

# Tracking Nana

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### War to the Knife

*"When a man was old he could no longer get about easily; the labors of the hunt and the warpath were too much for him; he was pushed aside by the more active and vigorous ... How much better, therefore, to struggle and fight, to be brave and accomplish great things, to receive the respect and applause of everyone in the camp, and finally to die gloriously at the hands of the enemy!"*<sup>1</sup>

Fort Craig was empty save for three lonely sentries, according to the *Journal*, with the whole garrison out chasing Indians. The post could not have been quite that abandoned, since Col Hatch had moved his headquarters down there from Santa Fe in order to be closer to the action. But he was certainly running low on available reserves.

The unusually heavy monsoon rains had washed out railroad tracks, leaving two companies of the 9<sup>th</sup> temporarily stranded in Colorado and out of play. Worse, the telegraph lines that should have provided Hatch with a flow of actionable intelligence instead flooded his headquarters with wild rumors. Every isolated little way station on the railroad with a telegraph key was forwarding exaggerated reports of Indian outrages and demanding military protection. A rancher in western New Mexico complained he had successfully stood off "200 Navajo" but the Indians had made off with 300 head of cattle (perhaps some enterprising settlers already had their eye on future claims against the government's purse); a farmer rode a lathered horse in to Fort Wingate to report an entire village massacred south of the Zuni reservation, and a party of "60 or 70" Indians was sighted riding northwest through the Mangas Mountains toward the Arizona line.

By the time the colonel received Parker's initial report of the fight at Carrizo Canyon that bad news was already out of date, superseded by dispatches from Socorro of the attacks along the Magdalena road. Standing on the porch of the commanding officer's quarters at Fort Craig, Hatch may have been able to see the smoke from Werner's burning ranch house. That, at least, was solid intelligence.

The colonel correctly deduced that the war party was moving south toward the San Mateos, and he had been dealing with Apaches long enough to recognize that Nana was almost certainly headed for the Chihenne sacred spring at Ojo Caliente. If he could strike them there, the long and frustrating chase would be over.

Parker's Co. K was retreating toward the Rio Grande, and an exhausted Lt. Guilfoyle with L and Lt. Wright with the other half of K had withdrawn to Fort Wingate. Hatch brought Captain Michael Cooney's A Co. up from Fort Selden to Fort Craig by rail and sent it west through the gap between the Magdalenas and the San Mateos, but these troops passed through the area before the hostiles crossed going south.

Lt. Charles Taylor, with detachments of B and H and A Company Indian Scouts<sup>2</sup> was next brought to Fort Craig by rail and sent west along the same route with orders to skirt the western slope of the San Mateos and make for Ojo Caliente. Other units were either throwing a cordon above the border to the south or guarding the Mescalero reservation to the east.

With all these troops in the field, the colonel had one last arrow in his quiver. Company I was newly arrived at Fort Craig by train, having just completed a long and demanding march from Fort Wingate down the North Star Road to Fort Bayard near Silver City. Although the company mustered 54 men they shared just 23 serviceable horses, so that more than half the troopers must have been left behind at Fort Wingate. Now, looking over men and horses as they arrived at Craig, the colonel decided they were fit for one more mission.

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<sup>1</sup> Grinnell, George Bird. *The Fighting Cheyennes*, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> *These were Navajo. Co. A Apache Scouts was at Fort Apache in Arizona.*

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**Cadet George Burnett at West Point**

He had some doubts about the company's young commander, however. Second Lt. George Burnett, 23, was a "shavetail" (a derisory nickname borrowed from packers who clipped the tails of untrained young mules to make them easily identifiable) fresh out of West Point. He was an eager and energetic officer; but he had been with the regiment less than a year and he had a lot yet to learn about fighting Apaches.

Hatch apparently judged the force needed more mature leadership for the job ahead, and he put First Lt. Gustavus Valois<sup>3</sup> in as company commander before the troop departed Fort Craig.

Born in Prussia and christened Augustus Heinel, Valois adopted his French name when he emigrated to America and enlisted in the Union Army in 1862. He emerged from the Civil War a captain and served another three years as a non-com in the 5<sup>th</sup> Cavalry before securing a commission in the 9<sup>th</sup>. Although he had little experience leading troops in the field, he apparently enjoyed the colonel's full confidence. In October of the previous year, Hatch had selected Valois to command the escort accompanying President Rutherford B. Hayes, General Tecumseh Sherman and the Presidential entourage from the Southern Pacific railhead near Shakespeare to the A.T&S.F. at Round Mountain in the *Jornada*. This was no merely

ceremonial honor, as their route took the party through some of the most dangerous Apache country in the territory.<sup>4</sup>

Presumably Hatch hoped Burnett and Valois would balance each other out, with the older man's prudent caution curbing the young lieutenant's aggressive enthusiasm, while company First Sergeant Moses Williams would provide badly-needed tactical guidance.

