Aaron Talbot And The Old Apache (March 1867)

An old Mescalero Apache warrior sat cross-legged on the ground while staring into the darkness. He sang a song of prayer to the Spirits. He had spent the previous three days and nights alone while sitting in a cave. It was his sacred place, discovered during his youth. He had come here many winters past as a boy wanting to become a man among his people.

He had experienced waking dreams that prepared him for the trials of manhood. Now, fifty years later, he had returned. He hoped for new visions to guide him from his present life to the spirit world.

Gone were the muscles and vigor of youth, replaced with a wiry frame held together with gristle and determination. The old man was tired and ready for whatever the Great Spirit shared with him. The hot, New Mexico sun had given him a tough, leathery skin that was drawn tightly over his body. So tight that his bones protruded where once muscles had flesht everything out.

Three days ago, he had left the company of his family, promising to return after he had his vision. His son had come to the edge of the entrance to this holy cave. His son’s wife and three children waited at the camp set up about five miles away. It was a temporary camp and would be home to the family just until the old man returned.

A vision did come as the morning of the fourth day saw the sun appearing above the eastern horizon. It was not a vision of a simple death with a journey into the spirit world. Instead, it was a vision of a battle. He was at the side of a white man, and the two of them were fighting against a Comanche war party.

One warrior was swinging a tomahawk at his head when he suddenly awoke. He was uneasy about the vision and puzzled about what it meant. He started swaying as he continued his song of prayer. He wanted to know if the image showed his death.

As he sang, he became uneasy. He sensed something was wrong with the world outside of the cave. Bodaway (Firemaker) uncrossed his legs and attempted to stand. He groaned a bit as his joints creaked and popped with his movement. When he finally rose, he nearly fell back to the ground from stiffness and weakness.

When the stiffness and short spell of dizziness subsided, he moved toward the opening of the cave. As he emerged from the darkness into the light, he squinted and looked around through his nearly closed eyes. He found some pemmican and a waterskin where he had stashed them three days before. He took a few swallows of the water and chewed on a piece of the pemmican. He felt the goodness flow down into his stomach.

Another swallow of water followed by a piece of the pemmican broke his fasting. Then he staggered away from the mouth of the cave. Within a few minutes, he was walking at a brisk pace toward his family’s campsite.

It took him well over an hour to cover the five miles to their temporary home. He was upset with himself that he was moving at such a slow pace. As a young man, he would have taken much less than an hour to cover such a short distance.

He was nearly home when he found the body of his grandson. It was sprawled across a boulder. He had been shot in the back, and his scalp had been taken.

Bodaway stopped beside the remains of the six-year-old boy and stared into the sky as he said a brief prayer to the Great Spirit. Then he lifted him off the rock and cradled him in his
arms. Grief and anger coursed through his veins as he steadily walked toward the campsite carrying his grandson.

The camp was destroyed, with everything being smashed or cut into ribbons. His two granddaughters lay on the ground near what had been the center of the site. Their father had been killed while trying to defend them. All three had been shot and scalped. After a brief search, he discovered their mother’s body inside the shredded tepee.

As Bodaway gathered their bodies, he studied the signs left behind by their attackers. He steadily worked two days preparing everything so that their souls could enter paradise. After caring for their remains, Bodaway sat at the place where his granddaughters had died. He stared into the distance. He softly sang a death song for his lost family while waiting for his vision to come true.

The sun was moving toward the western horizon when Bodaway came out of his self-induced trance to see a Tonkawa warrior crouching at the edge of the clearing that defined the campsite.

The warrior made no threatening moves. He just crouched there, staring at Bodaway. Before he could speak to the Tonkawa, he heard a loose pebble click against a stone somewhere behind his position.

He pretended not to hear anything as he inched his hand toward the knife concealed in his breechcloth. He would take the life of the person at his back before the Tonkawa could react and interfere. Then he would deal with him as well.

Aaron Talbot belonged to a company of Texas Rangers that did not officially exist. It was the summer of 1866, and Texas was being run by people known as carpetbaggers. They were profiteers who had set up their own police force while making sure the Texas Rangers no longer existed.

