



A Brief History of the Modoc War

War in the Lava Beds

The Modoc War was the only major Native American war fought in California and the only one in which a general was killed. It was also one of the most costly wars in U.S. history. According to some estimates it cost \$10,000 (about \$300,000 today) per warrior to subdue the Modocs in battle. The Modoc warriors totaled between 50 and 60, while there were as many as 1000 U.S. troops at the height of the conflict. The war lasted six months, from November 29, 1872 to June 1, 1873, although tensions leading to the conflict began much earlier.

Much of the war was centered around Captain Jack’s Stronghold, a natural lava fortress characterized by deep trenches and small caves. The Stronghold was named for the Modocs’ war leader Keintpoos, or Captain Jack as he was known to the settlers. Some 150 Modoc men, women, and children lived in the Stronghold for five months of the war, including the harsh winter months. By the war’s end, the fatalities included 53 U.S. soldiers, 17 civilians, 2 Warm Springs Scouts, 5 Modoc women and children, and 15 Modoc warriors, five of which were killed in battle.

Background to the Conflict

The sagebrush-covered basins and forested mountains of central northern California and southern Oregon were the homeland of the Modoc people. Their settlements were scattered along the shores of Tule Lake, Lost River, Clear Lake, and in Butte Valley where they lived on fish, waterfowl, wild game, seeds, and bulbs gathered from the surrounding areas.

As non-Indian emigrants entered the region and established homesteads near Lost River, some demanded that the Modocs be relocated to the Klamath Reservation, north of present-day Klamath Falls, along with the Klamaths and members of the Yahooskin band of Paiutes. Conditions on the reservation were poor. The Modocs had trouble adapting to a new lifestyle and did not receive adequate provisions from the government to help ease the transition. Additionally, there was friction between the Modocs and Klamths. For many Modocs the reservation would never be “home.”

Captain Jack and other Modocs left the Klamath Reservation and asked for a reservation of their own

along Lost River. The presence of the Modocs unnerved some of the settlers, who again demanded that they be removed. Oregon Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Alfred Meachem, convinced Jack to return to the reservation late in 1869. After their return, conditions were no better and tensions between the Klamaths and Modocs continued to mount. In April of 1870, Jack along with 371 other Modocs, left the reservation and returned to their Lost River homeland. There were a number of Modocs, however, who remained on the reservation.

The War Begins

The Modoc War began on November 29, 1872, one day after Army Major John Green left Fort Klamath with orders from the Bureau of Indian Affairs to move the Modocs back to the Klamath Reservation. Green encountered a Modoc force nearly equal in number to his troops and, while reluctant to attack without being certain of victory, fighting eventually broke out. The ensuing battle, the Lost River Battle, caused the Modocs to flee by boat, crossing Tule Lake, to take refuge at the Stronghold on the southern end of the lake. As Captian Jack’s band fled to the Stronghold, an unauthorized attack on a Modoc village across the river was carried out by a group of civilians. These skirmishes resulted in the burning of Captain Jack’s village and the deaths of a

Modoc woman and child. An enraged group of Modocs traveled east around Tule Lake and killed 14 male settlers. A third band of Modocs, who were not involved in the early fighting, joined Jack and his group in the Stronghold after being warned of an angry group of settlers as they rode toward Fort Klamath seeking amnesty.

The Battle of the Stronghold

On the morning of January 17, 1873, a dense fog surrounded the Stronghold as more than 300 soldiers and volunteers launched their assault, after nearly two months of preparation.

The troops were confident of an easy victory and were convinced that their guns would “astonish and terrify the

Modocs.” However, they lacked knowledge of the terrain and of the Stronghold’s natural fortifications. They were confused by the fog, exhausted by the bitter cold, and overwhelmed by the rugged terrain. The soldiers, stumbling and bloodied by bullets and the jagged lava, retreated. They left behind weapons, ammunition, and the dead. The Modocs had won a decisive victory.

Attack on the Peace Commission

Following the First Battle of the Stronghold, several meetings were held between Army and Modoc leaders. As the two sides tried to reach a peace agreement, the Army continued to increase its number of troops. At each meeting, Captain Jack requested a reservation in the Modocs' Lost River homeland. When talks broke down, President Grant organized a peace commission to meet with the Modoc leaders. The night before the peace commission meeting, April 11, 1873, the Modocs held a meeting of their own. They assembled to vote on whether or not they should kill the peace commissioners. Despite Captain Jack's pleas for peace, he was outvoted by the Hot Creek Band and others.

Frank Riddle and his wife Toby, a Modoc who was later known as Winema, were to attend the meeting as translators. Toby warned the commissioners that the Modocs were planning an ambush, but they chose to ignore her warning. The following day eight Modocs met the four peace commissioners (General E.R.S. Canby, Reverend Eleazar Thomas, Peace Commissioner Alfred Meacham, and Indian Agent Leroy Dyar) just west of the Stronghold.

After Canby again declined the request for a Lost River reservation, Captain Jack, using a revolver that he had smuggled in, shot General Canby. The rest of the Modocs opened fire, killing Reverend Thomas, as Dyar and Meacham, who also had guns, began shooting. Meacham was wounded and partially scalped, but survived. Dyar and the Riddles escaped unharmed.

Response to the Attack

The second attack on the Stronghold began four days after the peace commission killings. The army planned to surround the Stronghold and force the Modocs to surrender. On April 17, the troops captured the Stronghold, only to find it deserted. The Modocs had escaped during the night toward the lava flows to the south using the deep trenches of the Stronghold for cover.

On April 26, a patrol of 69 men led by Cpt. Evan Thomas and Lt. Thomas Wright left Gillem's Camp to try to locate the Modocs. As they stopped for lunch they were fired upon by a small group of Modocs commanded by Scarfaced Charley. In 45 minutes, two-thirds of the patrol

was killed or wounded. Both Thomas and Wright were killed in the fighting. The battle ended when Scarfaced Charley ordered the Modocs to cease their attack and allowed the remaining soldiers to return to Gillem's Camp.

War's End

The Modocs suffered their first defeat on May 10 when an attack on troops camped at Dry Lake was repulsed. Ellen's Man George was killed in the skirmish, one of the few Modocs to fall in battle. Following the defeat, the Modocs quarreled about whether to surrender. They dissolved back into small, independent bands. On May 22 the Hot Creek band surrendered. In return for amnesty, the Hot Creeks tracked Captain Jack, who surrendered on

June 1, effectively ending the war that had brought suffering and tragedy to Modocs, settlers, and soldiers alike.

After the War

The Modocs who had attacked the peace commissioners were imprisoned at Fort Klamath, where they were tried and convicted of murder. On October 3, 1873, Captain Jack, Schonchin John, Black Jim, and Boston Charley were hanged. Barncho and Slolux had their sentences commuted by President Grant and were sent to Alcatraz. Nearly 2,000 people attended the hanging. The attendance of all Modocs was mandatory.

Twelve days after the hanging, 163 Modocs were sent as prisoners of war to the Quapaw Agency in Oklahoma. Their population dropped by one-third after their exile. Many died of tuberculosis. The Indian Agent Hiram Jones was put on trial and relieved of duty in 1879 for giving the Modocs substandard food, supplies, and medical care.

In 1909 any Modoc who wished could return to the Klamath Reservation in Oregon. Some returned, while others remained in what had become their home. In 1978 the Modoc Tribe of Oklahoma was federally recognized and eight years later the Klamath Tribes, including the Modocs, were reinstated as a federally recognized tribe.