



Tejano Soldados For The Union And Confederacy

*"...know that reason has
very little influence in
this world: prejudice
governs."*

*-Wm. T. Sherman
1860*



Duty and Sacrifice Mired in Prejudice

Warfare was nothing new to the Mexican-Americans (Tejanos) of the western American frontier. Since the moment the first hispanic soldiers (soldados) and missionaries pushed northward from Mexico, into the vast expanse of the American southwest, a daily struggle for survival had existed. Conflicts with Indian inhabitants, a series of internal revolutions, the Texas War for Independence, and the Mexican War with the United States had tempered the hispanic peoples of North America to the realities and rigors of war.

Despite this, hispanics did not respond to the American Civil War with the strong emotional urges felt by the vast majority of white Americans. Mostly isolated in small numbers on the frontier in Texas, New Mexico, and California, Mexican-Americans had only been U.S. citizens for 13 years or less. The average hispanic was preoccupied with far different social-economical interests and needs to become too involved in the "gringo" war.

An estimated 9,900 hispanic men did volunteer. Almost half of the hispanic volunteers came from New Mexico, or they lived in small Texas communities along the Rio Grande Valley. The typical Civil War hispanic soldier usually enlisted and served in all hispanic companies of Texas or New Mexico Volunteer or Militia units.

Civil War musters show that Spanish surnamed volunteers were to be found scattered throughout a variety of Federal and Confederate military units such as Hood's Texas Brigade, the Louisiana Pointe Coupee Artillery, Sixth Missouri Infantry, Fifty-fifth Alabama Infantry, and Ogden's Louisiana Cavalry. Some are even found in eastern volunteer units like Vermont. Hispanic volunteers served with forces which fired on Fort Sumter in 1861, and their participation and sacrifice can be found in both Union and Confederate armies engaged in most of the major battles of the war.

Those hispanics which did serve, seemed not to identify with, nor understand, the origins of this truly American war, and most soldados approached the issues with considerable apathy, whether in blue or gray. The wartime performance of the Tejano recruit is hard to assess. He did have a tendency to desert the service. The desertion rate in some Texas and New Mexico Volunteer militia units, made up of hispanics, often ran as high as 95 to 100 percent. These men deserted their units most often, not because of any fear of death or service, but because of a constant prejudice that existed within the mostly white Union and Confederate forces.



Typical of the men found in Hispanic companies serving in blue and gray, were these southern cavalrymen, seated left to right, Refugio Benavides, Atanacio Vidaurri, Cristobal Benavides and John Z. Leyendecker. Refugio and Cristobal both served with their brother, Col. Santos Benavides, against U.S. forces and bandits along the Rio Grande. They and the hard riding men under their command received the thanks of the Texas Legislature "for their vigilance, energy, and gallantry in pursuing and chastising the banditti infesting the Rio Grande frontier."

Struggle With Equality

Tejano regiments were consistently short changed on basic human necessities. Records show that at times, months often elapsed before some hispanic units received much needed food and clothing for basic survival. The soldado was often issued inferior and outdated weapons and foul ammunition to use with it. All of these factors contributed to the inability of the hispanic units to effectively organize, maintain morale, and perform standard military operations during the war.

Tejano soldados averaged 28 years of age. This was far older than his 18 year old white Billy Yank or Johnny Reb. He very rarely spoke english and this language barrier contributed greatly to the Tejano soldado's lack of under-

standing and emotion towards the American struggle. A Tejano generally joined the army to escape the ruthless peonage system practiced in the southwest, or he joined because some influential local economic and political leader from his home community had enlisted. Hispanic volunteers, whether officer or enlisted man, were illiterate. In some units the illiteracy rate was 100 percent, with even the commanding officer unable to sign his name. This problem associated with the language barrier, furthered the isolation between white and hispanic, and added significantly to the standard prejudices held at that time.

War Has No Prejudice

For the common Tejano soldado, the American Civil War was a terrible and frustrating experience. Besides the difficulties of social prejudice, language barriers, and economic and political poverty, the hispanic yankee or rebel recruit had to share the same hardships of war suffered by all Civil War volunteers. He suffered the high attrition rate, due to disease, which constantly plagued the campaign trails and camps of Union and Confederate armies in the field. He experienced the

cruel horrors and tragedy of organized warfare on the Civil War battlefield, where rifle muskets and superior field artillery devastated whole regiments, killing and maiming hispanic volunteers with the same cold effectiveness as they did any other soldier. Unlike man, dysentery, typhoid, the minie ball, and the artillery shell are all blind to the common social and cultural differences found among people, and they all lack human prejudice.



Santos Benavides, Colonel of the 33rd Texas Cavalry, C.S.A. was the most famous of the hispanic soldados. He later commanded a regiment known simply as Benavides' Regiment. This force, poorly equiped and usually starved, forced marched across the arid plains and canyons of Texas and Northern Mexico in a running fight with United States border forces. Never defeated in battle, Santos and his two brothers received high praise from the Confederate military and political leadership, for their solid record of defense of their native home. Santos was the highest ranking Tejano to serve the Confederacy.