These people were too busy looting the state to bother protecting the citizens. Three companies of Texas Rangers had been authorized after the war but never officially formed since no funds were approved.

A group of ranchers and businessmen in West Texas organized their own company of Rangers. They worked to keep the peace while avoiding the Texas State Police.

Aaron had left Arkansas just a short time after returning home from the war. His family had been killed by Confederate deserters during the confusion that marked the end of the war. He had spoken to one of the murderers before killing him. He had a name and a trail that led into Texas, where reconstruction was underway.

After a few months of hunting buffalo with a group of ex-confederate soldiers, Aaron decided it was not the kind of life he wanted. Besides, he was hunting other prey.

Texas was a big state with many opportunities. He would travel across it and live off the land until he found one of those opportunities or got wind of a particular former Confederate soldier.

Red Hawk was a Tonkawa Indian without a home. A vicious Comanche attack had destroyed his village and killed his family. Red Hawk did most of the scouting for the group of hunters. He always watched for any signs of Comanche war parties while locating scattered buffalo herds. Often he guided the men away from run-ins with the Comanche. Groups of
Mexicans often raided with them. In many ways, these Comancheros were worse than the Indians they accompanied.

Red Hawk sensed in Aaron, another man with a deep sadness in his heart. In a brief time, they became friends.

Aaron and Red Hawk spent considerable time together. They presented quite a contrast. Aaron was six feet tall with a framework that stretched his buckskin shirt and Confederate army trousers to their extremes. A slouch hat shaded his eyes while a military-style belt held a Bowie knife. A holster with its Colt Army pistol added to his appearance of ruthless efficiency.

Always alert and aware of his surroundings, Aaron rode a dun-colored horse. He sat tall in the saddle. The stock of a Henry repeating rifle jutted out of its scabbard on one side of his saddle while a tomahawk hung on the other side.

Red Hawk was just a bit over five feet tall with baggy leather leggings and jerkin covering his lean, sinewy frame. His hair hung to his shoulders and was held in place with a Yankee forager cap. Around his waist was a military-style belt holding a Colt Navy revolver.

He rode a pinto pony and carried a .50-70 breechloading rifle in a scabbard attached to a light saddle. He tended to slump in his saddle because he was in the habit of closely watching the ground for signs of life when not studying the distant horizon.

Whenever the two men rode out on a scouting trip, they presented an unlikely sight. Their competence was unquestioned. Aaron had been readily accepted into the hunting group when he demonstrated his prowess with a rifle. He put a slug through the center of an ace of spades at a hundred yards with a borrowed Sharps rifle. Besides, his Henry rifle significantly increased their defensive firepower.

Although Aaron appeared to dominate their partnership, the Tonkawa warrior was the actual leader on any scouting expedition. Aaron had learned tracking and scouting techniques during his travels after the war. However, he was still an amateur by American Indian standards.

When Aaron left the group, Red Hawk went along with him. They traveled west, avoiding scattered Comanche parties and occasional United States Army patrols.

From time to time, they came across a destroyed cabin. Once or twice, the destruction was fresh, and the men stopped to bury dead families. The signs of torture and mutilation fostered a deep dislike of Aaron’s part toward the Comanche warriors and their behavior.

Eventually, they reached El Paso. They heard about a company of Texas Rangers that was being formed in the area. It was supported by local ranchers and businessmen. The company would operate in the western part of Texas, where the Yankee police and army were seldom seen.

Aaron signed on as a ranger while Red Hawk was appointed a position as a scout. At first, there were some problems in the town concerning Red Hawk. It all concluded the day five scruffy looking men rode into El Paso.

After some time in a saloon, the men came outside looking for some fun. They were carrying several bottles of whiskey, and drinking it like it was water. They were spread along the front of the saloon when Red Hawk rode past. Two of the men moved into his path, causing him to stop for a moment. One of the other men grabbed a rope from his horse and lassoed Red Hawk, pulling him from his pony. The first two grabbed him by the arms before he could do anything.
The men were fixing to hang him when Aaron came out of a building just across the street. He started across the street with his hand on his revolver as three other men carrying rifles followed him out of the same building. They took up positions across the front of the building with their rifles at the ready.

