

WARRIORS

A Jason Peares Historical Western

Jeffrey Poston

Warriors

By Jeffrey Poston

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Lomas & Turner Press
www.JeffreyPoston.com

ISBN: 978-0-9916194-1-2

1. Main category—Fiction: Westerns
2. Other category—Fiction: Action and Adventure

First Edition

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Chapter 1

“They will exterminate us,” the Apache warrior muttered to himself.

Juh (pronounced Hoe) walked slowly down the steep path under the high cliff face. He glanced up at the inaccessible caves of the ancient cliff dwellers. There were no paths from the river up to the cliffs where the caves sat higher than even the tallest trees, so Juh figured the ancient people must have used ladders or ropes.

A part of his mind reflected on the vision he’d experienced earlier in the afternoon. At the same time, he absorbed the beauty of the surrounding land. The sky was a deep, azure blue and there was not a cloud to be seen anywhere. Even high up in the mountainous pine country, it had been a scorching day.

The leader of warriors stopped his descent for a moment and gazed back up at the cliff face behind him. Only leaders and elders on vision quests were allowed to approach the ancient caves. He looked at the particular rock depression that seemed to call to him hours ago. Below that high cave opening, he’d spent the better part of the day seeking, and ultimately finding, his vision.

He continued his journey down, following the narrow stream of water as it meandered through the wide valley. He crossed, agilely hopping atop exposed rocks, and entered the protective canyon that branched off to the north of the main river valley. Shadows of late afternoon crept over the dozens of tepees lining the banks of the Middle Fork of the Gila River as Juh observed his people attending to their chores. They seemed at peace and he shared their feeling of security. Only three major paths led into the valley, and warriors constantly guarded these for intruders. Many narrow hidden trails allowed egress from the valley, if needed.

Yet, he knew that safety was a fleeting concept, a temporary dream of false hope, where the white man’s army was concerned. Just recently the black soldiers had journeyed two moons, all the way from the place they called Texas, to join the war against the native populations. Even the oldest and wisest leaders were bewildered by the black man’s involvement.

The warrior leader of the Apache tribe passed children playing in the water. He watched them for a moment and breathed deeply as a feeling of pride and love enveloped his soul. It was followed instantly by a deflating sadness and he wondered if any of the children playing before him would grow to reach adulthood. As Juh proceeded toward the tepees, he decided finally that the children would not be told of his vision. It would serve no purpose to spoil their young lives by telling them how bleak their future was.

Chapter 2

The gunshot brought Jason Peares out of his heat-induced drowsiness. He inhaled a deep breath of hot, dry desert air as the adrenaline rush of impending danger raced through his body. He caught a hint of the pungent odor of sagebrush and the more pleasant, spicy scent of desert evergreens.

When his eyes finally focused in full awareness, he found he already had a gun in his left hand and his Winchester rifle was raised and ready in his right. A dozen years of gun confrontations and a thousand fast draws had ingrained instant reactions in his brain.

He'd been just on the near side of dozing in his saddle, his body rocking comfortably in time with the slow gait of his horse. As he always did in hostile territory, he rode with his Winchester balanced across his lap, his right index finger resting across the trigger guard, and with his left hand resting on the butt of a pistol stuck in his belt. Most times on the long trail, he never even bothered to hold onto the reins, usually letting his well-trained horse simply follow the trail.

In addition to his belt gun, Jason wore a double-gun holster. The gun pockets were slung lower than most holsters, placing both gun butts in excellent position for a quick draw with minimal arm movement. Leather straps at the bottom of each gun pocket were loosely tied around his thighs and kept his rig secured. An observer, when he rarely passed one, might have thought him foolish for wearing all that hardware across the scorching desert. Certainly he was uncomfortable, but years of outlaw life taught him that having weapons ready for a fast reaction to danger was far more important than the inconvenience.

Despite what the army said about keeping the native people under control, Jason knew he rode in hostile Apache land. While he had no qualms with the natives of southern New Mexico, Jason knew they would treat him as they would any other intruder on their land.

