from gaining an unexpected advantage."<sup>21</sup>

The next day, 18 September, the Texians sought to entice a general engagement on favorable terms. According to James Nichols, one of the participating rangers, "Caldwell ordered Hays with his spy company to town to draw the enemy out."<sup>22</sup> Once in sight of San Antonio, the horsemen demonstrated in front of the town in order to galvanize pursuit. To the rangers' surprise, a battalion of heavily armed and armored Mexican cavalry immediately thundered out of the gates towards them. The rapidity of the sally indicated the invaders were already prepared for movement when the Texians arrived.

Hays proceeded to lead his enemy in a long, and at times desperate, chase to the infantry line at Salado Creek. The fresher Mexican horses nearly caught the exhausted Texian mounts during the pursuit, revealing an unanticipated setback. Morrell offered a spirited account of the chase as the company finally turned to face their pursuers: "Under our chosen leader, we sallied out and skirmished with the enemy at long range, killing a number of Mexicans, and getting two of our men severely wounded. In a short time they retired, and we fell back to the main command."<sup>23</sup> Once at Salado Creek the rangers dismounted to augment the Texian line while the Mexican forces, having identified the enemy's position, called up reinforcements under Woll. The assault force included 400 infantrymen and an artillery section, along with the Cherokee auxiliaries and Tejano expatriates.

The invaders deployed into attack formation as they approached the battlefield. Nichols, from his elevated vantage point in the Texian line, described the exposed assault that Woll launched against the defenders. He recorded that "the Mexicans marched on to the crest of the hill, filed to the right, marched to the opening between the heads of the two ravines, displaying his whole force in full view of Caldwell's men."<sup>24</sup> With a bristling line of long rifles aimed across the open ground, this action proved a critical mistake. In an attempt to mitigate the Texian defensive advantages, the Mexicans brought their field cannon to support the infantry assault.

The French general commenced the battle with "grape canister and round shot... for near an hour," which proved

ineffective, while his companies marched on the Texian line. This tactic reflected typical Napoleonic procedure of employing artillery to degrade enemy positions until infantry could make contact. Unfortunately for the Mexicans, the cannonade dispersed amongst the treeline and ridge while the Texians remained prone behind cover. For the defenders, the rangers' security patrols and the infantry's defensive preparation were paying tactical dividends.

The assault that followed proved disastrous for Woll and his men. Morrell observed from his position how attack began with a decisive, yet archaically vulnerable, maneuver: "The Mexicans now advanced upon us, under a splendid puff of music, the ornaments, guns, spears and swords glistening in plain view."<sup>25</sup> The reference to the invaders' reliance on edged weapons illustrated one of the primary differences between the opposing armies. While the Texians relied on American rifled firepower, the Mexicans maintained conservative, European reliance on spears, swords, and short-ranged muskets.

This manner of engagement offered combat which the Texians understood best: precision marksmanship from protected positions to, as prescribed by FM 3-21.20, employ massing effects to "break the enemy's offensive tempo and disrupt his attack."<sup>26</sup> They had utilized the tactic against Amerindian opponents and now wielded it against a conventional opponent. Morrell described his countrymen's first volley, explaining that "some of the Mexican infantry were within 30 feet of us before a gun was fired. At the first fire the whole of them fell to the ground." The militiaman noted that, "soon however, all that were able rose to their feet, but showed no disposition to advance further upon our line."<sup>27</sup> Nichols, who still lay in the firing line, recounted their technological superiority: "We would crawl to the top of the bank and fire, and it was seldom a Texas rifle fired that there was not one seen to bite the dust."<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the engagement Caldwell complemented efforts of his static formations with counterattacks by smaller, more mobile elements designed to cause disruption. When Woll dispatched an infantry force early in the battle to turn the Texian line with a flank attack through the woods, Caldwell countered with a picked group of fighters armed with the most lethal close-combat weaponry of the era: shotguns. Hiding until the Mexicans came to within 30 feet, the irregulars suddenly closed the gap and decimated the advancing infantry with massed buckshot. This maneuver, stemming from lessons previously learned against Comanche tactics, reflected an adept use of active defense by the Texians to mitigate their primary vulnerability.<sup>29</sup>