Stopping in front of the drunken men, Aaron said, “You fellas drop that rope and let this man alone. He works for the Texas Rangers.”

“There ain’t no Texas Rangers,” one of the men loudly mumbled.

Another one said, “All I see is an Injun lover. You better move along, or we’ll be hangin’ you too.”

The men started to laugh but stopped when Aaron lifted a double-barreled shotgun from his side and laid it in the crook of his arm.

The three rangers who were backing him up changed their demeanor as they raised their rifles to their shoulders.

One of the drunken men took the rope from Red Hawk’s neck and suddenly shoved him toward Aaron while reaching for his gun. He had just cleared leather when a shotgun blast blew him off his feet.

As the others reached for their guns, Aaron shifted his aim toward the man standing by the remains of the dead man. The four men froze and slowly moved their hands away from their pistols.

Pointing toward the dead man, Aaron said, “You all take what’s left of that piece of trash and get outta town. If’n you ever come back, I’ll shoot you on sight.”

The men threw their partially filled whiskey bottles to the ground and picked up the dead man. As they tied his body onto his horse, Red Hawk finished dusting himself off and walked over to one of the men. He stood next to him and waved a scalping knife before speaking directly into his ear, “You will give me back my gun, or I will slit your throat.”

The man blanched and shakily took Red Hawk’s pistol from his belt and handed it to him. Red Hawk kept staring into the man’s eyes as he took the gun and stepped back. Then he turned and walked away as the men all mounted and rode out of town.

As the men rode from town, the bartender came out of the saloon and stood by Aaron. He wiped his brow with a towel and said, “You fellas just kicked open a hornets’ nest.”

“Why do y’all say that?” Aaron replied.

“They’s Comancheros. They came into town from Mexico on their way north to join up with a big trading party in New Mexico. Then they’ll come into Texas to trade with the Comanches.”

The other three Rangers had joined Aaron and Red Hawk in front of the saloon and heard what the bartender said. One of the Rangers, a man named Jack Slade, said, “We know who the Comancheros are and what they do.”

“Yeah, but you don’t know that the man you done killed is the brother of their leader. After they all get together and do their trading, we’ll probably be getting a visit from them.”

“We’ll worry about that when it happens,” Slade replied.

“Here’s somethin’ else to worry about,” the bartender said, handing Slade a small sack. Opening the sack to look inside, Slade said, “We got ourselves a problem.”
He emptied the sack onto the boardwalk and threw it aside. Seven scalps lay scattered on the boards.

Red Hawk said, “They Apache scalps. Three from woman, one from old man, and three from children.”

Slade said, “I have seen this before. Those men are scalp hunters. They sell scalps in Mexico for bounties, or they sometimes trade them to the Comanche. Either way, the Apaches get all stirred up and go on the warpath. A lot of settlers will die if these scalp hunters are active in Apache territory.

“I notice there aren’t any warrior scalps in that bag,” Aaron said.

“Nah, women, children, and old men are easier to kill. The scalps ain’t worth as much, but there ain’t any danger in collecting them.”

“Maybe we should follow those four and see where they go.”

“You and your friend, Red Hawk, here can do as you please,” Slade said, taking a folded piece of paper from his shirt pocket. He slowly unfolded it and continued, “This here is an order telling us to stand down. There ain’t no more Texas Rangers, and a company of Yankee cavalry is comin’ to El Paso to maintain order.”

Aaron looked at Slade and said, “Red Hawk and I left five minutes ago.”

An hour later, Red Hawk and Aaron were following the trail left by the four Comancheros. They had hardly gone a mile before spotting a body alongside the road. It was the man Aaron had killed. He had been dumped and stripped of anything of value.

Moving on, the two men took turns as the lead tracker. The Comancheros were easy to follow until they got into Apache territory. Then they became more cautious. The Mescalero Apaches roamed throughout southeastern New Mexico and killed Comancheros on sight.

When they finally came within sight of the four men, it was late on the second day out of El Paso. The men had met with some others and were setting up camp for the night. The two former rangers moved close enough to the men to hear some of their conversations.