As he scanned the desert around him, pointing his gun and rifle in all directions, the thought finally occurred to him that the sound he heard was not the sharp report of a nearby gunshot. Distance had muffled the gunshot, made it sound more like an echo. Almost as soon as he came to that conclusion, he heard several more distant shots.

He recognized the deep, throaty echoes from the army's standard issue single-shot fifty-eight-caliber Springfield carbines. The sharp reports of the Winchester repeaters that raiding Apache warriors preferred answered the army weapons.

Jason tucked his pistol back into his belt and guided his mount toward the top of the low hill where the echoes of battle seemed to be coming from. Atop the swell, he gazed down into the near distance to find a small detachment of soldiers riding rear-guard behind a racing stagecoach. Every now and then one of the soldiers turned in his saddle and fired at the half dozen warriors pursuing a couple hundred yards back. While one soldier reloaded, the other two turned in sequence to take a shot.

Very efficient army tactics, Jason thought.

Whenever possible, Jason liked to avoid well-traveled trails through hostile country, mostly because of the sight below him. The folks in the stagecoach were lucky to have an army escort. Otherwise, the battle would be over already, or maybe there never would have been a battle in the first place.

Jason had chosen his own trail, following a winding path through the low hills north of the main route. That way chances were pretty slim he'd ride into an ambush like the stagecoach had. He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully as he gazed down at the running exchange of gunfire.

Even though the stage driver ran his six-horse team full out, the warriors should have been able to overtake their prey with ease. The attackers might have lost one or two of their number in the

battle, but three soldiers shooting back over their shoulders at six charging warriors with Winchester repeaters wouldn't survive a determined attack. Suspicious, Jason scanned the terrain ahead of the stage from his vantage point.

He knew this part of the southern New Mexico landscape formed a natural depression. The shallow valley stretched many miles wide from the flatlands near Deming, then narrowed as it ran northwest to the foothills of the Mogollon Mountains where Silver City sat. The stage trail below him didn't follow the valley exactly. Rather, it paralleled the Mimbres River north from the valley, allowing stage passengers and the coach horses to have access to water during the long trip.

When the river turned sharply east before continuing north again only a few miles from where Jason now sat, the trail headed west to rejoin the relative safety of the wide valley. The stagecoach company accepted the risk of having extra travel time in proximity to water only because of the army's promise of help in that dangerous stretch of land. Cavalry escorts from Fort Bayard near Silver City or Fort Cummings near Deming assured safe passage of all stagecoaches.

As he searched the terrain ahead of the stagecoach, Jason immediately recognized the warriors' strategy. The trail traced through a series of draws and no doubt the soldiers hoped to get the stage into the first draw so they could dismount and prepare a defense against their attackers. Already, one of the soldiers raced ahead of the stage to secure the area. Clearly, the army commander knew the warriors were herding the stage into a potential ambush as the pursuing warriors neither gained ground nor fell back. If the attackers had brethren waiting in the next draw, there was no need for the pursuers to accept even minimal losses. All the warriors needed to do was chase the stage into a two-sided ambush and the battle would be over in seconds.

Jason flipped his Winchester barrel down and slid it into the scabbard in front of his right knee. He reached back behind his saddle pack and pulled out his long rifle. The single-shot Spencer was modified with a forty-four-inch octagonal barrel. A powerful scope was mounted to the top of the barrel to allow extreme long-distance shooting. Jason had hit stationary targets just under a mile away with the weapon.

He dismounted and steadied the thirteen-pound weapon across the saddle. He peered through the scope, scanning the trail as it dipped ahead of the stage. As expected, he saw movement in the draw below the line of sight of the approaching stage and soldiers. It would be quite a long shot at the extreme edge of his range. He'd succeed only if his targets stayed put while he tried to hit them from such a great distance, and he'd only get one shot. As soon as the distant warriors knew he had them in his sights, they'd smartly start moving around. Hitting a moving target a mile away could only be the wildest stroke of luck. Regardless, massacre awaited the soldiers and the travelers on the coach as soon as they entered the draw.

Jason turned his attention to the victims, focusing his scope on the racing stage. As near as he could tell, seven or eight civilians filled the big coach to capacity.