The Mexican regulars were not the only attackers that suffered



Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress

### John Coffee Hays

during costly flank attacks. At the height of the contest, Woll dispatched his Cherokee augmentees, led by former insurgent Vicente Cordova and moving fast as light infantry, to attempt another indirect assault. Militiaman John Jenkins observed, as before, that a second swift-moving reserve contingent "with double-barrel shot-guns had been detached" and "stationed above to prevent it." Demonstrating operational flexibility, a central tenant of active defense, the defenders repulsed the Cherokees and killed Cordova, finally eliminating an agitator who had long frustrated Texian authorities.<sup>30</sup> By the close of the day, the Mexican Army lost over 60 killed and hundreds wounded while the militia suffered only several injured and one dead. Recognizing diminishing prospects of victory under such attrition, Woll ordered an ignominious retreat back to San Antonio.<sup>31</sup>

The defense at Salado Creed ended as an unqualified success for the Texas Republic, yet the frontiersmen suffered unexpected and peripheral defeat elsewhere. At the close of the main engagement, the Mexican cavalry, conspicuously absent at Salado Creek, intercepted an Anglo reinforcement company en route from nearby La Grange. The larger Hispanic battalion, consisting of several hundred horsemen with light cannon support, immediately surrounded and overwhelmed the company. According to one survivor's recollection, the Texian captain "raised a white flag in token of his surrender and was instantly shot down."<sup>32</sup> The invaders killed most who surrendered and eventually took 15 men as prisoners. Two militiamen escaped to tell the bloody tale.

### Transition to Offensive Maneuvers

Like the mass killings at the Alamo and Goliad in 1836, this slaughter enraged the defenders and catalyzed a dogged pursuit by Hays and Caldwell. On 21 September, the vengeful Texians caught the retreating army at the Arroyo Hondo, a small creek south of San Antonio. The Mexican retreat suffered from logistical privation as well as organizational disarray common in defeated armies, and thus provided an ideal target for retaliation. Hays and his mounted rangers, again providing reconnaissance for the infantry in the manner of conventional light cavalry, identified Woll's rearguard on elevated ground above the creek. The Mexicans supported the picket with a cannon on the road, making the position hazardous for any frontal assault.

According to Morrell, again riding with the rangers, Hays determined to attack immediately. This success of this action hinged on internalizing audacity, an offensive fundamental which reflects "the commander's ability to see opportunities for action, to decide in time to seize opportunities, and to

accept calculated risks.”<sup>33</sup> Morrell described the charge that followed: “Away went the company up a gradual ascent in quick time. In a moment the cannon roared, but according to Mexican custom overshot us. The Texan yell followed the cannon’s thunder.” He then boasted that “shotguns and pistols were freely used...every man at the cannon was killed as the company passed it.”<sup>34</sup>

Despite the success of the charge, the rangers could not retain the high ground and captured cannon. The Texian infantry companies, under Caldwell, failed to reinforce the attack and the horsemen abandoned their gains. The militiamen then stalled until the next morning as they debated the hazards of offensive action. The loss in momentum likewise reflected the indecision and disunity festering within the command. The Texian failure to achieve offensive concentration, a characteristic that FM 3-21.20 correlates to “superior timing” and “precision maneuvers,” allowed the invaders to escape back into Mexico intact.<sup>35</sup>

### Maximizing Tactical Potential

The Battle of Salado Creek offers an illustrative historical case study where a defending force, outnumbered five to one, shaped battlefield events to allow maximal impact of their one and only advantage: precise, long-range marksmanship. Choosing to fight from a natural strongpoint that facilitated technological overmatch, the Lone Star militiamen catalyzed a sequence of events that, as phrased by modern American infantry doctrine, allowed them to “deceive the enemy into attacking under unfavorable circumstances, defeat or destroy his attack, and regain the initiative for the offense.”<sup>36</sup>

This operational success, which incorporated characteristics of the defense to lure an uninformed enemy into an ideal engagement area, resulted from combined arms cooperation towards a common defensive scheme. While the Texians effectively employed mounted rangers for reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance, riflemen for massing effects, and light skirmishers for flank protection, the Mexican Army failed to dominate the information contest with a larger cavalry force, achieve envelopment by both heavy and light infantry, or degrade with artillery effects. Not surprisingly, the victorious militiamen likewise revealed their own operational limitations upon transitioning to the offense when their amateur organizational culture proved unsuitable for aggressive maneuver.