The company marched out of Fort Craig on August 13 and by the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> the men were watering their horses in the creek near the little village of Cañada Alamosa/Monticello when an excited young boy rode in to report the Apaches had just attacked the nearby Chavez ranch. Whether the company had arrived the previous evening or just that morning, the men were in the middle of tending their tired mounts when the alarm was given, and most were in no shape to move out. Rather than wait until all were ready, Burnett persuaded Valois to allow him to take those he could mount and start out immediately, while the company commander would follow with the balance of the command as soon as they could saddle up. Burnett took about a dozen men, half the force, and rode for the Chavez place. Along the way he was joined by a hastily organized civilian posse drawn from the nearby village and local ranches.

They found Chavez, his wife and two children and two shepherds all dead – as far as I know it was the only occasion during the raid when the Apaches deliberately killed children, and likely was done to enrage the pursuers and overcome their caution. In the distance, little more than a mile away, on the bench that borders the Rio Alamosa, Burnett could see a group of men "for the most part dressed as Mexicans with blankets over their shoulders and wearing sombreros, which they waved for us to come on." At first the lieutenant mistook the strangers for more civilian volunteers, but he was soon persuaded these were in fact the raiders, taunting the soldiers and daring them to come after them.

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<sup>3</sup> "Captain" in some accounts, a courtesy reference to his Civil War rank.

<sup>4</sup> It was unfortunate Nana was still in Mexico when President Hayes and Gen. Sherman passed through, as he certainly would have valued the opportunity to lay his grievances before the Great White Father and the Army's top general in person.

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Nana deliberately challenged the soldiers to battle that morning. When they attacked the Chavez ranch, the Apaches could hardly have been unaware that the troops were just two miles away. But instead of riding off they attacked the ranch and then halted on the nearby high ground, “deployed mounted and apparently waiting for some one,” according to Burnett’s later account, until the lieutenant and his little command arrived. The *sombreros* and *serapes* were an attempt to lure the soldiers into pursuit.

If Nana had known the brash young lieutenant personally he could not have devised a better stratagem. Although Burnett counted 40 Indians on the heights – and some of his men claimed to see as many as 60 – he immediately advanced up the slope at a gallop, without waiting for Valois and the remainder of the company to come up. The fact that the Indians opened fire at more than a half-mile indicates they did not intend to engage their enemies in open country but instead wanted to draw the pursuit into the *Sierra Cuchillo Negro*, a low-lying chain that separates the Cañada Alamosa from the Black Range to the west.

When Burnett dismounted some of his men to return fire and sent others under Sgt. Williams to flank the hostiles, the Indians retreated to the next rise and repeated the tactic. Nana’s plan was to lure the soldiers and their civilian auxiliaries into terrain where they could be fragmented into separate detachments beyond the support of the other elements of the command, disorganized and demoralized by unexpected flanking fire from different directions, and then destroyed in detail.

It was an extraordinarily risky stratagem for the Indians because between the Cuchillo Negros and the safe haven of the Black Range were the booming mining camps of Chloride and Fairview/Winston. Just a cluster of tents and a few crude log buildings when Nana passed through in January, by mid-summer Chloride boasted eight saloons, three restaurants, two butcher shops and other thriving businesses, and hundreds of miners were busily staking out claims in the surrounding countryside.<sup>5</sup> By engaging the troops in the Cuchillo Negros, Nana risked being caught between the soldiers in front and the miners to his rear.

Burnett’s standard tactic of “fire and maneuver” – establishing a base of fire to keep the opposing force pinned in place while deploying a detachment to swing around the enemy’s flank – is the basic small unit exercise still taught to the Army’s aspiring second lieutenants today. When repeated several times in rugged terrain against an opponent who is simultaneously trying to work around your own flanks, the resulting collision is likely to lead to some ugly surprises.

While scarcely mountains compared to the Black Range or San Mateos, the Cuchillo Negros are steep and deeply cut by arroyos and canyons that funnel horseback travel along limited routes. According to Burnett’s later account:

“I made a wide detour to the left and on approaching the rear of the Indians my attention was called by Sergt. Williams to a dark object probably 150 yards directly in front of me, and he remarked that he believed it to be the head of an Indian peeping over the rocks. We were riding in “column of files.” I sprang from my horse and took deliberate aim at point blank range over my horse’s saddle for an instant. The object did not move and not willing to risk giving an alarm I was on the point of withdrawing my carbine when I perceived a slight movement and firing instantly I had the satisfaction of feeling that I was responsible for at least one ‘good Indian.’

