



# **A Little War of Destiny: The Yakima/Walla Walla Indian War of 1855-56**

*John C. Jackson*

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In August 1854, a minor incident along the overland trail led to the deaths of an impetuous young army officer and twenty-nine soldiers, the first casualties of the sometimes glamorized Indian Wars of the Great Plains. Next year a large military force was still trying to run down indiscreet Sioux when troopers of the inadequate western army rode into the Yakima heartland to punish the murder of a territorial Indian agent. A Little War of Destiny traces the tragic conflict between the native peoples of the Pacific Northwest and the Territorial Governments of Oregon and Washington. For almost half a century the Yakima and Walla Walla Indians learned to accommodate non-threatening fur traders and beaver trappers but treaty makers who came to restrict free movement and claim hunting ranges and fisheries were another matter. Columbia Plateau tribal leaders had enough previous contact with outsiders to grasp the implications of the documents presented to them and left the treaty councils in early 1855 apprehensive and resentful. In a few months hostilities led a United States Army punitive expedition to the brink of a military disaster. It was a military disaster that almost ended in massacre. Fearing the expansion of hostilities the pioneer communities responded by organizing a regiment of mounted volunteers and sending this amateur army to chastise the belligerent Yakima in their homeland. The officers of the territorial forces were leaders of the pioneer communities inexperienced in military operations and not much better prepared for strategic field operations or tactical engagements than the tribal chiefs they expected to meet in the field... and rout. After minor resistance, the intended targets melted away. Having failed to pin down and punish that enemy, the volunteer force was in the field and turned east to secure the Walla Walla Valley and its potentially dangerous tribesmen. Tension mounted as this small army approached the Indian heartland. The leader of the threatened Walla Wallas tried to intervene and offered himself as a hostage to the good behavior of his people. While captive in the volunteer camp Peo Peo Mox Mox was ruthlessly murdered. But a mounted charge and a battle that failed to scatter the opposition. During a three day fight in the bottoms of the Walla Walla River, the overmatched warriors managed to hold a battle line, stopping the volunteers long enough for their families to escape. Hostile or placative, the Indians of the Pacific Northwest were educated to the awful reality of territorial displacement and inevitable defeat. Treaties failed to abrogate the shock to a culture that believed they could not own the land the master of life entrusted to them. How could they sell it with marks made on a paper? They made agreements under the pressure of onrushing cataclysm and those tremors shook the plateau country. Tribesmen needed generations to fully comprehend what happened to them. That little war of inescapable destiny was caused by men, good or bad, who acted in good faith but made small human errors leading to an accumulating mistake and unavoidable tragedy.



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