Despite the lost chance to destroy the retreating Mexicans at the Arroyo Hondo, the Texian victory at Salado Creek remains a tactical triumph that enabled larger strategic success. Mexico’s attempt at a second reconquest was decisively thwarted, in large part, because the frontier infantrymen fulfilled the Army Capstone’s mandate to “dictate the terms of operations and render enemies incapable of responding effectively.”<sup>37</sup> Yet while the victory ensured South Texas remained Lone Star territory for the immediate future, the final decision over the dispute would wait for United States’ annexation of Texas and the Mexican-American War. In that conflict, like at the strongpoint defense perfected on

the banks of the Salado, Texan volunteers would again prove their effectiveness as rangers and riflemen.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “Texian” was the self-described and nationalistic identification for citizens of the Texas Republic.
- <sup>2</sup> Joseph Nance, *Attack and Counter-Attack: The Texas-Mexican Frontier, 1842* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), 318.
- <sup>3</sup> FM 3-21.20, *The Infantry Battalion*, 13 December 2006, 5-1.
- <sup>4</sup> Frederick Wilkins, *The Legend Begins: The Texas Rangers, 1823-1845* (Austin: State House Press, 1996), 59.
- <sup>5</sup> Charles Sawyer, *Firearms in American History* (Northwood: The Plimpton Press, 1910), 144.
- <sup>6</sup> Noah Smithwick, *The Evolution of a State* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 159-160.
- <sup>7</sup> Telegraph and Texas Register, 1 September 1838.
- <sup>8</sup> FM 3-20.971, *Reconnaissance and Cavalry Troop*, August 2009, 5-2.
- <sup>9</sup> John Henry Brown, *Indian Wars and Pioneers of Texas* (Austin: L. E. Daniell, Publisher, 1880), 51; Telegraph and Texas Register, 1 September 1838.
- <sup>10</sup> FM 3-21.20, 5-6.
- <sup>11</sup> James Greer, *Colonel Jack Hays: Texas Frontier Leader and California Builder* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1952), 28.
- <sup>12</sup> *New Orleans Bulletin*, 27 September 1842.
- <sup>13</sup> Nance, 318.
- <sup>14</sup> Wilkins, 128-130.
- <sup>15</sup> FM 3-21.20, 5-5.
- <sup>16</sup> Z. N. Morrell, *Flowers and Fruits in the Wilderness; or Forty-six Years in Texas and Two in Honduras* (Dallas: W. G. Scarff & Co., Publishers, 1886), 163.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> Nance, 343-346.
- <sup>20</sup> Morrell, 164.
- <sup>21</sup> FM 3-12.20, 5-5.
- <sup>22</sup> Nichols, 98.
- <sup>23</sup> Morrell, 168-169.
- <sup>24</sup> Nichols, 98.
- <sup>25</sup> Morrell, 170.
- <sup>26</sup> FM 3-21.20, 5-5.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup> James Nichols, edited by Catherine McDowell, *Now You Hear My Horn: The Journal of James Wilson Nichols, 1820-1887* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), 99.
- <sup>29</sup> Wilkins, 136.
- <sup>30</sup> John Jenkins, *Recollections of Early Texas: The Memoirs of John Holland Jenkins* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958), 97.
- <sup>31</sup> Greer, 73-78.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>33</sup> FM 3-21.20, 4-2.
- <sup>34</sup> Morrell, 176-177.
- <sup>35</sup> FM 3-12.20, 4-2.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-1.
- <sup>37</sup> TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1, *The U.S. Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World*, 31 October 2014, iii.

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