Jason had only half a minute to act before the coach and the pursuing warriors were out of his effective range. He wanted to fire a warning shot to discourage the warriors from their raid, but he knew with all the gunfire and the thunder of hooves down on the trail, neither the soldiers nor the warriors would hear his shot. He didn't want to take a life, but he didn't seem to have any other choice. Kill one to save a dozen. It didn't take much brain work to figure that one out.

The horse whinnied and shook its head, then pawed the ground with its left hind leg.

"Easy, Grady." Jason patted the horse's flank and spoke gently to the animal, as if it could understand him. "Things are fixin' to get a bit noisy, but it's nothing you haven't been through before."

Two years back, he'd found Grady waiting patiently by his dying master's side on the plains of western Texas. The grizzled old man sat leaning against a tree in the middle of nowhere, waiting for someone to come along and see to his burial. He'd been gored by a wild steer and trampled by several others, and both his legs were broken in more than one place. The left side of his chest was caved in nearly to his backbone.

"I got careless," the old man croaked when Jason fed him water. "I shoulda quit this work like the missus told me." The old man managed enough strength to grab Jason's arm. "Just take care of Grady for me."

The obedient horse whinnied as if it knew its name and Jason glanced over. When he looked back, ready to ask after the old man's kinfolk, he was dead.

Over the past couple of years, Jason had come to appreciate Grady. The big roan was tough, yet gentle, and was very obedient. The animal possessed great stamina and had carried Jason through the worst that man and nature could conjure up. He liked its color, too. The animal wore a reddish-brown coat that was thickly interspersed with gray.

He related to Grady as if the animal had a personality and the horse responded to Jason similarly. He'd trained Grady not to react to the sounds of weapons fire and had even shot the Spencer off the saddle a few times. He knew the animal would not spook.

He grabbed a trio of fifty caliber shells from a saddle pocket, locked one into the Spencer's chamber, and took aim. He sighted down into the valley and made his adjustments to account for the half-mile distance and his target's forward movement.

When Jason pulled the trigger, Grady skittered only slightly against the tremendous explosion of sound. The cartridges packed the powerful explosive force of a hundred-seventy grains of black powder, propelling a seven-hundred-grain bullet toward its target at more than fifteen hundred feet per second.

The recoil of the weapon slammed against Jason's shoulder and his right boot slipped a bit. The rifle barrel bounced up, then dropped back down against the saddle, the scope right in front of Jason's waiting eye. In less than a second, Jason ejected the first spent shell and inserted another. He aimed and pulled the trigger a second time in case the first shot missed.

When the scope dropped back down in front of his eye, he reloaded a third time and waited. A fifty-caliber bullet with that much force behind it pretty much destroyed whatever it struck.

There were women and children on that stage. Had the battle been only between the warriors and the soldiers, Jason would have left it alone. He had no interest in taking sides in the war between the army and the Apache, but in his mind war should never involve unarmed civilians.

He mentally counted three seconds and knew his first shot missed. His aim was true on the second shot.

Chapter 3

Juh and his band had been on the move almost constantly for the last six summers. His people spent most of the year in their mountain stronghold of northern Mexico, but they always welcomed the opportunity to journey north and visit with family and friends of Victorio and Nana's bands. Lately, though, the two other leaders rarely had their people together on the Warm Springs reservation north of the Gila at the same time.

When Juh brought his people up into the valley of the Gila River, he learned both Victorio and Nana had taken their people even farther north into the Black Hills and the San Mateo mountains to elude army scout patrols. So, instead of continuing north to Warm Springs, Juh camped his people on the banks of the Middle Fork of the Gila River where it merged with the West Fork. Hundred-foot-high cliffs protected the camp from the occasional high winds that raged through the wide-open Gila Valley. During the extremely hot weather, the cliff walls shaded the camp for most of the day.

