

NEW FACTS ON THE BATTLE OF MILK CREEK
SEPTEMBER 29--OCTOBER 5, 1879
Written by Brad L Edwards
Edited by Roberta Edwards

The two advance companies of the White River Expedition first sighted the upper reaches of the Milk Creek valley near 10:00 a.m., September 29, 1879. The White River Expedition's commander, Major Thomas T. Thornburgh, 4th Infantry, was awed, in all likelihood, by the escarpment, which arose to his right. He did not know that within two hours he would be dead and those ominous mountains would someday bear his name. The White River Expedition's mission was to intervene in the sour relations between U.S. Indian Agent Nathan Meeker and the people of the White River Ute Indian tribe. But, Thornburgh's command, only twenty miles from the White River Ute Agency, would not complete their mission. This was as near as they would come to their objective. What Thornburgh and Meeker could not have known, was that the White River Utes were about to execute the simultaneous massacre of Indian Agent Meeker and his civilian employees, and ambush the White River Expedition in a narrow valley in an effort to wipe them out.

Major Thornburgh and his troopers were posted at Fort Fred Steele, located near present day Rawlins, Wyoming. Thornburgh's assembled command consisted of elements of the 3rd and 5th Cavalry; with a company of infantry in reserve on their back trail, camped at Fortification Creek. All told, Thornburgh had 150 soldiers and 30 civilians under the Army's employ. His officers and NCOs were, for the most part, solid and experienced. In particular, Capt. Joseph Lawson had seen lots of action fighting

Indians.¹ Also, among the officers was young Lieut. Samuel Cherry. Lieut. Cherry would distinguish himself in the coming battle by conducting a brave and stubborn rear guard action, which prevented this fight from becoming a disaster, akin to the Custer Battle three years earlier.² Major Thornburgh's senior officer was Capt. J. Scott Payne. Although in ill health and getting on in years, Capt. Payne would rise to the challenge and ably assume command upon Major Thornburgh's untimely death in the opening minutes of the battle. The fiery Joe Rankin provided scouting for the White River Expedition. Joe's cousin, M. Wilson Rankin, would publish the most important primary source account of the Battle of Milk Creek (also known as the Thornburgh Battle) in 1935. Rankin's book, "Reminiscences of Frontier Days," contains a wealth of information about early northwest Colorado history and, of course, the Thornburgh Battle. The historical record shows that the expedition was not traveling light;³ Thornburgh had between sixteen to twenty wagons filled with a wide assortment of equipment and supplies. The thirty teamsters with the White River Expedition were kept busy driving this long wagon train.

By 10:30 a.m., September 29th, Thornburgh, Payne, Lawson, Cherry and Rankin, with two companies of mounted troopers, had crossed Milk Creek and were starting the ascent to Yellow Jacket Pass, some four miles to the southwest. Bringing up the rear, the wagon train, escorted by Lieut. Paddock and his company of troopers, was just beginning to enter the flat barren bench where they would arrange the wagons into a makeshift corral and defensive barricade for the coming six-day siege they were to endure. The old

¹ Mark E. Miller, "Hollow Victory," page 21.

² Fred H. Werner, "The Meeker Massacre," page 125, Appendix B.

³ Author's Note: Among the many artifacts recovered while doing fieldwork in the spring and summer of 2000 was 44-paired spare horseshoes.

trail they followed on this eastern end of the Milk Creek valley is quite narrow. It was in this narrow funnel where the Army's wagons overtook the wagons of contract freighter John Gordon.⁴ Back in the van, Thornburgh instructed Lieut. Cherry to take five men and trail blaze a more direct route up the rolling ridges and hills to Yellow Jacket Pass. This decision by Major Thornburgh probably saved his command from certain slaughter.

Less than one mile away, to the southwest, the Utes had concealed themselves on a narrow ridge, overlooking the old trail. This valley is narrow and devoid of cover. Had the Ute war chiefs' ambush gone undetected, the entire expedition may have been wiped out. Lieut. Cherry spotted the hiding Utes when he gained the crest of Confrontation Ridge⁵ and had a clear view towards the southwest to the ridge where the Utes were concealed.⁶ Upon discovery of the hidden Utes, Lieut. Cherry returned to Major Thornburgh to apprise him of this intelligence. Major Thornburgh and his advance troopers were still in the flat, open valley of Milk Creek and highly vulnerable if the Utes should occupy the crest of Confrontation Ridge overlooking his position. Reacting quickly, Major Thornburgh ordered Capt. Payne's company up the slope to his left and Capt. Lawson's company up the slope to his right. This was done to occupy the northern end of Confrontation Ridge. These maneuvers were executed quickly. By 11:00 a.m., Major Thornburgh had positioned his troops in a "V" formation, facing the southwest.