The leader was talking to one of the men from El Paso, and he was upset. “You tellin’ me that some ranger killed my brother over a damn Injun?” he said.

“We couldn’t do nothin’ about it. There was too many rangers, and they had the drop on us,” was the reply.

“You four know what he looks like? The one what shot Dirk?”

“Yeah, we all saw him.”

“So you all can point him out when we ride into El Paso after our business with the Comanche. Right?”

“Yeah. We’ll help you kill him.”

“Okay, then,” the leader said, drawing his pistol and shooting the speaker in the stomach. Then, holstering his gun, he continued, “That was for losing the scalps.”

The wounded man lay on the ground, moaning while clutching the hole in his belly.

“I ain’t gonna put up with your moaning all night. I want to get some sleep. We got a good distance to travel tomorrow.”

He pointed at the wounded man and said, “You three been ridin’ with him so you can shut him up. Just do it quietly. Then come and get some grub.”
One of the men picked up a large rock and caved in the skull of the dying man. Everyone got quiet for just a minute before the rock wielder started to strip the body of valuables. He was unbuckling the gunbelt when the camp was stirred up by the entrance of a Comanche warrior. He quickly dismounted and gave a brief glance toward the recently killed man as he approached the leader. He said something in his native tongue and pointed toward the north.

The leader turned to his men and said, “Waco, stop playing with that piece of trash, and all of you listen close. Bloody Wolf here found us some scalps to collect. Tomorrow we’ll get back the ones that those three gave away.”

Aaron and Red Hawk silently backed away and made a cold camp about a half-mile away from the Comancheros. They spent much of the night making plans.

The rising sun saw the two men circling around the Comanchero camp. They planned on setting up an ambush at some point along their route. The idea was to whittle down their numbers before they confronted them in an open fight.

They found a likely position two miles to the northeast of the camp. Red Hawk located a rocky outcrop that overlooked their expected route of travel. Since the Comancheros had a two-wheel wagon carrying their trade goods, they had fewer trails to pick from. Aaron secured their horses and found a spot for himself. Red Hawk was already well hidden. They would kill several of the Comancheros and then move on to another location.

They waited until midmorning before the Comanchero wagon came into view. Two men rode in front of the wagon, and another trailed behind. They were not paying much attention to their surroundings, and the driver was nursing a jug of firewater. The others were not to be seen. They must have gone after the scalps of some Apaches in the area.

No one noticed anything when Red Hawk’s arrow killed the trailing rider. His second arrow killed the wagon driver. The sudden slackening of the reins startled the horses pulling it, and they stopped moving.

The two leading riders finally noticed something was wrong. They stopped and turned, reaching for their guns. Aaron shot them both out of their saddles.

When no other riders appeared, the two men moved down to examine the wagon. They discovered various trade goods that included old rifles, gunpowder, and several bags of scalps. Several small kegs of whiskey were buried beneath everything.

They stripped anything of value, including their weapons, from the dead men and threw it all into the wagon. They unsaddled the dead men’s’ horses and threw the tack into the wagon as well. Then, while Red Hawk chased the horses away, Aaron lit the wagon on fire.

While the wagon was burning, aided by the gunpowder Aaron had spread over the guns, he and Red Hawk rode west. They figured on cutting across the tracks left by the other Comancheros. They would follow them and watch for an opportunity to attack them. The wagon had burned without any explosions and little smoke. The Comancheros should be unaware that anyone is hunting them.

It was early in the afternoon when they found the tracks left by the Comancheros. They were traveling northwest and moving fast. Sometime during the day, the two men passed out of Texas and entered New Mexico. Since they were no longer Texas Rangers, that was not a problem.
It was near sunset when they came across an odd scene. An old Mescalero Apache was sitting in the center of a campsite with a shredded tepee of sorts. There were five fresh graves along the northern edge of the site. The old man was staring in that direction.

Red Hawk circled around the site and took up a crouching position facing the old man. The two of them quietly stared at each other. Meanwhile, Aaron approached the old man from behind. He carelessly bumped two pebbles together. When he did, he saw the old man slowly reach toward a knife in his belt.