Though the US Government had reclaimed the Warm Springs reservation that had been promised to Victorio in exchange for his treaty of peace, the army could never discover with certainty when Victorio or Nana and their people were actually present on the reservation. The army routinely sent out detachments to scout for the Apache, but the mountain landscape made the deployments difficult. Apache lookouts always saw and heard the noisy and carelessly advancing soldiers. By the time the army arrived at a camp, the entire Apache village would have moved. Juh's camp on the Gila River was no less secure. It wasn't as safe as the stronghold in Mexico, but the bluecoats rarely scouted into the high mountain valleys.

Juh's tepee, and those of his wives, sat in the center of the camp. Those of other elders and warriors of status were clustered a comfortable distance from his. He approached the camp from the rear since the doorways of all the homes faced to the east in the Apache tradition. He greeted some of the women and children with a smile as they walked around him, then paused beside the door of the tepee occupying the position of honor to the left of his own as he faced it. The thick hide flap swung to the side as if the occupant had been summoned by some hidden signal.

An elderly woman, stooped with advanced age, walked out to meet him. She stood wordlessly as he greeted her.

"Grandmother," he said. "You look well today."

She nodded and smiled, showing gaps of missing teeth. "I opened my eyes this morning and I am still breathing. That is no small thing."

Juh smiled in return. Though she was not his blood relative, he called her Grandmother as a name of great respect, as did everyone else. Two generations removed from his own parents, Grandmother was said to be the oldest living Apache of all the tribes. Over a hundred summers old, she was the most respected of all the elders.

Juh always thought her round face held a distinguished beauty, as if she held the wisdom of the ages in her countenance. The outer corners of her eyelids drooped downward and made her look sleepy or unaware. Sometimes he didn't know if her eyes were actually open, but Juh suspected she saw everything and her mind was as sharp as anyone's.

As always, he shared his discovery with her first. "I have had a troubling vision."

She nodded knowingly. "I remember a time when no one had ever seen a white man. In those days, the Apache were hunters instead of warriors. When I was a child, we could travel for two moons in any direction and never depart Apache land. Those days are no more."

Juh nodded and explained what he saw in the cave. “I will speak to the people after the evening meal.”

Grandmother nodded and Juh went into his tepee. The *White-Eyes* called him a chief. They seemed either unwilling or unable to learn Apache names or customs. To prove how little they cared to learn about his people, white folks sometimes referred to any Apache as Chief, so much so that Juh considered the word an insult. Failure to honor or accept cultural differences was one of the primary reasons why the Apache and the army remained at war. Juh was convinced the *White-Eyes* sought to destroy all they feared and to force change on all they could not understand. There seemed no room in the land for a culture that was different from that of the white man.

He reflected on the new army tactics—sending black soldiers after his people. Grandmother had told the other elders long ago that the slaves had found a way to find their freedom by accepting the white man’s ways and living in his culture, by his rules. She said that, as distasteful and foreign as it seemed, the Apache would also have to find a way to do the same.

The elders of the tribes had scoffed at her notion, and had chosen to continue waging war. Now Juh realized Grandmother was right. She had known for years what he had just discovered that very day.

Juh lay on his favorite blanket. As was accorded his status, his tepee was more spacious than all the others, and he could stretch out his six-foot frame twice over without touching the walls, even with his arms reaching over his head.

He sat upright for a while, gripping his hands in frustration. Safe in his solitude, Juh displayed the emotions he felt, a luxury he allowed himself only in private. He banged his fists together a few times.

After a few fitful moments, he simply held his head in his hands and rocked slowly forward and back. Then he banged his fists together again. The Apache and the *White-Eyes* would never live together in peace.

He remembered back so many years ago when his father explained to him the meaning of the term *White-Eyes*.

“The name comes from an old Apache word that really means pale-eyes,” his father had said. “Except for some half-breeds, all Apache have dark eyes. Until the white man came into our land, we had never seen a person with eyes of blue or gray or light brown. No one remembers how ‘pale-eyes’ became ‘white-eyes,’ but now—just as they call us *Chief*—we call all outsiders *White-Eyes*, whether their eyes are pale or dark.”