⁴ Author's Note: I recovered many artifacts still lying on the surface of the ground where John Gordon and his employees abandoned their wagons to seek shelter from the Utes who had outflanked the advance elements of Thornburgh's command.

⁵ Author's Note: I have named the first ridge the troopers climbed from the Milk Creek crossing Confrontation Ridge. The historical record and artifacts I recovered suggest that this ridge saw the initial fighting of the battle.

⁶ Author's Note: I have named the second ridge to the southwest of the Milk Creek crossing Ambush Ridge. I recovered two 45-caliber bullets fired by the troopers at the Utes who were hiding in Ambush on this ridge.

Unknown to Major Thornburgh, some of the Utes were leaving their positions on Ambush Ridge and attempting to outflank the cavalry on both flanks, while at least 30 to 50 Ute warriors advanced on Thornburgh's front, clearly getting the attention from the skirmishers on Confrontation Ridge.

Sometime around 11:30 a.m., Thornburgh instructed Lt. Cherry to take fifteen men from Capt. Lawson's company and move to his right, closer to the Utes, to attempt to communicate. Meanwhile, Thornburgh and Capt. Payne signaled with handkerchiefs to a group of Utes who had occupied high ground on Thornburgh's left. Several of these Indians waved back. Lieut. Cherry's detachment advanced perhaps 300 to 400 yards until a small number of Utes advanced towards Lieut. Cherry, as if to parlay. Lieut. Cherry took off his hat and waved. It was this action by Lieut. Cherry that compelled a Ute to fire the first shot in the Battle of Milk Creek. The bullet missed Lieut. Cherry, however, it wounded a trooper and killed a horse directly behind him. Upon hearing that first shot, all hell broke loose on both sides. The White River Utes were well armed with modern 44-caliber Winchester and Henry repeating rifles, of which they had an abundant supply of ammunition.⁷ The troopers were armed with the 1873, 45-caliber, Springfield carbine. The fighting quickly intensified all along Major Thornburgh's skirmish line. Before long, two of Capt. Payne's men were shot dead by the Utes who held the high ground on the left flank. The Utes skillfully used their knowledge of the terrain to outflank the troopers. A new threat emerged from a group of mounted Indians attempting to occupy a low knoll in Major Thornburgh's rear. This knoll overlooked the Milk Creek crossing and, thus, Thornburgh's route back to the remainder of his command. Seeing

⁷ Marshall Sprague, "Massacre: The Tragedy at White River," pages 196 and 197.

that his current position was rapidly becoming untenable, Major Thornburgh ordered Capt. Payne to take twenty men and charge the Utes on the knoll. He also ordered the remainder of Capt. Payne's company to fall back into Capt. Lawson's company, who were also ordered to fall back towards the wagons. Lastly, Thornburgh instructed Lieut. Cherry's advance detachment to lay down suppressing fire long enough to cover this general withdrawal, until it was well underway, then fall back on Capt. Lawson's company.

It was at this point in the Battle of Milk Creek that selfless acts of bravery and gallantry began to occur among the troopers of the White River Expedition.⁸ One such act involved Capt. Payne and 1st Sgt. John Dolan. As Capt. Payne mounted his horse to charge the Utes on the knoll in his rear, the horse was shot and killed. Capt. Payne took a hard fall and several Utes began moving towards the dazed captain. Not seeing Capt. Payne in the charge, Sgt. Dolan looked back and discovered his plight. Immediately Sgt. Dolan wheeled his horse and galloped back to Payne's side. Dismounting, the Sergeant offered his mount to Capt. Payne. Payne declined his offer. Shortly thereafter, a young private came with a lead horse and the three made good their withdrawal.

It was now a little after 12:30 p.m. After issuing the final orders of his military career, Major Thornburgh began making his way back to the wagons alone. The Major could see that the wagons were under attack and his leadership was needed. Perhaps he was so engrossed pondering his tactical situation in this, his first engagement with hostile Indians, that his personal safety never entered his thoughts. Whatever the unarmed Major Thomas T. Thornburgh may have been thinking, we shall never know. Shortly after he

⁸ Mark E. Miller, "Hollow Victory," page 189, Table C-1.

crossed back over Milk Creek, a Ute sniper, concealed in the brush, shot and killed the commander of the White River Expedition.⁹

Meanwhile, all was in turmoil at the wagons. Lieut. Paddock, in charge of the rear guard, was forced to circle the wagons in a totally exposed location. A large number of Utes had outflanked the forward skirmishers; they now occupied the ridge-tops on three sides of the wagons and were pouring a withering fire on the troopers below. The men worked frantically to position the wagons and unhitch the teams. While supervising the teamsters, wagon master William McKinstry was shot and killed. Wounded and dead horses and mules were scattered about the barricade. Some troopers took cover behind the carcasses while others sought cover beneath the wagons. A few men unloaded baggage from the wagons to construct breastworks. Those who could, returned the Utes' fire.

