



5-30-2018

The Camel Corps Experiment

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Major, Abigail K., "The Camel Corps Experiment" (2018). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 306.
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The Camel Corps Experiment

Abstract

“Did you know there was a push to create a Camel Corps right before the beginning of the American Civil War?” This certainly seems like an interesting piece of trivia to share around the dinner table, but what was the Camel Corps and what insights can it provide on U.S. military thinking in the mid-19th century? I believe that the Camel Corps Experiment, regardless of whether it was deemed an utter failure or not, demonstrated progressive military thought and the desire of its advocates to explore advancements in both mobility and technology for military practices. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Gettysburg College, Technology, U.S. Camel Corps

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

The Camel Corps Experiment

By [*Abigail Major '19*](#)

“Did you know there was a push to create a Camel Corps right before the beginning of the American Civil War?” This certainly seems like an interesting piece of trivia to share around the dinner table, but what was the Camel Corps and what insights can it provide on U.S. military thinking in the mid-19th century? I believe that the Camel Corps Experiment, regardless of whether it was deemed an utter failure or not, demonstrated progressive military thought and the desire of its advocates to explore advancements in both mobility and technology for military practices.

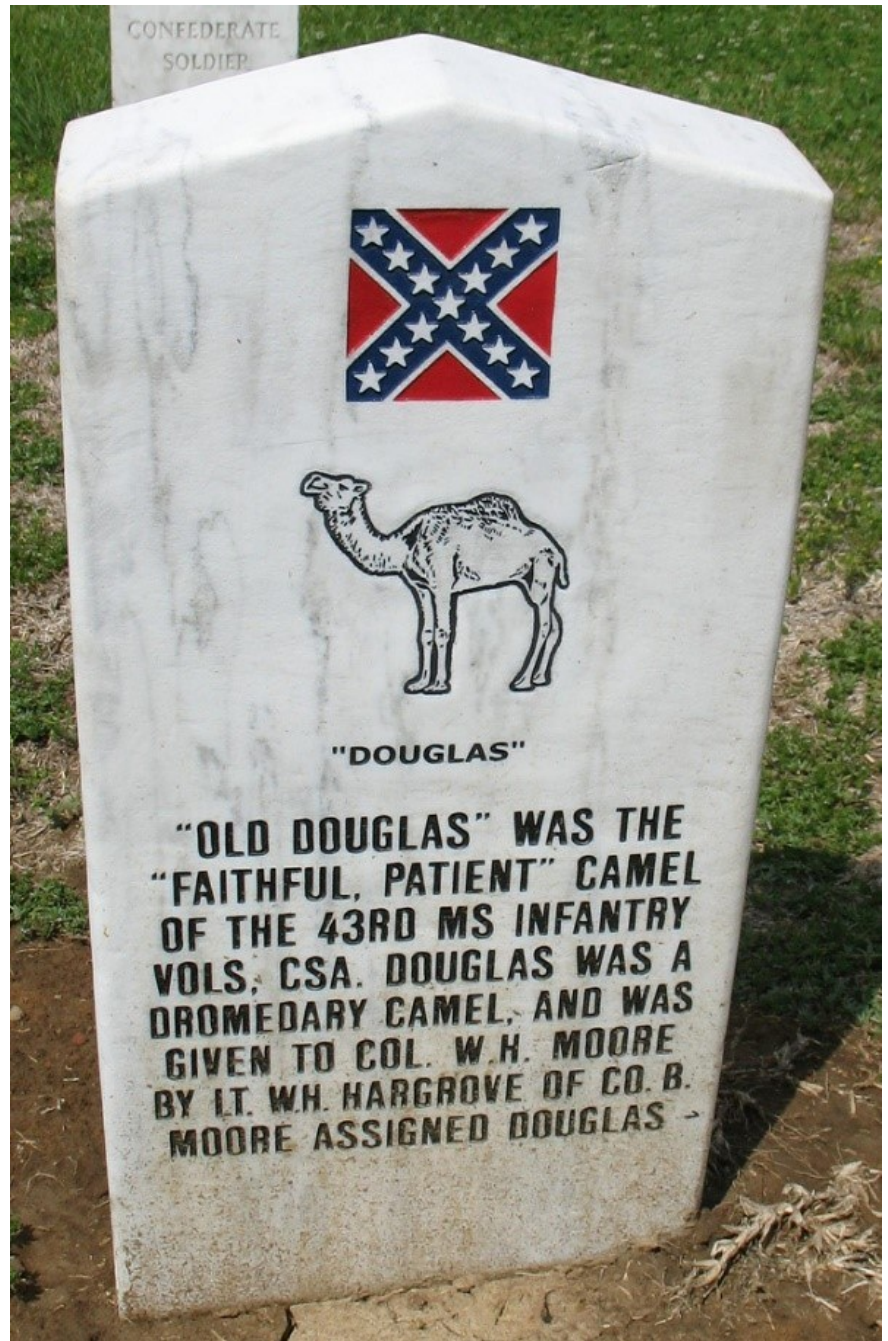
Where did the push for the utilization of camels come from in the first place? Historian Harold Schindler suggests that, like horses which were not native to America but flourished when introduced, camels too had the potential to be successful in theory. In the early 20th century, U.S. Army explorer Stephen Harriman Long wrote *General Description of the Country Traversed by the Exploring Expedition*, which included his description of parts of the West as “completely destitute” possessing little vegetation and sterile soil. His word choices in his description suggests that the American West held many desert-like qualities. For then Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, the American Desert represented a lack of the nation’s unity. The vast barren interior of the West presented the issue of disconnectedness because it was not easy or simple to travel. If a solution to the transportation problem in the West were achieved, it would not only connect the Western territories to the more populated East Coast, but it would also aid in creating a united nation of Americans.