Aaron stood perfectly still as the old man suddenly jumped to his feet and drew his knife. He rushed toward Aaron but had only taken a step before falling flat onto his face. His knee joints had tightened up while he sat and refused to obey his mind.

Stepping onto the old man’s hand, Aaron reached down and took his knife. When he backed away with it, the old man got into a kneeling position and started singing his death song. He only stopped after Red Hawk walked over to him and said something into his ear. They said a few words to each other, and the old man stood. He made no movements while Red Hawk talked to Aaron.

Red Hawk explained what had happened to the old man’s family. Aaron watched the old man while Red Hawk spoke to him. When he finished, Aaron said, “It was probably the same bunch we’ve been following. This attack took place several days ago, and their scalps were probably in the wagon we burned. Now they are after another family somewhere nearby.”

Red Hawk nodded and said something to Bodaway, who quickly answered.

“What’s he saying,” Aaron asked.

“Bodaway say another family camped two hours north of here. Today they would have moved toward the rising sun. His people have learned that they must constantly move around.”

“You think they are the ones the Comanche scout had spotted?”

“Bodaway say no others within a day’s travel of here.”

“Can he lead us to them? It will be quicker than trying to follow the Comancheros, and we might be able to set a trap for them.”

“Him want revenge. He say we follow him.”

Aaron returned his knife. Bodaway returned it to its sheath and walked into the remains of his tepee. He threw an old, tattered buffalo skin to the side. Beneath it was a bow and a quiver of war arrows. Next to the quiver was a small pot of black paint.

Aaron gave Bodaway a questioning stare. Bodaway returned the look and, in English, said, “These for my journey to the Great Spirit if I no survive my seeking. Now they want to find the hearts of those who killed my family.”

After quickly drawing black lines across his forehead and on each side of his face, Bodaway threw the container aside and said, “We go now.”

Bodaway led the way out of the camp. He was on foot while the other two men rode after him. He maintained a steady pace that many younger warriors would have found difficult to match.

After several hours and two brief stops, Bodaway suddenly signaled another halt. Aaron and Red Hawk reached for their rifles but stopped when Bodaway made a yipping sound similar to a coyote. There was a similar response from a short distance ahead. It was followed by the sudden appearance of an Apache warrior.
As the man approached Bodaway, he held an old muzzle-loading rifle in his left hand. His right hand was raised in a greeting of friendship. Bodaway responded with the same sign, and the two men had a short discussion. Then they both turned as Aaron and Red Hawk rode up to them.

The Apache said, “The old man says you are to be trusted. I think maybe he is old and foolish to trust a white eye and his Tonkawa friend. But scalp hunters kill his family, and he had a vision. I trust you for now, but I will kill you very slowly if you betray me.

Aaron looked directly into his eyes and said, “We seek the scalp hunters, not the Apache. They are coming for your family and are aided by a Comanche.”

“We go,” the Apache replied.

Yellow Quill, the Apache warrior, led them to his camp. There were six others in his party, and they were in the process of setting up their tepees.

Red Moon, Yellow Quill’s brother-in-law, his wife, Day Star, and their three children were erecting one tepee. Yellow Quill’s wife was preparing a meal in front of her completed home.

Red Moon signaled the others to stop working. They watched Yellow Quill lead the others into the camp. When everything appeared to be alright, he directed them to continue their chores. He met the riders and extended his right hand in greeting.

Red Moon’s left arm was missing. He had lost it during a fight with a Comanche war party raiding in Apache territory.

The five men held a quick meeting and decided how they would defend the camp. They had to move fast since the Comancheros must be close at hand.

Red Moon would sit with the women and children near the fire in the center of the camp. Bodaway would wait in the partially completed tepee. Yellow Quill and Red Hawk would keep watch from a high outcrop near the camp’s eastern edge. Meanwhile, Aaron stayed among some rocks at the camp’s northern boundary.

