

The Battle of Bloody Tanks Revisited

By Al Bates

One of the most controversial episodes in the long and bloody conflict between the settlers of Arizona and the various Apache tribes was the Battle at Bloody Tanks, sometimes referred to as the "Pinole Treaty" incident.

The battle occurred on January 27, 1864, after a small band of settlers led by King S. Woolsey, and aided by a group of Maricopa Indian warriors, trailed stolen stock deep into Tonto Apache territory near present-day Miami, Arizona, where they found themselves surrounded by a much larger force and in imminent danger of extermination. How they escaped from this predicament has long since entered Arizona lore and legend.

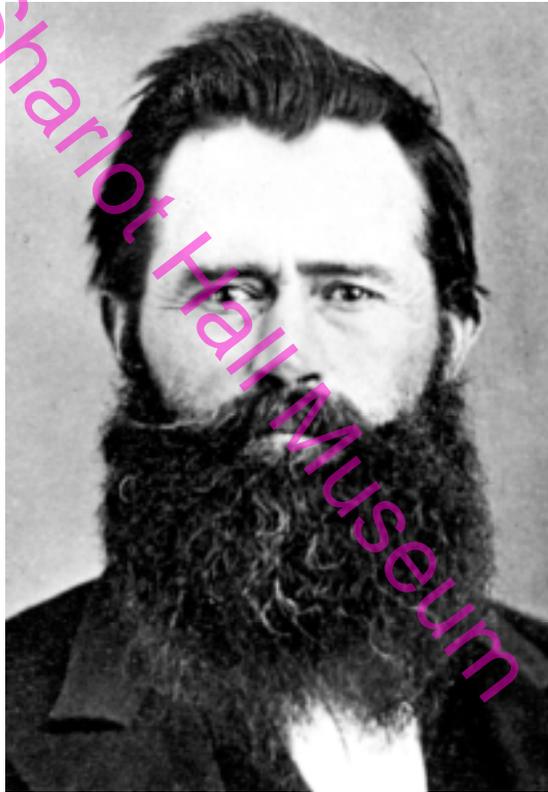
Much has been written about the episode, almost all of it taken from second- or third-hand accounts, or worse, but Woolsey's own account of the action has never before been published. Since he has been cast as a villain accused of treachery during a peace conference, and has been accused of feeding the Apaches poisoned pinole, it seems important that his version of the event be heard.

Woolsey did not make a written report for some time, but sent the following letter to General James H. Carleton, only after submitting an official report to Governor Goodwin about his third and final expedition against the Apaches later that year.¹

His full letter follows:

Prescott, Sept. 14th, 1864

*General James H. Carleton
Commander of Department
New Mexico & Arizona*



King S. Woolsey

Sir: I have the honor to report to you that on Jan. 5th the Apaches broke into the corral at the Ranch of A. H. Peeples near Weaverville and took 32 horses & mules & started with them in the direction of the Salt River country. A party was immediately raised to follow them. I was chosen as the leader of the party.

I started on the 7th with 28 men & ten days rations. We traveled in an easterly direction following the trail of the stolen stock across the Rio Agua Frio, Lost Creek & New River to the San Francisco [Verde River]. There the trail lead across the San Francisco still continuing in an easterly direction towards the Mouth of the Big Cannon on Salt River. My provisions being nearly exhausted, I decided to camp here & send to the Pimos Villages for supplies.

January 21st the party having returned with Flour & Pinola and some 45 Maricopas and Pimos warriors² I started on the 22nd for the junction of Salt River & the San Francisco. We followed up Salt River some 15 miles & struck the trail of the stock again at the Mouth of the Big Canyon. There all the Pimos backed out declaring that they would not enter the Canyon as they never had been up there before. But Captain [Juan] Chivari³ the head Chief of the Maricopas (being made of different material) called out his Braves and said that he would follow where I would lead.