“Immediately the Indians opened up on us from all along the ridge. I at once ordered my men to dismount and take shelter among the rocks, but in the excitement my horse broke and started to the rear riderless on the dead run. Someone started the cry ‘They’ve got the Lieut.’ and with this the whole outfit proceeded to follow suit – with the exception of 1<sup>st</sup> Sergt. Williams and Private Aug. Walley, who remained by me. I called to Sergt. Williams to go after them and bring them back.

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<sup>5</sup> Sherman, James E. Ghost Towns and Mining Camps of New Mexico, p 43

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“In the meantime myself and Walley under a heavy fire took shelter among the rocks and returned the fire till joined by Sergt. Williams and the rest of the detachment, he having quickly succeeded in rallying them.”<sup>6</sup>

It was by then four o'clock in the afternoon, and Burnett was wondering where his commander was with the rest of the company. He sent a courier pelting back toward the Cañada Alamosa to urge Valois to come up and take a position on the high ground to his right, while Burnett continued to work around the left in an attempt to block the Apaches' escape into the Black Range.

“Finally we succeeded in dislodging the Indians and a number of them mounted started along the base of the mountains to the left toward the Rio Grande,” Burnett wrote. “My first impulse was to follow them, when my attention was attracted by heavy firing on our right, and the remark by Sergt. Williams that he ‘believed the main fight was there and that our Indians were only a decoy.’”

By recognizing that the hostiles fleeing to the left were decoys, Sgt. Williams averted what might otherwise have been a military disaster smaller in scale but equal in scope to Custer's five years' previously. Young Lt. Burnett deserves equal credit for listening to his experienced sergeant in the heat of battle and abandoning pursuit of what appeared to be a defeated foe. Instead he moved in the opposite direction and arrived on the scene just in time to save Valois from making a classic last stand.

“On coming over the intervening plateau I saw at a glance that there was not a moment to be lost for the Indians were concentrating from all directions on Valois who in his efforts to reach the hills referred to above, had been anticipated by the Indians who got there first and gave him a very warm reception. They killed or wounded nearly all of his horses and wounded some of his men and when we came up he was making his way to the rear as well as possible and the Indians were in hot pursuit.

“There was nothing for us to do but charge them, which I did mounted, and drove them back to cover and dismounting held them long enough for Valois to collect his scattered men and get his wounded to the rear. Believing the Indians to be too strong for him, Valois ordered his men to fall back and sent word to me to follow.”<sup>7</sup>

As he was complying with that order, “my attention was attracted by one of Valois' men, whom I believed to be dead, calling to me ‘Lieutenant please, for God's sake don't leave us, our lives depend on you.’ I then discerned that Valois in falling back had left three men – Privates Glasby, Wilson and Burton – behind some prairie dog mounds about two hundred yards from the Indians and midway between their line and mine,” Burnett continued.

While Burnett and Williams provided covering fire, Pvt. Walley rode out and picked up the most seriously injured trooper and carried him to the rear, while the other two wounded men crawled back on their own. Burnett then rounded up the horses Valois had abandoned in his hasty retreat before following the rest of the company back to Cañada Alamosa.

Although Burnett mentions only “three men wounded, ten horses killed, and several wounded,” and makes no mention of his own wounds, Gen. Sheridan's 1882 report lists Burnett as twice wounded and two men killed in the engagement.<sup>8</sup> (It could be that two of the wounded men later died.) According to its muster rolls, I Company had 54 men fit for duty in August 1881 but just 23 serviceable horses.<sup>9</sup> If a dozen animals had been killed or wounded, Nana had effectively converted Co. I to infantry.

“The Mexicans suffered some loss but I was unable to learn exactly how much,” Burnett added.

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<sup>6</sup> Lieutenant George R. Burnett, in a letter to Ordnance Sgt. Moses Williams, June 20, 1896:

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Sheridan, Record of Engagements, p. 115.

<sup>9</sup> Watt, Robert N. “*Horses Worn to Mere Shadows*,” N.M. Historical Review, p. 200

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An incomplete victory and an expensive one for Nana's small force, if Burnett is correct that "a number of bodies were found the next day concealed among the rocks." While the old man might have taken some satisfaction in having inflicted a painful lesson in irregular warfare tactics on his opponents, he was in fact only partially successful.