The situation at the skirmish line was deteriorating rapidly. The Utes were pouring a deadly fire on the retreating cavalry. Many men were wounded and, most alarming, ammunition was running dangerously low. Sgt. Edward Grimes volunteered to ride to the wagons for more cartridges. Mounting his horse, the Sergeant rode the gauntlet, firing his pistol on the way. He returned shortly with the cartridges in hand. For this act of bravery, Sgt. Grimes was awarded the Medal of Honor.

Slowly but surely the skirmishers from Capt. Payne's and Capt. Lawson's companies were making their way to the wagon barricade. Reaching the wagons, they were informed of Major Thornburgh's demise. Capt. Payne, as senior captain, was now the commander of the White River Expedition. Wounded and dazed from the bruising

⁹ Marshall Sprague, "Massacre: Tragedy at the White River," page 109.

fall he suffered at the beginning of the charge on the knoll, Capt. Payne suggested to Capt. Lawson that the troopers mount the remaining horses and retreat back to the north. Capt. Lawson knew this was not possible, owing to the large number of wounded men. He informed Capt. Payne he would stay where he was with his wounded. Capt. Payne, realizing his poor judgment, offered to relinquish command to Capt. Lawson, sighting his injuries as the reason. Capt. Lawson refused the suggestion, explaining that his injuries were slight and should not affect his ability to lead. From this point on, until the end of the siege, Capt. Payne rallied the men and proved to be an able commander.

Meanwhile, Lieut. Cherry's rear guards continued their stubborn fighting withdrawal.¹⁰ They were still over 750 yards from the relative safety of the wagon corral, with the Utes pressing hard on their front and both flanks. By this time, most of the troopers in Lieut. Cherry's detachment were wounded but still fighting. The area they fought over was devoid of cover. In contrast to the Custer debacle three years prior, Lieut. Cherry's men displayed enormous cohesion and discipline in the face of the Utes' ferocious efforts to cut them off from the rest of the command. As a testament to Lieut. Cherry's leadership and personal bravery, Sgt. Edward Grimes, along with thirteen noncommissioned officers, drafted this most eloquent letter to Lieut. Cherry:

November 21, 1879

2nd Lieut. Samuel A. Cherry, 5th Cavalry

Sir:

We, the undersigned Non-commissioned officers of Company E 3rd Cavalry and Companies "D" and "F", 5th Cavalry, desire to express to you our

¹⁰ Author's Note: I recovered over a dozen Ute bullets and Springfield cartridge cases along the path used by Lieut. Cherry's detachment during their fighting withdrawal.

admiration of the gallant and praiseworthy conduct displayed by you in the recent engagement with the Ute Indians at Milk River on September 29th, 1879.

To a brave man, bravery needs no better or higher reward than the consciousness of duty well performed, but in order that you should fully understand the feeling of approbation that exists among the men who fought with you, we take this method of tendering to you our hearty approval.

You do not need this – you have already made yourself a page in the history of our country and endeared yourself to the men who witnessed your noble conduct, and who feel that to a great extent it is to your coolness and sagacity they owe their lives. The party that accompanied you on your dangerous mission to check the enemy and cover the retreat knew full well that the chances of life and death were unequally paired, and that one false move would turn the scale far down on the side of death. But, you did not make that move. With unflinching courage you held the Indians in check though their bullets were striking your men from every side, and by your bearing nerved even the wounded to fight to the last -- and when the retreat was safely made, and your services at that point no longer necessary – with seventeen of the twenty men composing your party, wounded, you accomplished your own retreat, fighting your way inch by inch, without leaving one of your wounded on the field.

Such conduct is beyond all praise. --No words of ours can express to you the respect we feel for the man who displayed such courage, -- but if in the future it should be your lot to lead men on to some great feat of daring, as long as their remains a man who fought with you at Milk River you will find ready and willing hands to share your glory or your death.

But this is not all:--When the brunt of the fight was over—when each man looked about him, and saw the fearful destruction wrought—when each heart for the moment quailed at the thought of what the morrow might bring—when the excitement of the battle had passed and the reaction had brought despair in its stead, you infused a new spirit in the hearts of the despairing men, and by the force of your example led them to make still greater efforts leading toward their own preservation and defence.

In conclusion we have only to add that we express the sentiments of the companies we represent and are proud to be permitted to do honor to one whom honor is richly due, --to a soldier among soldiers, a man among men.

Very Respectfully Your Obedt. Servants
First Sergeant E.P. Grimes, Co. F 5 Cavy.¹¹

¹¹ Fred H. Werner, “The Story of the Meeker Massacre and the Thornburgh Battle,” page 125, Appendix B.