For some military and political leaders, camel transportation was the solution to the issues of unity and military transportation. Traveling and carrying materials by using wagons drawn by mules, horses, or oxen was time consuming and expensive, especially when considering the animals’ great dependency on water and grass – two factors that were not bountiful in the “American Desert.” Camels, on the other hand, could travel longer on fewer provisions. It is likely that Davis was a great supporter of this idea due to the encouragement of select group of peers, and because of his familiarity with Napoleon’s memoirs, which included the French leader’s own fascination with the dromedary camel (an Arabian one humped camel) and its hardiness. In 1855 Congress finally approved the experiment, and Major Wayne and Lieutenant David D. Porter, two men who played a significant part in convincing Davis to advocate for the camel project, acquired thirty-three camels from Turkey, Egypt, and Tunisia.

At first, the project seemed to go well. The camels were successful in their tests around San Antonio and Camp Verde, Texas. In addition to their lack of grass and water dependency, camels could ford rivers much easier than mules, carry heavier loads, and did not require shoeing. It seemed as if the only downside was the smell and appearance of the camels, which seemed to bother the horses – a seemingly small disadvantage compared to the supposed various advantages of camel utilization. Even Lieutenant-Colonel Robert E. Lee, who had used camels on a patrol in 1860, praised the camels' capabilities.

Yet the experiment began to unravel as issues began to rise to the surface. The project had a lack of public support. Packers and freighters in the South disliked the economic competition and army men stationed at Camp Verde thought the experiment was ridiculous. In addition, a cultural barrier might have also contributed to the failure of the camel experiment. While some leaders of the project, such as George Perkins Marsh, had witnessed camel usage and traveled to Egypt, Syria, and Arabia, a majority of people (both civilians and government officials) were not well familiar with camel transportation. This reluctance to change from mules and horses to camels, as well as the potential lack of knowledge of how to utilize these animals to their full extent, could be a couple additional reasons why the camel experiment failed to gain the mass support it crucially needed.

A photo of Old Douglas's memorial marker at Cedar Hill Cemetery, Vicksburg, Mississippi. Taken by [Natalie Maynor](#).



By the eve of the Civil War, the experiment had collapsed. While camels were still present during the Civil War, Union forces did not use the camels found in Camp Tejon, California, because they could not understand how the camels could be used for any missions. Similarly, the Confederacy did not use the animals for any major operations. One notable exception lies in Douglas the camel. Affectionately known as Old Douglas, he was the only known camel to be used militarily east of the Mississippi River during the American Civil War. He became the mascot for the 43rd Mississippi Regiment, and also assisted in carrying baggage for the officers. During the Siege of Vicksburg, Old Douglas, who had been “harmlessly grazing,” was shot by Federal sharpshooters. In *The Camel Regiment: A History of the Bloody 43rd Mississippi Volunteer Infantry, CSA, 1862-65*, Author Scott W. Bell includes Lieutenant-Colonel R. S. Bevier’s account of what happened afterwards: Douglas was “pierced by several bullets at one discharge, and fell with a piteous, almost human moan, to expire in a strange land far from the ‘help of Islam.’ All who saw it were highly incensed at this useless cruelty.”

With this one exception of Douglas, the Camel Corps experiment can be interpreted as a failure. It was disbanded by Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton – who was supposedly unaware that such a project existed – and by the end of the Civil War, most of the camels were sold. If the camel experiment can be regarded as unsuccessful, and perhaps even an embarrassment for the government who had invested a substantial amount of money in this project, is there any value to remembering this veiled venture? The camel corps experiment demonstrates the desire of military and political leaders to solve the issue of mobility apparent in the “American Desert”, and to promote connectedness of the nation – the latter idea which obviously fell apart during the American Civil War. The attempted utilization of camels in military operations and practices also indicates how government officials hoped to advance the nation’s military forces. Indeed, the Great Failed Camel Corps Experiment represents the idea of “trial and error”—through the failure of the camel experiment, other ideas of mobility for the “American Desert” and the military could be proposed.

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