So with my original 28 men & Cyrus Lennan & G. G. Fisher of the Pimos Village & 16 Maricopa Braves we started up this unknown canyon. We had but 19 rounds of ammunition for the White men and 7 for the Indians. We traveled all day the 23rd in the canyon and at dark found the trail leading over a high mountain on the south side of the river. We traveled all night without finding any fresh sign of the thieves until near sun rise when we discovered Squaw and children tracks. Some of my men being worn out I took all that were able to double quick it & dashed forward as rapidly as possible until 8 o'clock A.M. when we reached the ranchiere. The Apaches having discovered us & fled.

My men being all worn out I selected an open spot for a camp near some small Tanks of excellent water. The remainder of my party soon arrived. We commenced to prepare for breakfast & obtain a little sleep. We had however scarcely unpacked our animals before the Red Devils took possession of the Bluffs in our rear & in a short time they had entirely surrounded us. None of them coming closer than 600 yards. They kept up a most infernal yelling & built tremendous sig-

nal smokes as if in honor of our arrival. We paid no attention to them until we had satisfied ourselves with bread & Pinola & most of the boys had snatched a few hours sleep.

So at about twelve 12 o'clock I started out towards the nearest cliff with my interpreters a Maricopa & Yavapai Boy leaving my men in camp laying around carelessly on their blankets. As soon as we came in speaking distance the Chief of the Apaches came out on a point of rocks & told us that we had followed them in from Weaverville to kill them. That they had taken our horses & mules and would

continue to do so & kill us whenever they could & wound up by saying that they had us this time. That we could not get out of the Canyon below as they had four hundred warriors as well armed as we were. They would then break out into loud laughing & yells.

After quiet was restored I replied to this great Chieftain that he was greatly mistaken in the character of his visitors. That we were great men in our own

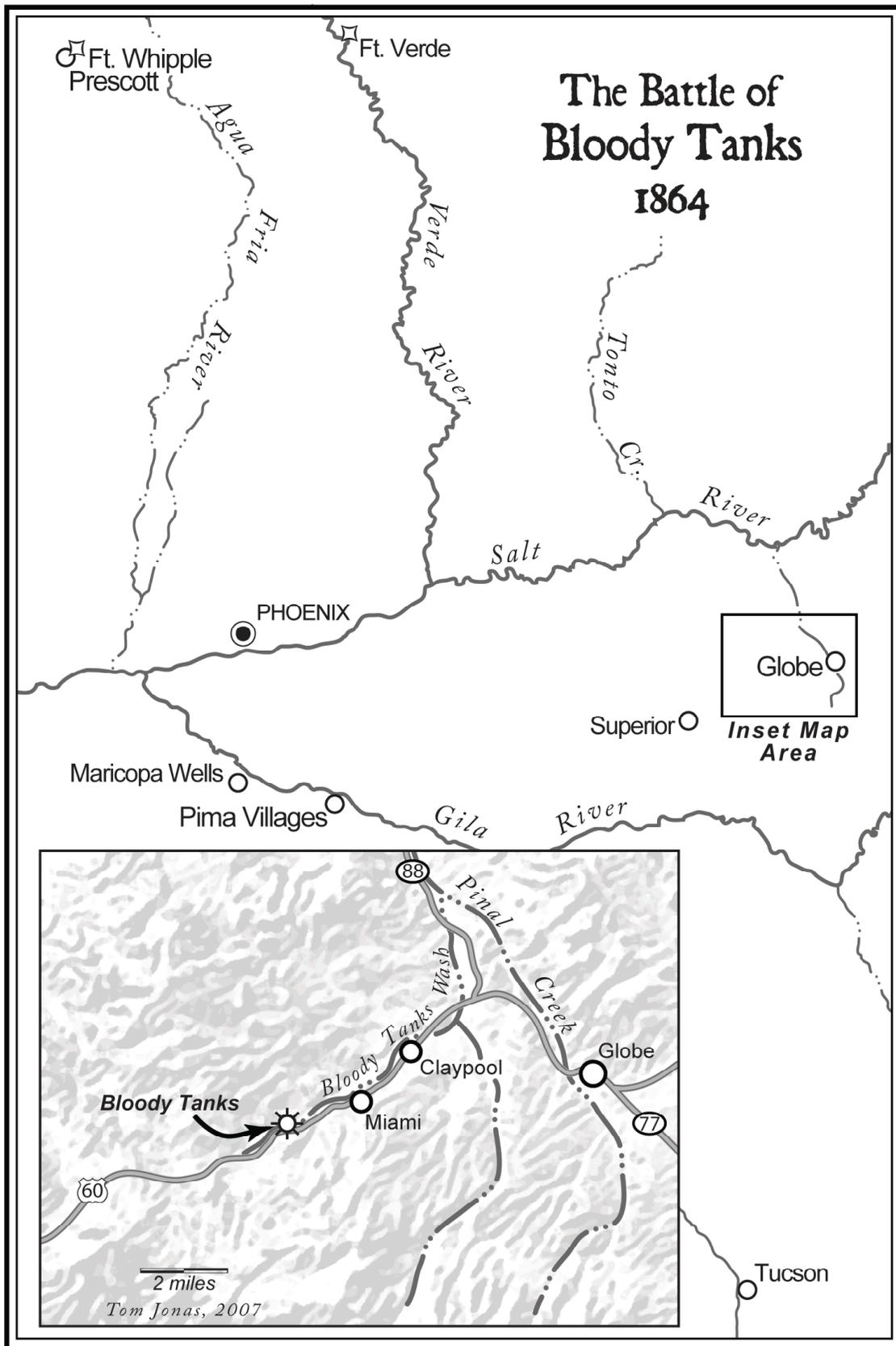
country & had come out here with the Chiefs of the Pimos & Maricopas & Yumas for the purpose of making a treaty with them & had followed the track of the stolen stock because we knew no other road into this country.

