

# A Journey to the Heart of Darkness

## John W. Wright and the War against the Sioux, 1863-1865

by Kim Allen Scott and Ken Kempcke





On a Sunday afternoon in September 1864, Union cavalry sergeant John W. Wright employed a few idle moments at Fort Berthold, Dakota Territory, to contemplate his military experience on the plains. Hoping to get a letter to his cousin Emilie on the supply boat departing the next day, the young Iowa trooper reflected on the contrast between his present leisure and his previous twenty months' service:

I have been recounting the sacrifices that a soldier is called upon to make when he leaves Home and friends to serve his Country and I have come to the conclusions that the privileges of the Sabbath day is amongst the greatest. We have not heard a sermon since last winter and will not for a year to come and during our summer campaign we knew not when the Sabbath came. Every day was alike, marching or fighting it was all the same."<sup>1</sup>

Coming from a former member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Wright's musings could have been written from any venue of the Civil War. Having abandoned their church's pacifistic teachings to shoulder muskets in Mr. Lincoln's army, Wright and thousands of Quaker enlistees like him found military experience at odds with their former values and habits. What made Wright's reflections different was the nature of his military service: a campaign that brought the sword not to Southern slaveholders but to aboriginal peoples whose alleged offenses against the Union had nothing to do with secession. Wright's journey from patriotic enlistee to avenging warrior puts into human terms one of the more unusual episodes of the Civil War.

John W. Wright (inset, circa 1860) joined the Union army in 1862 to fight in the Civil War. Instead he ended up serving in Major General John Pope's campaign against the Sioux in Dakota Territory. Throughout his enlistment the former Quaker wrote letters and kept a diary that now provide present-day readers with a common soldier's perspective on life in the frontier military. After spending the summers of 1863 and 1864 on the northern plains, he wrote home from Fort Berthold (left, circa 1864), remarking on the army's nonobservance of the Sabbath: "Every day was alike, marching or fighting it was all the same."

Photographs of John and Martha Wright (pages 3 and 16) are from the Virginia Burlingame Papers, courtesy Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, Montana State University Libraries, Bozeman.



U. S. Signal Corps, National Archives, Washington, D. C.



Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.



In 1863, determined to punish the Santee Sioux for their uprising against settlers in western Minnesota, Major General John Pope (left) sent troops to engage the Indians, who had fled westward. Troops under Brigadier Generals Alfred Sully (above) and Henry H. Sibley (right) departed for the Dakota plains in May 1863.



Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul

**B**orn in Adams County, Pennsylvania, on August 31, 1843, John was the second of George and Lucy Wright's seven children. When still a young boy, Wright moved with his family to Clayton County in northeastern Iowa, where he attended school while working on his father's farm and learning the carpenter's trade. The outbreak of the Civil War was a time of trial for the Wright family and many other Iowa Friends because it put their long-held belief in pacifism to the ultimate test. Even as church officials preached pacifism, hundreds of Quakers like Wright succumbed to patriotic zeal and the desire to emancipate slaves. To them, the necessity of a crusade against the "peculiar institution" of the Southern states counterbalanced the evils of warfare.<sup>2</sup>

What motivated Wright to enlist on September 22, 1862, is unknown, but patriotism and antislavery

sentiment were probably part of the reason. Wright's father, according to family

legend, had served as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, assisting runaway slaves to freedom in Canada.<sup>3</sup>

If Wright had aspirations to fight in one of the war's main theaters after enlisting with the Sixth Iowa Cavalry Regiment, he was quickly disabused of the idea. The regiment, as fellow recruit Joseph H. Drips recalled in an 1894 reminiscence, "was recruited under false pretenses."<sup>4</sup> Wright and his comrades had been led to believe that they would be sent immediately to fight Confederates. By the time they officially entered federal service on January 31, 1863, however, the men had learned their assignment would be somewhere along the Missouri River frontier, facing an enemy far different from Southern slaveholders. Wright had much to

1. John W. Wright to Cousin Emilie, September 25, 1864, folder 27, box 5, collection 2384, Virginia S. Burlingame Papers, Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections, Montana State University Libraries, Bozeman (hereafter Burlingame Papers).

2. Edward Needles Wright, *Conscientious Objectors in the Civil War* (New York, 1961), 189.

3. Virginia S. Burlingame to Michael D. Gibson, August 3, 1979, accession files, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.

4. Joseph H. Drips, *Three Years among the Indians in Dakota* (Kimball, S. Dak., 1894), 2.

5. Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., *The Civil War in the American West* (New York, 1993), 139-42.

6. Joseph Conrad, *Youth: A Narrative and Two Other Stories* (Edinburgh, 1902).

7. Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian Hating and Empire Building* (Minneapolis, 1980), passim.