Capt. Payne, seeing how hard pressed Lieut. Cherry's troopers were, ordered Sgt. John A. Poppe, with ten men of Company F, 5th Cavalry, to move out from the barricade and link up with the skirmishers. Sgt. Poppe and the detachment rushed out and moved towards the fighting skirmishers. Along the banks of Milk Creek, Sgt. Poppe's men flushed out and probably killed several Ute warriors who were pouring a deadly fire into the skirmishers' rear. The link-up was quickly accomplished. The troopers then lay down a heavy cover fire and, before long, the tired, battle-weary troopers of Lieut. Cherry's command reached the relative safety of the wagon barricade.¹² Over twenty of Lieut. Cherry's troopers were wounded. Some were wounded seriously. However, not one wounded man was left on the field. Thus, the troopers of the White River Expedition were reunited, but their situation was far from stable.

The Utes continued a plunging fire into the wagon corral from their ridge-top positions overlooking the barricade. The officers and non-coms began to rally the men. Breastworks and trenches needed to be constructed. While ordering several troopers out from under a wagon, 1st Sgt. John Dolan was heard to yell, "If you don't get out and help, I will kill you myself."¹³ At that instant, a Ute bullet struck the Sergeant and he crumbled dead to the ground. Capt. Payne was deeply grieved by the loss of his friend. He wrote this epitaph in 1866: "He was the bravest and most loyal soldier to his officers I have ever known ... in his long service of 37 years, he had met with many adventures; had been wounded twice, had innumerable horses killed under him, and had been a prisoner at Andersonville."¹⁴

¹² Mark E. Miller, "Hollow Victory," page 189.

¹³ M. Wilson Rankin, "Reminiscences of Frontier Days," page 70.

¹⁴ Theo F. Rodenbough, "Uncle Sam's Medal of Honor," page 357-359.

For the next several hours, cavalry sharpshooters kept up a hot, suppressing fire on the Utes, allowing other troopers to strengthen the defenses in the barricade. Wagons were emptied of their contents to build the breastworks. Dead horses and mules were also used to afford the men cover. Three large trenches were dug in the center of the barricade to shelter the wounded. Sometime around 3:00 p.m., a new danger emerged from the southwest. With a strong wind at their backs, the Utes fired the dry sagebrush. Pushed by the wind, the fire spread quickly, and before long, approached the wagon corral. Capt. Lawson, commanding this southwest side of the barricade, ordered several men to set counter fires outside the wagons. Despite their efforts, the conflagration soon reached the wagons. The Battle of Milk Creek had now entered its most critical phase. The troopers were forced to combat the flames while exposed to the Utes' galling fire. Six men were killed and many more wounded in a short span of time. Civilian scout, C. Grafton Lowery, was killed for the first time with a bullet shot into his head. When Dr. Grimes, the expedition's surgeon, came to his aid, the scout muttered, "Never mind me, I am done for."¹⁵ Assuming he was dead, Lowery's body was placed in the breastworks, which contained other dead troopers, then covered with canvas and dirt. Meanwhile, on the northeast side of the barricade, Capt. Payne ordered Sgt. Poppe to take some men and set counter fires in his front to deny the Utes cover. Alone, Sgt. Poppe jumped over the breastworks, started several fires, and then returned. Sadly for John Gordon, these counter fires quickly engulfed his wagon train, which was parked 50 yards to the northeast of the barricade.¹⁶ Sgt. Poppe's work was successful, in that the fires burnt all

¹⁵ M. Wilson Rankin, "Reminisces of Frontier Days," page 70.

¹⁶ Author's Note: Burnt surface evidence (nails, screws, glass, etc.) of Gordon's freight trains still litters the pasture.

cover on the northeast side of the barricade. After the fires burned over the battlefield, the fighting slackened considerably.

At this point, Capt. Payne and his troopers began to realize that the greatest danger to their survival had come and gone. Their makeshift barricade, while exposed on all sides, had afforded enough protection to withstand the Utes' concerted attacks. Likewise, the Utes understood that their ferocious attacks had failed to route the White River Expedition from the reservation boundaries. Utes and troopers alike began to prepare for the long siege that lay ahead. Work began in earnest on the 3000 square feet of trench-works the troopers would dig inside the wagon corral.¹⁷ The Utes began constructing rock forts with gun loops on the ridge tops overlooking the barricade. These rock forts provided protection and the gun loops allowed the Utes a steady platform to aim and fire their repeating rifles the long distances to the wagon corral.¹⁸

Near dusk on the 29th of September, the Utes mounted their final assault on the barricade. About ten Utes on horseback charged the northeast side of the barricade. The troopers easily repulsed this charge, however, the Utes managed to stampede twenty to thirty oxen that were milling around John Gordon's burnt-out wagon train.¹⁹ The Utes drove these animals south about a mile to their main war camp. Several of these oxen would provide fresh meat for the Utes throughout the six-day battle. At dusk, the fighting tapered off to desultory sniping. Capt. Payne began to assess his situation. In addition to Major Thornburgh, nine enlisted men and three civilians had been killed in action. Over forty men were wounded, some seriously. Nearly all of the cavalry horses

¹⁷ Dawson & Skiff, "The Ute War," page 32.

