

# The U.S. Army Camel Corps

As the train rolls through open country, far from cities, towns and farms, try to imagine the region as it was in the 1850s—a thinly populated wilderness. Charged with protecting this vast territory, the U.S. Army faced tremendous challenges just moving men and supplies and maintaining lines of communication.

To solve these problems, some said, why not import camels from the Middle East? After all, they could go for days without drinking, thrive on desert vegetation, endure heat and cold, and move easily on harsh ground—all while carrying huge loads. Camels had long been the “ships of the desert” in Arabia, why not in the Great American Desert? So, Jefferson Davis, then secretary of war, got congressional approval to test the camel idea

The first two shiploads of camels reached Texas in 1856. The 77 beasts, both one-hump dromedaries and two-hump Bactrians, were taken to Camp Verde, northwest of San Antonio. To care for the animals, the Army brought over Turkish, Greek and Arab camel drivers. Among them were Elias from Turkey, Greek George and Hadji Ali, quickly nicknamed Hi Jolly by the soldiers.

The big test came in 1857 on an expedition to survey a wagon road between El Paso and California. Lt Edward Beale led the party that included men, horses, mules and 25 camels. Once they became trail hardened, the camels performed admirably, even carrying food and water for the horses and mules while living off the land themselves. The experiment was a success, and camels were used on several more expeditions before the Civil War turned the Army’s attention elsewhere.

Yet the Camel Corps failed. Why? Well, not everyone appreciated camels. They were mean-tempered, smelly beasts, and few soldiers could handle them properly. Opponents claimed—falsely—that desert rocks cut their feet. They did frighten horses and people and could create havoc in towns. .

Not all the camel-drivers returned to their native lands. Hi Jolly, for one, had a long and storied career, and is buried under a pyramid near Quartzite, Arizona. Elias, from Turkey, became a rancher; his son, Plutarcho Elias Calles was president of Mexico in the 1920s.

And the camels? Many were sold off to mines, businesses and individuals. Others were just turned loose in the desert. Camel-sightings continued for decades, and legends are still told about the remnants of the Army’s most successful failure.

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