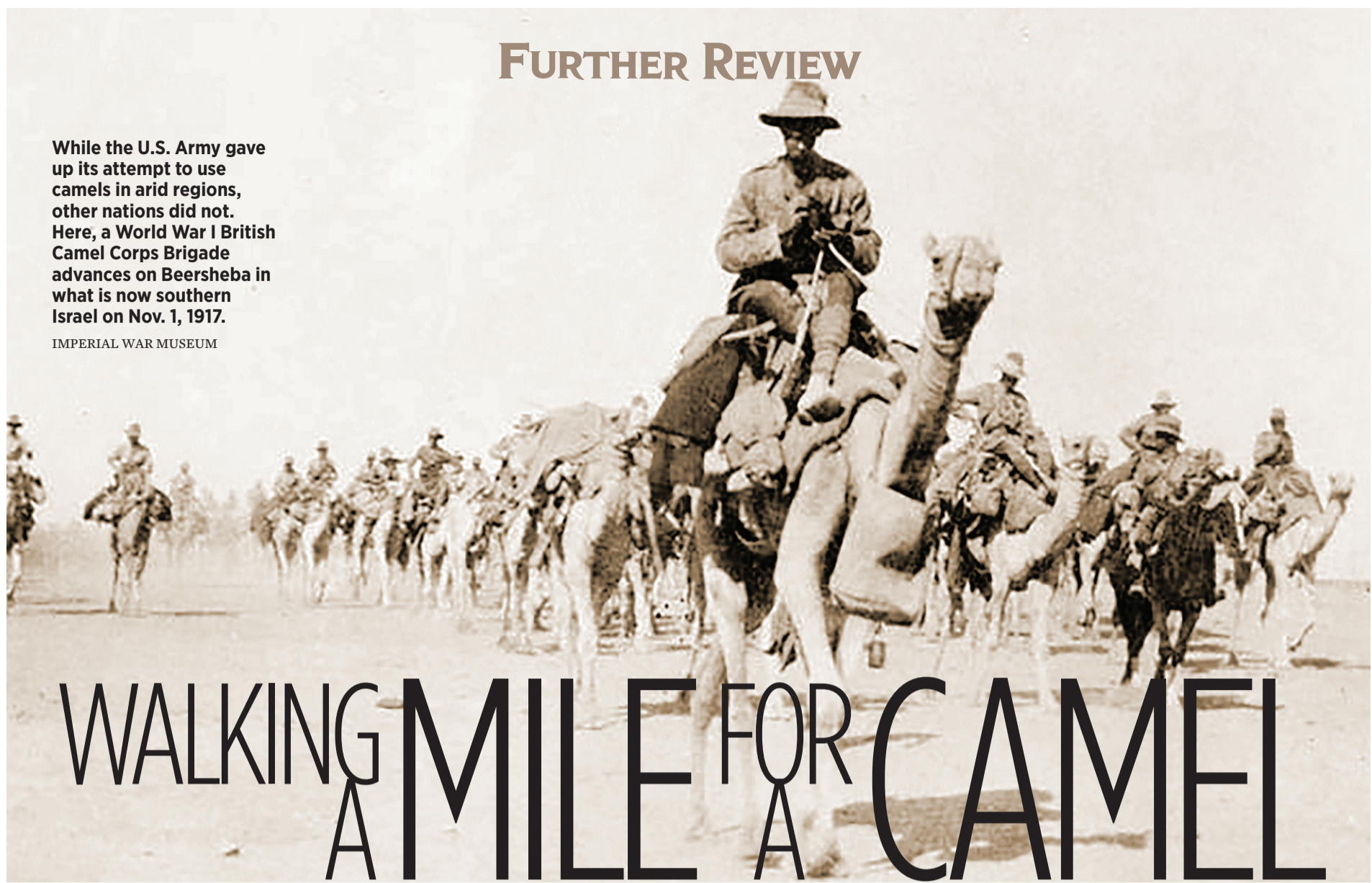


FURTHER REVIEW

While the U.S. Army gave up its attempt to use camels in arid regions, other nations did not. Here, a World War I British Camel Corps Brigade advances on Beersheba in what is now southern Israel on Nov. 1, 1917.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM



WALKING A MILE FOR A CAMEL

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

The idea seems like a simple one, not to mention a good one: equip the U.S. army with camels instead of horses or mules to ease movements and operations in the ever-expanding Western territories of the 1840s and 1850s.

On March 3, 1855 — 170 years ago Monday — Congress appropriated funds for the Army to buy and train camels.

It might have worked out, too ... were it not for a little military disruption called the Civil War.

BRINGING CAMELS TO AMERICA

As the United States acquired Texas and began pushing westward toward California, the U.S. Army found it increasingly difficult to operate in arid regions it found there.

As early as 1836, the idea of using camels instead of horses or mules had been floated. But no one took the suggestion seriously until 1848, when Maj. Henry C. Wayne of the Quartermaster Corps began pushing for camels. He gained an ally with Mississippi Sen. Jefferson Davis, but again, Congress wasn't inclined to allocate funds to such a project.