8. Drips, *Three Years*, 2; Mildred Throne, "Iowa Troops in Dakota Territory, 1861-1865: Based on the Diaries and Letters of Henry J. Wieneke," *Iowa Journal of History*, 57 (April 1959), 138.

9. Edward H. Stiles, *Recollections and Sketches of Notable Lawyers and Public Men of Early Iowa* (Des Moines, Iowa, 1916), 849.

10. Samuel W. Pollock testimony, February 8, 1864, in "Proceedings [of] Board of Investigation held at Fort Randall in the Territory of Dacotah by virtue of the following orders, Headquarters, District of Iowa, Davenport, Iowa, January 26, 1864, General Order No. 9" (hereafter "Proceedings [of] Board of Investigation"), in Abraham Moreland service record, Compiled Service Records of Union Volunteers from the State of Iowa, Record Group 94, Records of the Office of the Adjutant General, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter RG 94).

11. John Pattee, "Dakota Campaigns," *South Dakota Historical Collections*, 23 vols. (Pierre, S. Dak., 1902-1947), 5:294. Wieneke said: "I understand Colonel Pollock's motto is, to take no prisoners and I believe it is well imbued into the spirit of the whole battalion." Throne, "Iowa Troops in Dakota Territory," 157.

ponder that day as he received his warrant as third sergeant of Company G.

Ever since the 1862 uprising of the Santee Sioux against the tide of settlers pressing them in western Minnesota, the frontier region encompassing the present-day states of Iowa, Minnesota, and North and South Dakota had been in turmoil. Some of the Indians involved had been punished, but other tribesmen had fled west to the plains or to the safety of Canada. They were the target of a campaign planned by Major General John Pope, commander of the Military Department of the Northwest. Envisioning a two-pronged attack in summer 1863, Pope hoped to seek out what were considered hostile Indians in Dakota Territory, destroy their ability to wage war on frontier settlements, and clear the Upper Missouri Valley for emigrants headed to the goldfields of the northern Rockies. Brigadier General Alfred Sully had been ordered to work in concert with a Minnesota column led by Brigadier General Henry H. Sibley, and on May 17, 1863, Sully and his troops began a slow advance up the Missouri River from a camp near Sioux City, Iowa.<sup>5</sup>

Thus began John Wright's journey into what novelist Joseph Conrad described in the "The Heart of Darkness."<sup>6</sup> In this famous novella, Conrad showed how easily a European could sink into savagery when thrust into a primeval landscape among primitive natives by describing a bizarre journey up the Congo River in which the protagonist, Marlow, explores the depths of racial hatred and brutality. Fears of such degradation through military service may have been on the minds of Wright and his companions in 1863. All soldiers share the underlying fear that the brutality of combat will estrange them from civilian life, but at least one historian has argued that nineteenth-century Euramericans also shared a deep-rooted phobia that Indians represented the darker side of their own nature.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, resentment over deployment on the frontier hardened the Iowa troopers, preventing them from seeing even friendly tribes with any sympathy.

Summarizing such sentiments, Wright's fellow sergeant Joseph Drips later wrote:

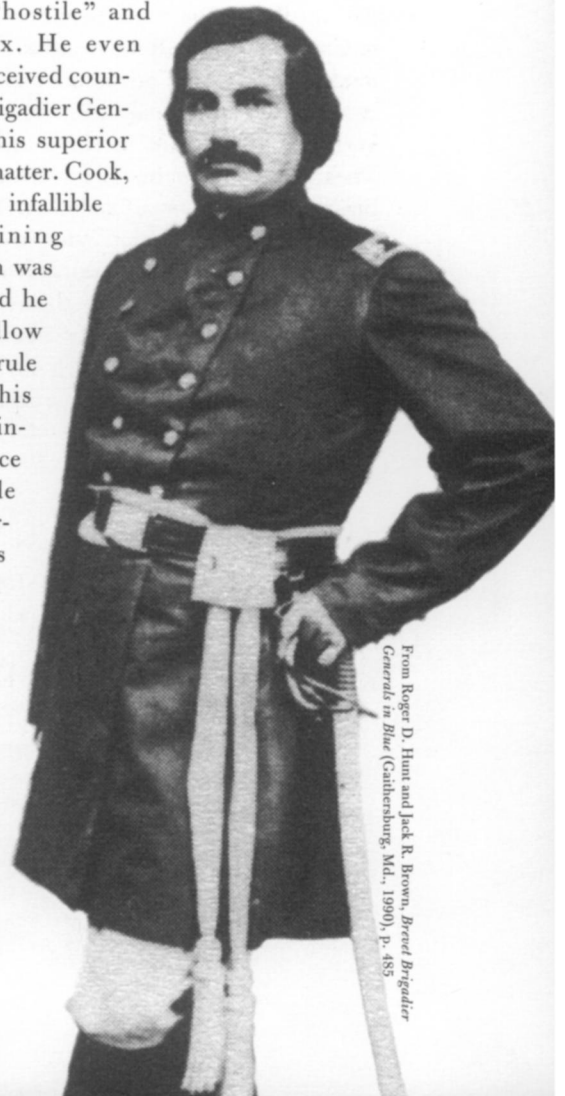
There was a romantic idea existing among a large number of the men that the great majority of the Indians were the real nobility of the country; that the few who had been committing the diabolical

outrages at New Ulm, Spirit Lake, and other places, were the off-scourings of that noble race. But at the first sight of a camp of friendly Indians—at the Yankton Agency on the Missouri River—dispelled that romance and every subsequent acquaintance with "the noble red" went to emphasize the idea that "the good Indian was the dead Indian."