¹⁸ Fred H. Werner, "The Story of the Meeker Massacre," photo on rear cover.

¹⁹ Author's Note: I recovered eight Henry cartridge cases on this northeast side of the barricade, suggesting the Utes did mount this charge.

and mules were dead or wounded. Seeing that withdrawal from Milk Creek was not possible, owing to the number of wounded men and lack of transport, Capt. Payne began drafting a dispatch to inform the Army of their plight. His dispatch read:

“Milk River, Colo., Sept. 29, 1879, 8:30 p.m.

“This command, composed of three companies of cavalry, was met a mile south of Milk River by several hundred Ute Indians who attacked and drove us to wagon train, which had parked with great loss. It becomes my painful duty to announce the death of Major Thornburgh who fell in harness; the painful, but not serious wounding, of Lt. Paddock and Dr. Grimes, and killing of ten enlisted men and a wagon master, with the wounding of about 25 men and teamsters. I am now corralled near water with three-quarters of our animals killed after a desperate fight since 12:00 N. We hold our position at this hour. I shall strengthen it during the night and believe that we can hold out until reinforcements reach us, if they are hurried through. Officers and men behaved with greatest gallantry. I am also wounded in two places.”

Payne (Comdg)²⁰

Upon finishing the dispatch, Payne asked for volunteers to carry the message through the Ute line. Four men came forward, Joe Rankin, John Gordon, and troopers George Moquin and Edward F. Murphy. The four best surviving horses were chosen. The couriers left the barricade sometime around midnight. The besieged troopers kept busy digging trenches and praying for the couriers' safety.

September the 30th dawned clear and cool. The troopers had made remarkable progress during the night in strengthening their position. Seventeen trenches, 2-1/2 feet wide by 2 feet long, had been dug and the excavated dirt was used as breastworks.²¹ The troopers now had adequate cover to protect themselves. No more troopers would die in the Battle of Milk Creek after September 29th, which was largely due to the excellent cover afforded by the trenches. The Utes began firing at daybreak and continued their

²⁰ United States Continental Commands Records.

²¹ Dawson & Skiff, “The Ute War,” page 32.

firing until darkness. The only easy targets left for the Ute marksmen were the remaining horses and mules, which they set about to wound, rather than kill. They did this in the hope that the wounded animals would cause havoc within the barricade. The White River Expedition surgeon, Dr. Robert Grimes, was forced to shoot several wounded horses that threatened to jump into the trenches where the wounded men lay.²² Several other primary source accounts convey what conditions were like in the barricade during the long siege. One account relates the story of a trooper who could not deliver the coup de grace on his horse. “Upon being wounded, this horse did not become panic-stricken like the others. Instead, the horse hobbled over to where its trooper was fighting in the trenches. The horse looked down to the trooper as if to say ‘for Christ’s sakes help me.’ Deciding he could not shoot his own horse, the trooper pleaded to his comrade, ‘I can’t do it by God, Hank, I can’t do it. You’ll have to finish him.’ Hank waited for the horse to turn his head. When it turned, he pulled the trigger on his pistol, sending a ball crashing through its skull, behind his left ear. That night, the horse was dragged from the barricade and thrown down the ravine to the south with the other dead horses and mules.”²³ There were also several pet dogs in the corral, among them a beautiful greyhound named Frank, belonging to Lieut. Cherry. The Lieutenant would let the dog go to the creek at night for water. One night, the dog came back with one of his paws shot off. The dog had been mistaken for a crawling Indian. Lieut. Cherry said, “There was nothing to do but kill the poor old fellow to save him misery.”²⁴

²² Mark E. Miller, “Hollow Victory,” page 98.

²³ Dawson & Skiff, “The Ute War,” page 39.

²⁴ Dawson & Skiff, “The Ute War,” page 39.

October the 1st dawned as the siege wore on. The Utes, as usual, promptly began shooting at dawn. Unknown to the besieged troopers, the couriers had safely made it through the Utes' line and relief was on the way. Towards evening, the Utes managed to infiltrate along the creek bed to within seventy-five yards of the barricade. These Utes made the nightly water detail work even more dangerous. As evidence of this danger, Private Esser was shot in the face while part of a water detail on the night of October 1st.

As October the 2nd came and the fourth day of battle was to begin, relief finally arrived. Courier John Gordon had found Capt. Francis Dodge and his company of 9th Cavalry Buffalo Soldiers and led them to the besieged troopers at Milk Creek. John Gordon approached the barricade in the dim light before dawn and identified himself. Capt. Payne bid them to enter the barricade amidst hardy cheers from the besieged troopers. As Capt. Dodge and his company entered the barricade, men leapt from the trenches to shake hands with their new comrades. Capt. Dodge's men quickly unsaddled their horses and took positions in the barricade. All the commotion had roused the Utes and daylight brought with it a deluge of gunfire into the barricade. As before, the newly arrived horses of Capt. Dodge's command provided easy targets for the Ute sharpshooters. Within an hour or so, most of these horses were dead or wounded. This horrific slaughter of the Army's horses and mules marked a first in the Indian wars. The U.S. Army had adopted a doctrine to kill Indian ponies when and wherever found in order to deprive the enemy of transport and mobility. A good example of this doctrine was Custer's 7th Cavalry "Battle of the Washita," where a very large herd of Cheyenne ponies were killed. In the aftermath of the Thornburgh battle, over 300 Army horses and mules were confirmed killed during the fight, marking the battle as unique whereby the

Ute Indians had turned the tables on the Cavalry and used an Army tactic against the troopers of the White River Expedition.²⁵

Another unique incident in the Battle of Milk Creek was the dialogue between combatants. Several of the Utes spoke English and were eager to taunt the troopers. One Ute was heard to say, “Come out you sons of bitches and fight like men.” Another Ute dared the troopers to: “Lift up your hats and give us a mark.”²⁶ A Buffalo soldier, most likely frustrated by the lack of good targets, climbed from his trench and shouted, “Show me a Ute.” No Utes obliged, however, they did direct their firing at the soldier, which induced him to dive into his trench headfirst.²⁷ And, a poignant account of brotherhood among the troopers is chronicled in Dawson and Skiffs book, “The Ute War.” Private Eugene Schickendonz suffered from a wound to his arm. The wound had made him sick, so he had not eaten for several days. The private shared a trench with a fellow trooper of Capt. Dodge’s 9th Cavalry. This soldier was full of fight and would readily fire at the Utes when a target presented itself. One morning (either Oct. 3rd or 4th), Private Schickendonz said to his trench-mate, “Here pard, stop shooting at them bluffs and, for the Lord’s sake, make me a little coffee. The Buffalo soldier answered not a word but set to work. There was no coffee in the pit, but there was some in the next one, which was tossed over. But how to make a fire without wood, that was the question. The colored man calculated the chances, made a break for the settler’s wagon, snatched a loose side of a provision box, and came back with a bullet hole in the board, which was meant for his own body. Then he made a fire in a corner of the pit and prepared the coffee for his

²⁵ Author’s Note: I recovered over 150 horse/mule bones throughout the entire barricade area during the 2000 season.

²⁶ Cheyenne Daily Leader, October 26, 1879.

²⁷ M. Wilson Rankin, “Reminisces of Frontier Days,” page 75.

patient.”²⁸ One can only imagine how grateful the wounded trooper must have been for this tender mercy from his brother in arms.

Perhaps the greatest support Capt. Dodge and his troopers provided to the besieged men upon their arrival to the fight at Milk Creek was in the person of Sgt. Henry Johnson. Upon the death of 1st Sgt. John Dolan, the White River Expedition lost its most senior non-commissioned officer. By his steadfast courage under fire, Sgt. Johnson rose to the occasion and became the defacto Sergeant Major to the besieged troopers. “During the siege, Henry Johnson served as Sergeant of the Guard, and it was in that capacity that he left his fortified rifle pit and went to other pits to give necessary instruction to the members of the Guard. As he dashed from pit to pit, he was exposed to the fire from the Indians who were very near and at easy range of him. Johnson was also one of a party who formed a skirmish line by order of Capt. F.S. Dodge and fought their way to the creek (Milk River) for water for the wounded and themselves.” For his bravery, Sgt. Johnson was awarded the Medal of Honor in 1879.²⁹

Another day passed and the siege wore on into its fifth day. The historical record contains little mention of events on this day. Clearly, both warriors and troopers alike were nearing exhaustion and fatigue. Capt. Payne must have known that relief for the White River Expedition was nearly at hand for he knew his old commander and friend, Colonel Wesley Merritt, would make all haste to come to his aid. In the Union Cavalry, Col. Merritt had a distinguished Civil War record, almost equal to his famous brother officer, George A. Custer. When the courier, Joe Rankin, arrived in Rawlins, Wyoming

²⁸ Dawson & Skiff, “The Ute War,” page 39 and 40.

²⁹ Preston E. Amos, “Above and Beyond in the West, Black Medal of Honor Winners 1870-1890,” pages 14-17.

Territory, with the news of the battle, Capt. Payne's message was immediately telegraphed to Army headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska. Early on October 1st, Col. Merritt, commander of Fort D.A. Russell, was ordered by his superiors in Omaha to proceed with all haste to the rescue of the troopers at Milk Creek. Rising from his sick bed, Col. Merritt set about organizing the relief force. He assembled a force of approximately 250 cavalry and infantrymen. The relief column boarded a train and arrived at Rawlins, Wyoming, early on the 2nd of October, where three companies of infantry met Col. Merritt. Now, with over 400 men, Col. Merritt embarked for Milk Creek. The journey to Milk Creek would prove to be one of the most successful forced marches in U.S. Army history. In Merritt's book "Marching Cavalry", he describes the maneuver:

"One of the most successful marches of modern times was that made to the relief of the Thornburgh command by a battalion of the 5th Cavalry in the autumn of 1879 . . . the distance accomplished was 170 measured miles. The time from 11:00 a.m., October the 2nd, to 5:30 a.m., October the 5th, this was at the rate of 60 miles per day for two and three-quarters days. This march is mentioned as being peculiarly successful for, in brief, the following reasons: 1) the distance accomplished in the time, 2) no horses were lost or disabled on the march and there were noticeably no sore back horses after its completion, 3) the command, men and horses, were in good condition for service at once after the march."

Merritt and his command reached Milk Creek in the gray of dawn October the 5th.

Merritt ordered his bugler to sound the officer's call. This was done, and Capt. Payne's bugler promptly answered back. The wearied troopers in the trenches jumped for joy now that their final salvation was at hand. When Col. Merritt and Capt. Payne met, they embraced. Col. Merritt openly wept when he viewed the utter devastation inside the barricade.³⁰

³⁰ Dawson & Skiff, "The Ute War," page 42.

The Utes, in their ridge-top position, overlooking the barricade, immediately began to withdraw now that the odds were clearly against them. Col. Merritt composed himself and began to issue orders. He sent skirmishers out to clear any Utes in the immediate vicinity of the barricade area. Next, he directed his surgeon, Dr. A.J. Kimble, to assist Dr. Grimes with the wounded men. Because of the stench of decaying horses and lack of good water and forage, he instructed his officers to move everyone up Milk Creek one mile. He established a base camp there and awaited further reinforcements. When the dead troopers were removed from under their temporary grave in the breastworks, Scout C. Grafton Lowery awakened from his coma. He rose to his feet and muttered, "What's the matter boys," as Dr. Kimble probed for the bullet in his head. He died a second time, this time for good.³¹

Thus, the Thornburgh battled ended. In its aftermath, thirteen men of the White River Expedition lay dead, with another forty-two wounded. When nearly a week later Col. Merritt reached the White River Agency, it was discovered that the Utes had massacred Agent Meeker and all eleven of his civilian employees. It was also revealed that the Utes had kidnapped four women and two children, who were relatives of the slain agency employees. After thirty days of rape and violent abuse by their captors, the women and children were released to envoys sent by Chief Ouray. In all, twenty-seven white men lost their lives in the Ute War of 1879. The White River Utes have given conflicting accounts of their dead. After lengthy legal proceedings, only one Ute Indian was convicted for his part in the massacre of the Agency employees. Chief Douglas became the Ute scapegoat. He served one year in Leavenworth Prison and was released.

³¹ Marshall Sprague, "Tragedy: The Massacre at White River," page 222.

Two years later, he was shot dead by a fellow Ute during a drunken spree in Meeker, Colorado.³² Of course, the real punishment, caused by a few, was meted out to the entire Ute nation in the form of abrogation of their treaty rights.

What stands out most about this little known, yet remarkably unique Indian War battle was the behavior and conduct of the frontier army of 1879. The officers, non-coms, enlisted men, civilian scouts, and employees of the White River Expedition exhibited great courage under fire and tremendous unit cohesion. The eleven Medals of Honor and eighteen lesser citations awarded to the troopers of the White River Expedition is a testament to the glory and professionalism of the United States Army.

AFTERWORD

On May 8, 2000, I traveled to the Milk Creek battle site, twenty miles northeast of Meeker, Colorado. I had spent the prior six months researching and studying all the literature that could be found about the 1879 battle. The purpose of my visit was to investigate the site with a metal detector and prove or disprove various facts about the battle, which are unclear in the historical record. I was granted permission to access the private property where the battle occurred and over the next six months, I made sixteen trips, encompassing 44 days of research at the Milk Creek site. My research has revealed a number of new discoveries about the battle. In addition, I recovered over 800 artifacts from the site. Some of these artifacts are very unique and similar artifacts, to my knowledge, have never been discovered on other Indian War battle sites. Currently, I am

³² Smith, "Ouray, Chief of the Utes," page 175.

writing a book about my research at the Battle of Milk Creek, which will document the discoveries and artifacts for the historical record.

I write this afterward to announce in a published paper the most important discovery made during my work at the battle site. On October 22, 2000, I inadvertently discovered the skeletal remains of the two cavalry troopers pictured above. This inadvertent discovery solves the conflicting and confusing historical accounts concerning the gravesite of the twelve United States Army and civilian personnel killed in the Battle of Milk Creek. Much of the misinformation about the final resting place of the fallen troopers of Milk Creek originated from Marshall Sprague's 1957 book, "Massacre-Tragedy at White River." Sprague claimed that the dead troopers were taken with the wounded back to Fort Fred Steele, Wyoming Territory. Mark Miller, in his book, "Hollow Victory" debunked Sprague's claim about the troopers' status. My research has revealed the most accurate primary source account on the exact status and location of the troopers' graves. Joe Rankin's book, "Reminiscences of Frontier Days," page 82, states: "Because of the Indians quitting the fight and the stench about the trenches being unbearable, Merritt ordered the camp with the wounded men moved up Milk Creek one mile to the east where there was grass for the stock. Details of troops scouted the surrounding hills during the day. From this camp, Capt. Auger, with an escort of his cavalrymen and a detail of workers, was ordered to bury the dead. Of these, all were buried near the trenches except Major Thornburgh." Rankin's account is accurate, except Capt. Auger did not dig new graves near the trenches. In fact, Capt. Auger's burial detail utilized an existing trench, which was dug during the battle. This trench is located approximately in the center of the barricade area and may have been dug for the wounded

during the battle. I believe this trench was dug during the battle because of the large amount of artifacts recovered from the thirty inches of soil directly over the soldiers' remains. Looking at the photo, it was the trooper on the left who I discovered first. He lies on his side. While excavating further, I discovered his comrade on the right. He lies on his back, with the legs of the soldier on the left resting across his mid-section. Because of the position of the remains and the reference in Rankin's book, I strongly believe that the other ten fallen troopers buried by Capt. Auger are either below or to the sides of the troopers pictured above. After examining the grave, I said a pray for them and backfilled the trench.

Next, I informed the landowners about my discovery. They were shocked to learn that the battlefield contained a mass grave, yet sadly; they denied me further access to the entire battlefield, which has halted study of this important historical site. Most importantly, their denial of access to the site has halted U.S. Army efforts to properly disinter, identify, and re-intern, with full military honors, the hallowed remains of the forgotten troopers of Milk Creek. In the weeks after my discovery of the troopers, I attempted to enlist the help of professional archeologists. For whatever reason, no guidance or assistance was offered. Then, by what I thought as mere coincidence, I came into contact with a U.S. Army officer. I met with Major General Kenneth R. Bowra in February 2001. After learning the facts about the Milk Creek troopers, General Bowra wholeheartedly agreed to help in the efforts to honor the fallen soldiers. Over the next several months, General Bowra offered invaluable guidance and assistance. I can assure you the reader, that the time-honored U.S. Army tradition of "leave no man behind on the battlefield" even applies to soldiers lost for 123 years. General Bowra arranged and

coordinated within the Army the aid of the Joint Task Force for Full Accounting. This multi-service group of archeologists and forensic experts were established in 1993 to recover our killed and missing-in-action from the Vietnam War. Their dedicated efforts have resulted in the recovery of over 600 of our fallen soldiers throughout southeast Asia. With the Joint Task Force for Full Accounting ready to conduct a professional disinterment, I asked General Bowra to appeal in writing to the landowners, requesting their cooperation and assistance in the recovery of the Milk Creek troopers. General Bowra wrote a most eloquent plea to the landowners in which he stated, "The U.S. Army has a proud history. You can help, not only to preserve that history, but also to have the soldiers who died at Milk Creek receive the honors so long overdue. The U.S. Army also has a tradition of recovering our dead from the battlefield. This too is long overdue, but now possible." Sadly, the landowners refused the General's request to recover the soldiers' remains.

At this writing, the twelve lost troopers of Milk Creek still man the trenches in their lonely vigil upon that windswept battlefield. I remain determined to continue the efforts to honor these men. These soldiers gave the last full measure of devotion in the service of the United States of America and deserve an honored final resting place in one of our national cemeteries, rather than their current shallow, unmarked mass grave located on a cow pasture. These brave men who died in the fighting at Milk Creek, yet still remain there, must never be forgotten. Their names are:

Private John Burns, Co. F, 5th Cavalry
Private Dominick Cuff, Co. E, 3rd Cavalry
Sergeant John Dolan, Co. F, 5th Cavalry
Private Michael Firestone, Co. F, 5th Cavalry
Lowery C. Grafton, Civilian Guide
Private Michael Lynch, Co. D, 5th Cavalry

Private Samuel McKee, Co. F, 5th Cavalry
William McKinstry, Civilian Wagon Master
Thomas McQuire, Civilian Teamster
Waggoner Amos D. Miller, Co. F, 5th Cavalry
Private Thomas Mooney, Co. D, 5th Cavalry
Private Charles Wright, Co. D, 5th Cavalry

Anyone with comments or questions about my work at Milk Creek may contact me at

BradLEdwards@earthlink.net.