With men dead and wounded, half his horses out of action and low on ammunition, Valois had no choice but to retreat to Cañada Alamosa. That was the problem from Nana's point of view, if his primary objective was to reach the sacred spring at Ojo Caliente. He had tried to draw Burnett off to the southeast and concentrated his force on attacking Valois, intending to eliminate him entirely or at least drive him away east back down to the Rio Grande. That plan had been thwarted by the timely arrival of Burnett and his men, which allowed the reunited company to retire back to where they effectively plugged the only canyon leading to Ojo Caliente from the east.

The soldiers didn't need horses or even much ammunition to hold those sheer cliffs. Just a few months previously, Blanco and a few warriors drove an Army supply column out of that canyon; now the moccasin was on the other foot. Balked just short of his goal, Nana had no choice but to circle around to the west, making a dangerous night passage through the miner-infested hills around Chloride Gulch.

The Cuchillo Negro fight was the only occasion during the raid when Nana took the offensive against the troops; in every other engagement he was defending himself against pursuit. I believe Nana deliberately challenged the cavalry in order to draw them away from their position blocking access to the hot springs. He wanted to visit this, the most sacred place in the Chihenne heartland, for one last time. He may even have intended to make his last stand there, at the head of a nearly impregnable canyon. Victorio, they said, had not been killed by the Mexicans but had stabbed himself with his own knife when he ran out of options. With his chief's death, Nana had lost his dearest friend. His last raid through New Mexico must have convinced him that the future could only hold final and complete defeat. What better way for an old warrior to die but with his rifle in his hands, his face to his enemies, and his feet planted firmly on his home ground?



**Pvt. Augustus Walley**

According to his [Congressional Medal of Honor citation](#), Burnett "saved the life of a dismounted soldier, who was in imminent danger of being cut off, by alone galloping quickly to his assistance under heavy fire and escorting him to a place of safety, his horse being twice shot in this action."

Burnett never progressed past first lieutenant in the regular Army, although he later served as colonel of the Iowa National Guard. Severely injured when his horse fell on him, he retired due to his disabilities in 1891. He taught at military prep schools, served for several years at a U.S. consulate in Germany, and died in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1908, age about 50.

Born in Carrollton, Louisiana, in 1845, Moses Williams joined the 9<sup>th</sup> when the regiment was organized in 1866. He learned to read and write and won promotion to sergeant after just two years in the ranks and was a veteran of 15 years' service when he fought at Cuchillo Negro. His Medal of Honor [citation](#) for the Aug. 16, 1881 engagement: "Rallied a detachment, skillfully conducted a running fight of 3 or 4 hours, and by his coolness, bravery, and unflinching devotion to duty in standing by his commanding officer in an exposed position under a heavy fire from a large party of Indians saved the lives of at least 3 of his comrades." He died in 1899, age 53.

Born in Maryland in 1856 and enlisted in 1878, Pvt. "Gus" Walley was Burnett's "striker" or personal servant, a position officially abolished by the Army in the 1870s but continued informally into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Derided by other enlisted men as a "dog robber," the striker cleaned and maintained his officer's uniform and equipment and generally looked after him in garrison and on campaign. In black regiments, officers and their strikers often developed a strong bond that helped bridge an otherwise insurmountable cultural gap.

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Walley retired as a First Sergeant in 1907 but was recalled to duty in World War I, retiring again in March 1919. He died in 1938 at age 82 and is buried in his hometown. His Medal of Honor [citation](#) reads simply: “Bravery in action with hostile Apaches.”

North of the village of Cañada Alamosa, (which officially became Monticello sometime in 1881 with the arrival of the town’s first postmaster), Alamosa Creek is squeezed into a gorge now called the Monticello Box. This canyon is so narrow that in places the “road” is in fact the creek bed running between vertical cliffs, so that during the rainy season it is frequently entirely impassable. Valois effectively blocked this direct route north as he retreated to his camp, forcing Nana to follow the Cuchillos north toward Wildhorse Canyon, where he could swing back east toward Ojo Caliente.

By New Mexico standards the Sierra Cuchillo is a range of steep hills rather than mountains, but for men on horseback there are only a few routes over the crest. Once over the pass Nana faced a new obstacle blocking his path – the booming mining camps of Fairview (Winston) and Chloride. Since it was already late in the day when they disengaged from Burnett and Valois in the Cuchillo foothills, the war party likely made this passage that night, emerging into Wildhorse Canyon sometime early the next day.

“Lieut. C.W. Taylor, Ninth Cavalry, came up with the hostiles at daylight in the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup>, in the San Mateo Mountains, soon routing them and driving them out of the mountains during the day,” according to Hatch’s report.<sup>10</sup> This date is difficult to reconcile to other reports that Co. “I” engaged Nana’s war party at Cañada Alamosa on that same afternoon, unless Taylor had encountered a separate group of hostiles.