Flash forward to 1855, when Franklin Pierce was president and Davis had become Secretary of War. That year, Davis managed to talk Congress into appropriating \$30,000 to acquire enough camels to give them a



A two-humped Bactrian camel is loaded onto the USS Supply. Sailors were forced to modify the ship to carry these larger camels.

U.S. ARMY

tryout.

Davis gave Wayne the job of traveling to the Mediterranean region to select and buy camels. The USS Supply was tasked with

bringing them to the United States.

Wayne bought 41 camels of several different breeds in Turkey, Egypt and Tunisia, as well as saddles and other equipment and hired five Arab

camel drivers.

The camels arrived in Indianola, Texas, on May 14, 1856, and by June, had been marched to the new home of the U.S. Camel Corps at Camp Verde, in central Texas. A few months later, a second shipment of 29 more camels arrived.

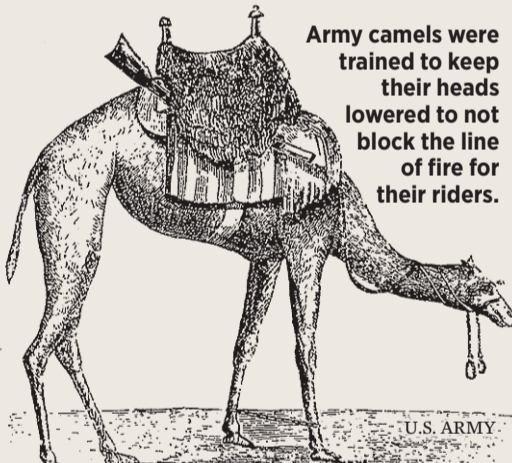
Soldiers began training in how to care for the camels as well as how to load and ride them. The camels were used in a number of long supply and reconnaissance missions in and around the Southwestern territories.

In 1860, Lt. Col. Robert E. Lee, a military engineer, took the camels on a long-range patrol. He and other leaders gave the camels high marks, but military leaders lost their willingness to experiment with camels as the Civil War loomed.

UPSIDES TO USING CAMELS

- Camels could carry heavier loads than mules or horses.
- Camels needed little food and water compared to mules and horses, so expeditions would need to carry less food for them.
- Camels could eat food growing along desert routes that mules and

- horses would not.
- Camels didn't require shoeing.
- Camels could ford rivers much easier and with a smaller risk of drowning.
- Camels could climb mountain trails better than wagons and wouldn't get stuck in the mud like wagon wheels.



Army camels were trained to keep their heads lowered to not block the line of fire for their riders.

U.S. ARMY

DOWNSIDES TO USING CAMELS

- Caring, equipping and even riding camels required a different set of skills than caring for or riding a horse or mule.
- Troops often got motion sickness riding camels.
- Camels smell *really* bad — so bad that it bothered soldiers and horses.
- When excited or

- exerted, a camel would blow mucus out its mouth or nose.
- When under stress, a camel will show its displeasure by vomiting.
- Camels tend to poop without much warning for anyone who may be standing or riding behind them.

END OF THE TRIAL

Southern states began to secede from the Union in late 1860 and early 1861, causing a number of changes that would affect the U.S. Army and its Camel Corps.

Davis, who had returned to the U.S. Senate in 1857, resigned from office and was eventually elected president of the Confederate States of America. Lee, too, resigned his commission, became a military adviser for Davis and, later, was given command of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia.

Texas officially seceded from the Union on March 2, 1861. But, two days before, Confederate troops had captured Camp Verde, where more than 80 camels and two of the Arabic camel drivers were based.

Confederate troops tried using camels to transport food and cotton between Texas cities and Mexico but soon gave up their efforts. A few of the camels were sent elsewhere and a handful were simply turned loose.

When the U.S. Army regained control of Camp Verde in 1865, troops found 66 camels still there. Five were sold to the Ringling Brothers Circus and some were made into jerky. Some were sent to Arizona, where they lived out the rest of their lifetimes.

And some were left to wander through the Southwest, where legends about them grew.



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

One of the very few photographs of a camel of the U.S. Camel Corps. This was around 1863 at San Pedro, Calif., near what is now Long Beach.



U.S. ARMY

Eight decades after the end of the Army's experiment, U.S. soldiers stand in line — upwind, presumably — for a camel ride in India in 1942.

'HAWMPS!'

If any of this sounds familiar to you — and if you're of a certain age — then it may be due to a comedy movie about the Camel Corps released 49 years ago this May, in 1976.

"Hawmps!" starred James Hampton, Christopher Connelly and Slim Pickens as U.S. Cavalry personnel who were excited to get a shipment of "Arabians." They're shocked to discover their new mounts are not Arabian horses, but Arabian camels instead.



MULBERRY SQUARE PRODUCTIONS
Christopher Connelly and James Hampton in the 1976 comedy "Hawmps!"

The opening prologue of the movie says that in the days before the Civil War, "an extraordinary experiment took place that could have changed the face of the Old West. If successful, the horse would be replaced in the United States Cavalry by the camel. This is the way it happened.

"Or at least, essentially the way it happened. Sort of."