Combat 19: Apache Warrior versus US Cavalryman
By Sean McLachlan
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Review by Jonathan Aird

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This is a bit of a non-standard entry in the Combat series, which typically pits one opponent against another in a very limited time frame ó British and German troops in France in 1940 for example. However, Sean McLachlan has very sensibly looked at his subject over a longer time period. Sensibly, because this has allowed him to look at evolving tactics on both sides and look in detail at a number of õbattles.ö These battles are very small affairs ó but on these small affairs with a few hundred participants at most on either side were big decisions made.

The Apache find themselves faced by the US Cavalry from the point that large territories are wrested from Mexico ó before that it was Mexican troops that the Apache would have been skirmishing with. In the early phase of the long drawn out wars, the Apache steadily increased their number and quality of firearms, but never fully relinquished the silent and, for a long time also longer-ranged, composite bow. Their tactics emphasized raiding and hit-and-run tactics as they were usually only able to field a couple of dozen warriors from a single Apache band and so could ill-afford any casualties. There is a good and balanced description of the pressures affecting the Apache and that forced them to defend their way of life.

The US Cavalry started the wars as Dragoons in fancy uniforms and through hard experience developed into a more mobile force with equipment better suited to the conditions they had to operate in. There is a good description of evolving weaponry and tactics, including such seemingly small changes as switching from wagons to mule trains to carry provisions and the introduction of mule-borne howitzers.

The bulk of the book is a description of three encounters in three different eras: Cieneguilla (1854), First Adobe Walls (1864) and Cibecue Creek (1881). The first of these has a Cavalry column pushing into Apache territory to attack and destroy a village ó but instead it finds itself out-manoeuvred and quickly in the position of fighting a long and painful fighting retreat. There is an excellent split-screen double page illustration of the retreat seen from both sides ó with the Apache in hiding and about to launch another attack on the Dragoons who clearly have no idea where their enemy is hiding and are just trying to hobble away as quickly as possible.

Adobe Walls sees the use of artillery and developed skirmish tactics to better cope with a large Apache force again during a punitive mission to burn villages. Despite this, the outcome is again something of a fighting retreat, but on this occasion with the Apache taking more causalities. Things really turn the US Cavalry's way when they start to employ Apache scouts who can actually get the cavalrymen to where their opponents are holed whilst at the same time avoiding being ambushed. This goes somewhat awry at Cibecue Creek when the US Cavalry are sent to arrest, or kill, or both (!) an Apache Medicine Man who is stirring up insurrection. Through a display of arrogance. the friendly scouts are induced to turn against their paymaster and side with their own people ó the results are almost disastrous.

The analysis and Aftermath sections are both very good ó balanced accounts of the failings of both sides and the eventual inevitability of the US Cavalry achieving victory through the combination of improved tactics, improved technology, and, finally, overwhelming numbers. The book is a very good primer on the era. In addition to the battles described in full, there are many even smaller skirmishes which have enough detail to be gamed, making this a really useful volume for the wargamer. With battles involving such small numbers, it is perfectly feasible to consider a 1:1 figure ratio, and 1:5 would allow for engagements with about 40 or 50 figure per side.