Henry J. Wieneke, a member of the Fourteenth Iowa Infantry who had been stationed near the agency the previous winter, amplified such sentiments. After reporting on sickness in the tribe in a letter to his wife, he said: "I wish they would all die. It would save us the trouble of killing them next summer."<sup>8</sup>

The Iowa regiment's commanding officer in the field, Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Pollock, helped harden such convictions. Born in Ohio in 1829, Pollock had been trained as an attorney before receiving his political appointment as the Sixth Iowa Cavalry's executive officer. A contemporary ironically described Pollock, with his dark eyes and long black hair, as a person who "might well have passed for an Indian chief of the highest order if he had been attired in appropriate toga."<sup>9</sup>

Whatever determined his feelings about Indians, Pollock made no effort to distinguish between "hostile" and "friendly" Sioux. He even claimed to have received counsel in 1863 from Brigadier General John Cook, his superior officer, about the matter. Cook, he said, "had one infallible rule of ascertaining whether an Indian was hostile or not, and he wished me to follow that rule, and that rule was to examine his liver."<sup>10</sup> Pollock interpreted this advice liberally and made sure his men understood that all natives they encountered should be considered enemies.<sup>11</sup>



From Roger D. Hunt and Jack R. Brown, *Brevet Brigadier General in Blue* (Gathensburg, Md., 1990), p. 485.

Wright's Sixth Iowa regiment was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Pollock (right) who disabused his soldiers of any sympathies they may have held for Indians, even the friendly tribes they encountered.



However thoroughly Sergeant Wright and the other Sixth Iowa men adopted Colonel Pollock's philosophy, an incident involving the regiment's Second Battalion near Fort La Ramboise, three miles north of present-day Pierre, South Dakota, suggests that some soldiers agreed strongly with their commander. Soon after the battalion arrived at the post on June 9, 1863, a steamboat laden with supplies docked to discharge its freight. Friendly Sioux camped nearby hailed the boat as it landed and took hold of the docking ropes, demanding that the vessel's captain treat them to presents. Lieutenant Colonel John Pattee of the Seventh Iowa Cavalry, ranking officer of Fort La Ramboise, avoided a potentially bloody confrontation by insisting the steamer captain distribute tobacco and hardtack to the Indians. The action enraged the onlooking cavalymen, however, and Sergeant Drips still seethed about the incident thirty years later. Accusing Pattee of cowardice, Drips claimed in his reminiscence that "the boys of the Second Battalion, as well as the boys in the fort, begged for the opportunity of turning the 'bull dogs' on them. . . . [We] were anxious for the fray."<sup>12</sup>

Colonel Pollock further tutored his regiment in Indian relations later that June. When Sergeant Wright and the men of the First Battalion accompanied their commander to Fort Randall on the Missouri River just north of the present-day South Dakota-Nebraska border, Pollock found some of Pattee's men working a ferry across the Missouri River and allowing friendly Yanktonai Sioux to use the vessel to visit the fort. Upon discovering that Pattee had ordered the service, Pollock countermanded the order, saying, "If Iowa boys are only here to cross Indians they had better go home."<sup>13</sup>

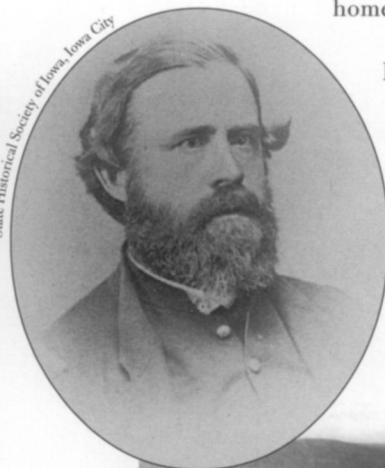
In yet another incident, Pollock insulted chiefs from nearby villages by demanding

they get away from the fort. Several of the chiefs paid the colonel a visit after Pollock assumed command at the post, expecting the officer to sponsor a feast as was customary. Instead, Pollock told the Sioux he had come to give them a feast of cold lead and was prepared to issue it at once. When the chiefs protested the colonel's lack of hospitality, he ordered all of them to clear out immediately, giving them five minutes to strike their tepees and one day to get six miles from the fort. The colonel later claimed he acted on orders from General Cook, then commander of the Department of Iowa, but Pollock's enforcement of the ban on Indian residency was entirely his own. Regardless, the incident had an impact on the regiment.<sup>14</sup>