Finally, Juh lay back and folded his hands across his stomach. He took a deep breath to calm himself, then exhaled in exasperation. Juh was leader of the band of Nednhi Apache. It had taken him a long time to understand why the *White-Eyes* referred to all the southern Apache tribes as Chiricahua. Perhaps it was for convenience, or maybe it was so they wouldn’t have to learn all the names that distinguished each tribe.

Geronimo led his group of Chiricahua Apache, Victorio led his Warm Springs Apache, and Nana led the Mimbres Apache. The white man had grouped all the tribes together under one name that they could understand—Chiricahua.

In the beginning, the whites’ lack of understanding of such obvious Apache tribal differences angered Juh. In time, though, he accepted that it made little difference how they viewed the Apache people. In fact, there were differences in the religions and customs among the white races, but Juh could no sooner explain those differences than whites could describe the different Apache customs.

Juh was a leader, but not so much because of his accomplishments as a warrior, although his deeds in war contributed greatly to his status. As with all Apache leaders, Juh was elected to his position because of his wisdom and his medicine.

He sighed again, acknowledging another major difference between the Apache and the *White-Eyes*. The medicine of the whites was totally different from Apache medicine. Their medicine most often took the form of strange liquids and powders, which they used to heal their sick and wounded. When Juh was younger and first learned of these white men called *doctors*, he found it inconceivable that they would cut into their wounded with metal blades. Indeed, this cutting was a form of healing in the white cultures. In time, the Apache had occasion to approach white doctors when Apache natural methods could not heal a battle wound or a strange new illness. In this regard, the white man's medicine was powerful.

To the Apache, natural herbal remedies of the land were only a small part of spiritual medicine. The Apache made spiritual medicine also for purposes other than healing. A warrior was rarely elected to lead his band if he possessed no such medicine. Those he led must believe in the power of his medicine or they would not follow.

Juh's medicine was his power to foretell the future. Literally, his name meant *He Sees Ahead*. Long ago, his father learned of Juh's ability and named him accordingly. Now, Juh's vision had shown him the future of his people. He'd lead them back to Mexico and they'd follow him because they believed in his medicine.

After the evening meal, he planned to share his vision as he had done many times before. Over the years he'd proven that his medicine—his ability to see visions of what was to come—was strong. No one ever doubted what he saw in his visions would most certainly become reality.

Juh heard a scratch on the cloth door of his tepee. When he pushed the flap aside, he was surprised to discover the entire area was in the deep shadow of early evening. He'd fallen asleep. His youngest and only surviving son, Daklugie, stood silently for a moment until invited to speak, then he relayed his mother's instructions to summon Juh to the fire. His beautiful wife, Ishton, favorite and best loved of all his wives, had let him rest.

Juh followed his son and took his place in the clearing where his people would eat their evening meal. Ishton's servants had spread skins and blankets in a semicircle in the clearing for Juh and his men. No warriors or leaders from other bands visited, so Poncé, Juh's *segundo*—second in command—took the place of honor immediately to Juh's left. Other warriors sat to the left of Poncé in accordance to their rank and fighting reputation, while the elders sat to Juh's right. Women and children sat beyond the warriors and elders.

When all were seated, Juh held up a hand and was greeted by instant silence. He lit a cigarette of tobacco rolled into an oak leaf and smoked it in the ceremonial way, without inhaling. He sucked in just enough smoke to fill his cheeks. He savored the bitter flavor for a moment, then rose and blew smoke to each of the four directions. After extinguishing the tobacco leaf, he sat and raised his hand again and the women began serving the food as directed by Ishton.

Everyone ate in silence. During the meal, Juh made no conversation, nor asked for any. When he saw that everyone had finished, he looked at the warriors seated to his left. Then he considered Grandmother, the most respected of the elders, seated directly to his right. She nodded to him, a single down-up movement of her head. He nodded in return and briefly considered each of the other elders.

Juh gestured to Ishton seated on the far side of the clearing and she immediately dismissed all the small children. Only adolescent males in training to become warriors were allowed to remain with the adults.

“We are the *Indeh*,” Juh began. “The Dead.” He paused to let everyone consider his words. “This I have seen in my vision on this day. The *White-Eyes* will kill us all.”