NEW DISCOVERIES AT THE THORNBURGH BATTLE OF 1879

By Brad L. Edwards

The Thornburgh battle occurred on September 29, 1879, twenty miles north of present day Meeker, Colorado. Three companies of U.S. Cavalry (about 150 men), lead by Major Thomas T. Thornburgh, were ambushed by an equal number of White River Ute Indians, hidden on the ridges, overlooking the valley of Milk Creek. After fierce fighting on the first day of battle, the cavalry was able to form a defensive barricade with the twenty wagons that carried their provisions. Inside this barricade, they dug over 3,000 square feet of rifle pits. The Thornburgh battle raged on for six days until General Wesley Merritt, leading eight companies of soldiers from Fort D.A. Russell, relieved the besieged troopers .

Being a student of military history all my life, books about this battle and other Indian war battles, fascinated and intrigued me to no end. After reading about archeological work conducted with metal detectors at the Custer battle site in Montana, a simple plan began to form in my mind. Wondering if I could conduct coherent and documented research at a battle site, I decided I could. Wondering if I could learn to use a metal detector and become an expert in its capabilities, I decided I would. The following story is the result of that plan.

After driving four hours from my home in Denver, I crested the summit of Yellow Jacket Pass and gazed down in wonder at the valley of Milk Creek, where

the Thornburgh battle occurred. It was early spring and the high mountain valley was green and the ground was moist. These conditions would allow my metal detector to work at its maximum effectiveness. Driving down into the valley, I stopped at the historical marker overlooking the battlefield. While reading the information on the marker, a truck pulled up to the main gate of the ranch where the battle site was located. After introducing myself to the manager of the ranch, I requested permission to conduct research with my metal detector on the battlefield. Granting the request, the kindly ranch boss informed me that many others through the years had searched the battle site with little success. Pointing to the 80-acre pasture where the battlefield was somewhere located, the ranch boss wished me luck, and I thanked him for the unique opportunity.

My exhaustive studies of the Thornburgh battle indicated that the location of the defensive barricade, where the soldiers fought from trenches for six days, was located 400 yards upstream, across a bridge spanning Milk Creek. Crossing the bridge, then pacing off 400 steps to about the middle of the large flat pasture, I began to search with my metal detector. Within five minutes, the detector located a target. Using a knife, I carefully sliced a pie-size plug of moist earth from the pasture and lifted it out, creating a three-inch deep hole. The detector indicated that the target was still in the hole. Being careful not to damage the target, I began to probe the soft earth. In the center of the hole, about two inches deep, I discovered an artifact from the Thornburgh battle. It was a spent lead bullet in

near perfect condition. From its size and shape, I identified it as a 44-caliber slug, fired from a Henry or Winchester repeating rifle. The historical record indicates the Ute Indians used these weapons during the battle. Backfilling the hole, I was beside myself with gratitude and excitement at recovering and having held in my hand a piece of history. Because the bullet had no impact markings on its soft lead surface, I surmised it might have fallen short of the soldiers' defensive breastworks. Recalling from my studies that the barricade was within 100 yards of Milk Creek, I began to search toward the creek. Within ten yards of the first find, the detector located another target. Careful digging revealed another lead bullet. This bullet was badly misshapen and had impacted into something. Perhaps it struck one of the army's wagons or the boxes and crates which the soldiers used to build makeshift breastworks between the wagons. Three feet away, my detector received a very loud and strong signal. Digging four inches down, I discovered a brass cartridge case. Removing it from the loose soil, I identified the two-inch long, half-diameter shell casing as a 45-caliber Springfield. The U.S. cavalry in 1879 was equipped with the Model 1873 Springfield 45 Caliber Carbine. To say the least, I was awestruck by the discovery of a 122-year-old, cavalry related artifact. I began to suspect that I had discovered the perimeter of the wagon corral. Recalling from my studies that the soldiers' barricade was oval in shape, about 50 yards long by 30 yards wide, I mentally formed this outline on the barren pasture. The historical record also

states that the south side of the barricade perimeter was situated along the 15-foot ravine, which slopes down to the flood plain of Milk Creek. I began a zig-zag search along this outline and soon recovered over 30 bullets and shell casings. Satisfied that I had discovered the north side of the soldiers' position, I moved to the top of the ravine on the south side. Within minutes, I was finding bullets and shell casings. A dry wash, about 30 feet long, with six-foot high walls, ran down to the Milk Creek flood plain. I wondered if this could be the path of the soldiers during the nightly water details. I spent several hours hunting this wash, and found fourteen Indian-fired bullets, in addition to ten Springfield cartridge cases. I was now certain of the exact location of the wagon barricade constructed by the cavalry troopers. My thoughts then turned to the area where the initial fighting of the Thornburgh battle began. This area is about one-half mile southwest of the barricade. After re-reading the historical record about the initial fighting, I returned to the Thornburgh battle site the next weekend. My objective was to determine if, and how much, fighting took place in this area. A quarter-mile long, 100-foot high finger ridge runs southwest from Milk Creek in this area. It was on this ridge that I believed Major Thornburgh deployed about thirty troopers moments before the fighting began. I began this search near the bottom of the ridge, at the creek. I found no artifacts until I was nearly halfway up the ridge and then began to get signals every couple of feet. Over the next 200 yards of ridge top, I recovered more than 60 artifacts connected to the Thornburgh battle. I

found mostly Springfield cartridge cases and a half-dozen 44-caliber Henry bullets. However, I did make two unique discoveries: first, a Springfield cartridge case lying on the surface of the ground where a trooper had ejected it from his carbine, and second, an eight-inch long hunting knife, most likely dropped by a soldier in the heat of battle. (The Springfield carbine sometimes had a shell ejection problem and quite possibly the trooper may have lost his knife dealing with this problem.)

Before the snows would come to Milk Creek in late October, I spent 36 days at the site. Most of my work was conducted inside the barricade. It was here that my most important historical finds were made. I was successful in locating four areas where trenches were dug during the battle. Upon excavating these trenches (sometimes up to five feet deep) I began to unearth rare, one-of-a-kind artifacts from the U.S. Army of 1879. One trench stands out among the others. It measured twelve feet long, five feet wide, and five feet deep when I played it out. Inside this trench I discovered three large wagon hubs, over twenty paired horseshoes, two curry combs, an 1859-style canteen, several large painted pieces of wagon wood, a nearly complete leather saddlebag, over twenty unfired 45 caliber cartridges, two dozen uniform buttons, a leather carbine sling, a coffee pot (for the most part complete), and, of course, numerous 44 caliber Henry impact bullets. The other trenches yielded items such as a U.S. cavalry spur, a mess kit with spoon, knife and bowl, two hatchet heads, a blacksmith's tool, the

heel of a cavalryman's boot, a leather and chain device for hobbling a horse, dozens of nails, screws, and fasteners, and lots of glass fragments. I also discovered what I believe to be the second ever recovered horse skull from an Indian war battle.

In total, I discovered 832 artifacts over 44 days of research at the battle site. Currently, I am writing articles and a book to add this new information to the historical record. What began as a simple plan has grown complex and sometimes bewildering? But I am most grateful for such a unique opportunity. And, to those interested in searching for history, I say this, "If I can do it, anybody can."

BIOGRAPHY

Brad Edwards, a lifelong student of military history. The last ten years I've focused on the Indian wars. I am currently researching and writing about several Colorado Indian war battlefields.