According to the August 18, 1881, *Albuquerque Journal*:

“Yesterday afternoon Lieut. Taylor, with a squad of 30 or 40 troops, was trailing a band of Apache Indians, when some thirty miles from Fort Craig, they came upon a fresh band of Apaches, about forty in number, direct from Mexico. A sharp skirmish ensued, lasting over two hours, in which five soliders (*sic*) were killed and several wounded. The Indian loss was severe, but exact numbers not known.”

Well, as we used to say when I worked there, “If it’s in the *Journal*, it must be true.” But no other reports of this encounter mention any casualties on either side, and I have seen no reports of any other significant incursions across the border that summer, so it’s probable that the band Taylor and his men engaged was in fact Nana’s, and the conclusion that these Indians were “direct from Mexico” may simply have been based on the same sombreros and blankets Burnett reported observing.

Taylor probably arrived at Ojo Caliente on the 16<sup>th</sup> and was alerted by a courier from Valois that the hostiles were headed in his direction, or he may simply have been sweeping the country to the southwest of the old agency when his scouts encountered Nana’s vanguard. According to Lekson there were no casualties on either side in this skirmish, although the hostiles killed several of Taylor’s horses as they withdrew west into the Black Range.<sup>11</sup> In return, Taylor’s men recaptured several stolen horses – likely abandoned as too worn out to keep up with the raiders – and “some of the stolen property” – perhaps the Mexican hats and blankets Burnett had reported.

Nana and his men were presumably exhausted from the previous day’s fighting and another all-night ride, as well as low on ammunition. It must have been a bitter disappointment for the old warrior, but his only path now ran west toward the headwaters of the Gila. Once he abandoned the idea of reaching Ojo Caliente, his sole objective was to shake Taylor off completely, or at least kill enough horses to slow the soldiers down. In this he was only partially successful. “Taylor lost a few horses killed, but no men. Nana withdrew once more and plunged into the Blacks, Taylor in close, but slowing pursuit.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Lincoln, *Annual Report of the Secretary of War, 1881*, vol. I, p. 127.

<sup>11</sup> Lekson, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> Thrapp, p. 215.

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Col. Hatch came down from Fort Craig to tour the scene of the Cuchillo Negro fight and talk with Burnett and Valois in person.<sup>13</sup> It must have been an uncomfortable interview. Guilfoyle had missed two chances at the hostiles before losing their trail altogether; then Parker had been soundly defeated at Carrizo Canyon. Now Co. "I" had been beaten and driven from the field, and the hostiles had once again disappeared into the mountains.

For Hatch personally it was a serious blow to his professional ambitions. In the shrunken post-Civil War Army there were perhaps half a dozen colonels on active service in the field with a serious chance of winning the coveted general's star, and most of them tried their hand against the Apaches at one time or another with varying degrees of success. Compared to Grierson's defeat of Victorio in Texas the previous year and Crook's earlier achievement in corralling the Western Apaches in Arizona, the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry had little to boast of in New Mexico.

Cuchillo Negro was yet another in a string of bitter blows the Apaches had inflicted on the regiment Hatch had personally recruited and led for 15 years. "If it weren't for bad luck, we'd 'a had no luck at all," pretty much summarizes the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry's record against first Victorio and now Nana. In every engagement the Apaches had either won outright or tied the score, killing men and horses before slipping away to fight again. It was not the buffalo soldiers but the Mexicans who finally trapped and killed Victorio, and now Nana was burning ranches, murdering travelers, kidnapping women and children, and apparently roaming free across the territory, literally running rings around the hapless 9<sup>th</sup> Cav.

"Sensational accounts of burnings, sackings, and massacres filled the newspapers."<sup>14</sup> Southwestern New Mexico was liberally salted with unreconstructed ex-Confederates with a visceral dislike for black men in blue uniforms, and the talk in the saloons was full of bitter criticism both of Hatch and his regiment. (In Silver City the previous year a crowd celebrated the glad news of Victorio's death in Mexico by burning Hatch in effigy.) If Nana escaped back across the border now, he was carrying Hatch's hopes of promotion with him.

Hatch sent Valois and his men together with Cooney's troop into the Black Range in pursuit of the hostiles and concentrated the remainder of his forces at the bottom of the sack to block the southern exits from the mountains. Then the colonel boarded a train south to Fort Cummings, where he intended to take personal charge of salvaging his own and his regiment's reputations by capturing or destroying Nana and his band.

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<sup>13</sup> Lekson, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid