

# Costs of the Modoc War

By RICHARD H. DILLON

IT IS NO SURPRISE that the story of the Modoc War has been distorted and its casualty lists over-estimated, involving as it did a fight against overwhelming odds in a volcanic slag-heap of twisted lava, cut by chasms and ridges. To the troops involved it was a nightmare; and even in the typically restrained and unemotional vocabulary of the official military report, we can detect some of the awe and respect awakened in the army by the fighting prowess of the little band of Modoc warriors led by Captain Jack. Maj. Gen. J. M. Schofield, in his report to the assistant adjutant general, Col. William D. Whipple, on November 3, 1873, wrote: "The Department of the Columbia has been the scene of a conflict more remarkable in some respects than any other before known in American history."<sup>1</sup>

This campaign, the only major Indian war fought in California, may be said to have been rivaled only by the Seminole wars of Florida in its drama of a small band of savages holding back—or rather *driving* back—the military forces, many times larger than their own number, sent against them by the United States government. There have been varying estimates of the cost, in lives and in dollars, of the Modoc War stated in books and magazines from the 1870's to the present. The money cost has been placed as high as a million dollars by some. Doris Palmer Payne writes:

. . . what a cost! Close to a million dollars in the currency of the day . . . seventeen of these braves were now dead having succumbed to bullets, shell fire or gallows. Yet for each of these redskins, the government had sacrificed the lives of at least a dozen men. During the whole campaign the total number of soldiers, volunteers and civilians killed by the Modocs ran into the hundreds . . . in fact, almost as many were killed in battle on the American side as in the whole Spanish American War!<sup>2</sup>

A figure as high as this can be arrived at by (1) estimating the amount of damage to persons, property, crops, and so forth; (2) adding the cost of participation by the state of California which came to \$4,441.33<sup>3</sup>; and (3) carrying the case against the Modocs back to their earliest depredations in the area.

As to the cost in lives, we have seen that Miss Payne says that "for each of these 17 redskins, the government had sacrificed the lives of at least a dozen men"; this would place her figure at 204. The official National Park Service pamphlet, *Lava Beds National Monument*, contents itself with saying on page 4 that "a small group of Modoc Indians, under the leadership of Captain Jack, repeatedly repulsed far superior numbers of United States soldiers and inflicted grave losses while sustaining practically none themselves." Another writer has reported that "during this war, which continued

from November 18, 1872 to June 1, 1873, more than 450 white soldiers were killed, with but few casualties suffered by the red men."<sup>4</sup>

The number of Modocs engaged in the lava-beds fighting, if we limit the period to the years 1872-73, is more closely agreed upon. Jeff Riddle, the son of Wi-ne-ma and Frank Riddle who were the government interpreters in the Modoc War, places the figure at exactly 52 warriors.<sup>5</sup> Miss Payne has the total at 53 Modoc combatants,<sup>6</sup> the same figure as that of A. B. Meacham.<sup>7</sup> The National Park Service pamphlet, quoted above, records on page 3 that the "small number of Modocs whose force totaled about 175, of which only about one-third were classed as warriors, prompted a feeling that the hostiles would be subdued easily."

It is only when we go to documentary sources that we find a clear picture of the Modoc War, a picture not befogged with romanticism and legend. Robert Allen, assistant quartermaster-general, wrote from the presidio of San Francisco, February 16, 1874: "The cost of the Modoc War to the Quartermaster's Department was \$355,000 more than it would have been if no outbreak had occurred."<sup>8</sup> This first estimate of costs was later revised by M. C. Meigs, quartermaster-general, who on June 26, 1874, sent the following communication to the secretary of war:

Sir: I have the honor to transmit herewith detailed statements of the cost to the Quartermaster's Department of the Modoc War, giving names of persons, &c., paid and remaining unpaid, as required by request of the House Military Committee of May 9, 1874 (copy herewith returned) amounting in the aggregate to \$411,068.18.

The expenditure, as shown by these statements, is \$56,000 greater than that reported by Gen. Robert Allen, February 7, 1874 and which was communicated from this office to Hon. James W. Nesmith, member of Congress, on that date.

These statements have just come to hand. It was impracticable to obtain them in time to present to Congress before adjournment.

I am, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

M. C. Meigs  
Quartermaster-General, U.S.A.<sup>9</sup>

The Indian wars aroused nation-wide concern in the 1870's, and, since the death toll was reputed to be very high, Congress requested information on the number of Indians and troops killed during the year 1873. Edward P. Smith, commissioner of Indian affairs, in answer to a senate resolution of March 19, 1874, requesting this information, prepared a circular and summed up the figures as follows:<sup>10</sup>

Indians captured by United States troops.....	227
Indians killed by United States troops.....	405
Citizens killed by Indians.....	44
Soldiers killed by Indians.....	48

Of this number, Commissioner Smith lists the Oregon-California lava-beds total as 27 Modocs captured, mostly women and children, and 18 Modocs killed, including 7 men, 8 women, and 3 children. When the list of

citizens and soldiers killed is broken down we find the toll to include: one general (E. R. S. Canby); one peace commissioner; one captain; 5 lieutenants; 4 sergeants; 4 corporals; 3 buglers; 24 privates; one cavalryman, no rank given; one artilleryman, no rank given; one packer; two members of the First Oregon Volunteers; three citizens, and two Indian scouts.

It would certainly appear from these figures that the Modocs tried to make every shot count by concentrating their fire upon the leaders of the army force and inflicting heavy casualties upon them, in comparison with the toll they exacted from the much more numerous privates. Fabulous stories of the marksmanship of the Modoc warriors have been told, and this casualty list, by rank, would seem to bear out these claims. Jeff Riddle says that in the first three days of fighting every trooper-casualty was hit either in the head or the neck.<sup>11</sup>

In this same casualty report of Smith's, compiled for 1873, we find the break-down of units involved in the lava-beds campaign: First Oregon Volunteers, First Cavalry, Twelfth Infantry, Twenty First Infantry, and Fourth Artillery. All of the 50 men killed in the Modoc actions fell during the months of April and May 1873, starting with the murder of Gen. E. R. S. Canby and the peace commissioner, Rev. E. Thomas, on April 11. As to the number of Modocs involved in the lava-beds war, Gen. A. C. Gillem, who commanded the troops in the Modoc area, wrote:

Since the termination of the Modoc war I wrote to Dr. McElderry to learn the number of Modoc warriors engaged during that war, and how many of them were killed, to which he replied as follows, viz:

Your note of inquiry in regard to the number of Indians killed from the 11th April to the end of the Modoc war, is at hand. The Modocs, themselves, while at this post, (Fort Klamath,) said that they had lost 5 warriors during that time, viz: 3 killed during the three day's fight, (2 by explosion of a shell, and 1 by rifle ball,) 1 killed at Sorass Lake, and 1 at the time of the Thomas massacre. They stated that several old squaws were killed during the three day's fight. There were forty warriors at this post belonging to the tribe. This corresponds to the account of Dorris and Fairchild, both of whom, you remember, always contended that this was the actual number of fighting warriors belonging to the Modoc tribe.<sup>12</sup>

It will be seen from certain of the excerpts quoted above that the temptation to overstate the case for the Modoc War has been yielded to by some authors. Such overstatement was not necessary, for the terse official communiques themselves manifest the uniqueness of this savage campaign.

#### NOTES

1. 43d Cong., 1st sess., H. Ex. Doc. 1, pt. 2 (rep't, sec'y war), p. 52.
2. Doris Palmer Payne, *Captain Jack, Modoc Renegade* (Portland, Ore., 1938), pp. 255-56.
3. H. H. Bancroft, *History of California* (San Francisco, 1884-90), VII, 457.

4. Kay Campbell, "Lava Beds National Monument," *Pacific Pathways* (June, 1947), p. 7.
5. Jeff C. Riddle, *The Indian History of the Modoc War* (San Francisco: privately printed, 1914), p. 3.
6. Payne, *loc. cit.*
7. A. B. Meacham, *Wi-Ne-Ma* (Hartford, 1876), p. 137.
8. 43d Cong., 1st sess., H. Ex. Doc. 185, p. 4.
9. 43d Cong., 2d sess., H. Ex. Doc. 131, p. 1.
10. 43d Cong., 2d sess., S. Ex. Doc. 22, p. 2.
11. Riddle, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
12. 44th Cong., S. spec. sess., S. Ex. Doc. 1, pp. 17-18.