They did not have long to wait. The Comanche scout was the first to appear. He came from the south and slowly rode into the clearing with his hand raised in the sign of peace. Red Moon stood and returned the gesture. As the Comanche continued to move toward Red Moon, he raised his right hand higher and touched an arrow in his quiver. His bow was in his left hand, and it would take a few short seconds to grab an arrow and fire it into Red Moon’s chest. Then the others would swoop in to kill the others.

When the Comanche realized that the Apache had only one arm, he sneered at him. He turned and signaled to the others. As they came storming in from the west, he grabbed an arrow from his quiver. He quickly nocked the arrow and started to swing the bow into a firing position.

He never completed the movement. Bodaway stepped out of the tepee and shot one of his war arrows into the Comanche’s chest. A look of surprise appeared on the warrior’s face, but it was quickly erased when a second arrow caught him in the throat and knocked him off his pony.

The five Comancheros kicked their horses into a faster gallop and rode toward the center of the camp. Red Moon stood in the open. They were so focused on him, they ignored Bodaway, much to their own detriment.
Red Moon pulled a tomahawk from under his shirt and threw it at the approaching riders, catching one of them in the shoulder and knocking him from his horse. The women and children had scattered, and Red Moon flattened himself behind a log next to the fire.

Bodaway fired another arrow, tearing open the cheek of the leader, who screamed in pain and motioned to his men to ride him down. The resulting confusion caused the mounted men to become entangled with each other. Red Moon scampered to his feet and headed to the edge of the camp. Aaron stepped out into the open and started shooting his Henry at the confused riders. He had fired one shot, hitting a man in the shoulder when three more riders appeared at the southern edge of the camp. They were Comanches and riding fast.

Aaron shifted his focus toward these three newcomers while the Comancheros were close to Bodaway. They were stopped when Yellow Quill killed one with a good musket shot, and Red Hawk put an arrow into another. The three surviving Comancheros were all wounded and trying to getaway. They had lost all interest in killing any of the people in the camp. As they turned their horses to ride past Bodaway’s location, Yellow Quill fired a second shot, knocking another rider from his horse with a shattered skull.

Bodaway saw the leader approaching. He hardly felt the impact of the slug from his pistol as it caught him in the stomach. He threw himself in front of the man’s horse, causing its legs to become entangled with his body. As the horse went down, it flipped over and broke its neck. The rider was trapped beneath its body.

Bodaway’s body was twisted awkwardly, but his arms were still functional. Blood flowed from his belly wound, and both of his broken legs were useless. He pulled himself up and over the dead horse to where he could reach the pinned man. The man was screaming and pulling the trigger on his empty pistol. The screaming changed to a gurgle when Bodaway plunged his knife into the man’s left side and macerated his kidney while tearing open a long gash. The gurgling quickly ended when the two women appeared with their own knives.

The last rider had reached the edge of the clearing. Red Hawk put an arrow into his back. The man threw his hands into the air and fell from his horse.

Aaron had been kept busy by the three unexpected Comanche warriors. Using his Henry, he shot two of them off their ponies before they got ten feet into the clearing. The third man turned and fled into the rocks and trees from where they had appeared. One of the other warriors followed him with his arm hanging uselessly at his side. Aaron let him go and turned his rifle toward the Comancheros. The fight was over except for one wounded Comanchero. He was sitting near the fire at the center of the camp.

The Comanchero was feebly touching the tomahawk in his left shoulder. When he finally worked up enough nerve to pull it free, Red Moon brained him with a second one.

Everyone gathered around Bodaway as he was dying. His expression was peaceful as he motioned to Aaron to come near. As Aaron bent down, Bodaway whispered into his ear, “This knife was a gift to me from Victorio. I give it to you. It will be honored by any of the People you meet.” He held out the bloody knife and died as Aaron took it from his hand.

The next day, Aaron and Red Hawk decided to head for Santa Fe. El Paso was in Carpetbagger country and needed to be avoided.

Yellow Quill and his family would travel along with them for a few days before turning north to their tribe’s stronghold.
Bodaway lay in an honored place and would be remembered by all who fought by his side. The Comancheros lay where they fell, food for the vultures. Their scalps adorned a lance carried by Yellow Quill.