After some other talk, the chief came down to the foot of the cliff within 80 yards of where I was standing. He thinking that I was unarmed raised his gun to shoot saying that was all he was playing for. But the sight of my Sharpes carbine from under my blouse brought him to his senses. I then told him that if he attempted to ascend the cliff I would certainly shoot him & that he and his men must come in & have a talk with us.

After some hesitation he concluded to make the best of a bad bargain; so he called to



Maricopa Chief Juan Chivirea



his men to follow him into camp where the Maricopas had a feast prepared for them consisting Flour Pinola & Tobacco. They however only partook of the latter dish. They came into the camp to the number 30.

By this time the mountains as far as the eye could reach was covered with Signal Smokes & Indian runners came & departed in quick succession. I detained them some two hours waiting for the arrival of Big Rump from the north side of Salt River with 40 men as the runners had reported. (Big Rump is the chief of the Tontos.) About 4 o'clock P.M. a runner came into camp & reported that Big Rump would not come in until next morning.

About this time one of the Apaches struck Mr. Cyrus Lennan with a lance in the left breast killing him instantly. Of course a fight ensued in which 24 of the Apaches were killed dead on the ground besides several wounded. Our loss was one man (Mr. Lennan) killed & one Maricopa wounded also one horse killed in action.

We immediately packed up and traveled 12 miles that evening. Jan. 29th when near the Rio Agua Frio we met 2 Indians (Pinals) with 2 mules and 1 horse that they had stolen from the Hassayampa mine. We succeeded in killing one and badly wounding the other & retaking the animals.

We arrived safe at home Feb. 3rd having been absent 27 days. The Indians killed in this scout [were] Pinals & Tontos including one Yavepie or Apache-Moharve who arrived in camp before the disturbance broke out.

Those Yavepies or Apache Moharves profess friendship to the Whites But my opinion is they are as bad as any Indians in the Territory. They live on the western edge of the Walker & Weaver mines & number near one hundred Warriors. All of which is respectfully submitted.

Very Respectfully Your Obt Servt
King. S. Woolsey

There are some interesting differences between Woolsey's account and the memories of three others who were there.

The first published account of the battle was in a letter dated February 10, 1864, that appeared in the March 9, 1864, edition of the Sacramento Union.⁴ It was signed by a participant identified only by the initials J.K.S. His take on the battle's start was, "About this time a difficulty took place in which we lost one man, killed by a cut from a lance in the hands of an Apache, and the interpreter of the Maricopas was wounded, though not dangerously . . . we made good Indians out of 24 of their number--or killed them which is the same thing--besides what got away packing lead."

Several of the participants visited the Pima Villages within days of the battle where they were interviewed by J. Ross Browne, a popular writer and artist of the time, and by Charles Poston, the Territorial Superintendent of Indian Affairs.⁵ Browne later quoted from his shorthand notes: "Suddenly Woolsey drew his pistol, leveled it and shot Par-a-muck-a dead on the spot. This was the signal for the signing of the treaty. Simultaneously the whole party commenced firing upon the Indians, slaughtering them right and left."⁶

Poston, 30 years later, had this interpretation of the interview: "Woolsey was not only a brave but a very intelligent man, and he saw at once that either the Americans or the Indians were to be slaughtered, so he said: 'Boys, we have got to die or get out of this. Each of you pick out your Indian, and I will shoot the chief for a signal.'"⁷

Undated notes taken by historian Sharlot Hall from an interview with A. H. Peeples, who also participated in the battle, say: "Indian

boy warned Mr. P. that the Indians were only waiting chance to kill all party. A moment of treachery was soon seen and fight begun in earnest. Whites & Maricopas were far outnumbered but had advantages of owning guns--only a few Apaches had guns--rest had bows and arrows and spears."⁸

Woolsey's widow, Mary H. Taylor Woolsey Baxter, at the 1927 reunion of Arizona pioneers in Phoenix related the story as she said was told to her by Woolsey. The following is a reporter's paraphrase of her statement carried in a local newspaper:⁹

"Captain Woolsey had arranged with members of his little band to open fire on a given signal. He was to lift his right hand to his hat as the signal for opening hostilities whenever he felt the situation warranted it.

"The parley was progressing satisfactorily, when of a sudden an Apache runner came from out of the brush with a message that the Indians were to withdraw immediately from the conference; that another chief was approaching with several hundred braves with the avowed intention of exterminating the little band of white men. The message was interpreted into Spanish by a Yuma Indian and Captain Woolsey immediately gave the signal for the opening of the battle."

If Woolsey's actions precipitated the battle, why did he not say so? His position regarding the Apaches and Yavapais was clear and consistent. He stated it very flatly in his response to complaints that he later had killed Apache women and children as well as warriors.

In a letter to General Carleton dated September 15, 1864, Woolsey wrote, "It sir is next thing to impossible to prevent killing Squaws in jumping a ranchiere [sic] even were we disposed to save them. For my part I am frank to say that I fight on the broad platform of extermination."¹⁰

Woolsey and his band were treated as heroes on their return, and Governor Goodwin honored Woolsey by naming him as military aide with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel of Militia.

Despite Woolsey's raids and later efforts by the U. S. Army, Arizona's Apache uprisings continued for another 22 years, ending only with surrender of Geronimo's renegade band in 1886. Even then, there were occasional reports of small groups of Apache raiders active below the Mexican border in the early 20th century.

A Final Thought

Why was it that Woolsey did not make a point of denying the rumor about poisoned pinole? The reason is obvious; the rumor did not exist until at least a decade later. The poisoning rumor, probably started by political enemies, surfaced about the time of his campaign for Territorial Representative to the U. S. Congress in 1878, and became a part of Arizona folklore after Woolsey's death in 1879.



¹ National Archives, filed under "Salt River Scout, January 7, 1864." Photocopy in author's possession.

² The Maricopa and Pima warriors were armed with muzzle loading caplock rifles provided by the U. S. Army expressly for use against the Apaches.

³ Spellings of Chief Juan Chivirea's last name vary greatly from source to source.

⁴ Clara T. Woody, "The Woolsey Expeditions of 1864," *Arizona and the West*, Vol. 4 No. 2, 1962, page 163

⁵ Charles D. Poston, *Building a State in Apache Land*, ed. John Myers Myers, 1963, page 118.

⁶ J. Ross Browne, *Adventures in the Apache Country*, facsimile of 1871 edition, page 122.

⁷ Poston, *Building a State*, page 117.

⁸ Sharlot Hall Museum Archives

⁹ Newspaper clipping in Sharlot Hall Museum archives, dated April 13, 1927. Newspaper not identified.

¹⁰ National Archives, filed under "San Francisco River Scout, April 1st, 1864. Photocopy in author's possession.