Sergeant Wright would receive an even more dramatic lesson in Indian relations before the 1863 campaign got underway. On June 13, 1863, Sergeant William Newman of the First Dakota Cavalry, a trooper at Fort Randall, lost his horse and, while searching for the animal, ran into a party of mounted Indians a few miles from the fort. Frightened by the encounter, Newman had turned to ride back to the post when he heard several shots fired, although he later admitted he could not be sure if the Indians had been shooting at him or at some nearby pronghorns.<sup>15</sup> Once safely back at Fort Randall, Newman told his story to Colonel Pollock, who ordered Captain Abraham Moreland to take men from Company G and pursue the Indians.

Sergeant Wright did not say whether he accompanied the detail from his company as they rode out to a nearby camp of reservation Yanktonai Sioux. If not, he certainly heard later from his comrades how they surprised the Indians and ordered six men and two teenaged boys to accompany them back to the fort. While some of Moreland's men continued to scour the countryside for the missing horse, the captain, along with Sergeants Charles F. Hobbs and Eben M. Jones,

State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City



Lieutenant Colonel John Pattee (left) was more accommodating to friendly Indians than was Pollock. When Pollock discovered that Pattee had allowed friendly Yanktonai Sioux to use the ferry at Fort Randall (below, circa 1860s), he countermanded Pattee's order, saying, "If Iowa boys are only here to cross Indians, they had better go home."



South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre

walked their prisoners a few hundred yards in the direction of the fort. Moreland bluntly told his soldiers he intended to kill the Indians and ordered them to pull out their revolvers. Seven of the Sioux were executed in the ensuing fusillade, and one badly wounded man managed to get away by hiding in the underbrush. They were left, in the words of one veteran, as “food for the coyotes.”<sup>16</sup>

General Sully’s 1863 expedition got fully underway on August 13. By that time, General Sibley’s Minnesota column had completed its sweep through eastern Dakota Territory after having encountered Indians southwest of Devil’s Lake. Sully arrived in the area well after the end of the month, but on September 3, Sergeant Wright and the Sixth Iowa faced their first enemy fire at White Stone Hill, a desolate battlefield northwest of present-day Ellendale, North Dakota. The fight was a sharp night engagement with hundreds of Sioux casualties and fourteen troopers of the Sixth Iowa killed. Wright, who was hit in the left leg by what today would be called friendly fire, was among the twenty-one soldiers of the regiment wounded in the battle.

Wright made no note of his wound in his diary, confirming only that he boarded the hospital ship *Alone* once the column reached the Missouri River on September 10. The wound proved serious enough for the young soldier to be evacuated to a Sioux City hospital. Granted a furlough in October, Wright returned home to his parents in Clayton County briefly before reporting back to the hospital on November 23. He stayed there until January 20, 1864, when he was sent to Fort Randall and declared fit for duty. During his absence, his company had remained at Fort Randall, gaining a reputation for harsh treatment of Indians on the nearby Yanktonai Sioux reservation by committing offenses ranging from burglary to rape.<sup>17</sup>

Wright no doubt found the next six months of garrison life at Fort Randall excruciatingly dull. The daily routine of drill and fatigue duty, interrupted only by an occasional Indian raid, formed the bulk of his expe-

riences that winter and spring. “We are having just enough excitement here to keep us from getting homesick,” he reported in a May 1864 letter to his cousin Emilie.

The Indians are constantly prowling around trying to steal our horses and kill straggling men. There has been six or eight killed this spring. Thus far we have been unable to catch the murderers. Day before yesterday we got so close on their trail that they were obliged to leave their ponies and cross the river. We brought back the ponies but the rascals escaped.<sup>18</sup>

Company G grew eager to resume active campaigning, waiting with the same impatience as General Sully for the Missouri River to rise enough to allow passage of essential supply boats.

The Missouri’s rise came as June approached, and Wright looked forward to the campaign as enthusiastically as the rest. Reacting to his Quaker cousin’s prayer for divine intervention to foil the coming expedition, Wright wrote on June 1: “Thee wishes the Missouri would not raise . . . too late. . . . It has already risen eight feet.” For once, he said, the river justified its Indian name,

which is “Mad River.” One night last week it rose suddenly about six feet and the scene it presented was truly frightful. It was filled from bank to bank with logs, trees, brush, and foam, and what was the most mysterious was it rose without any apparent cause. . . . We hope soon to be on the march and break this weary monotony of camp life.”<sup>19</sup>

Wright got his wish for action just a few days later. On June 17, 1864, General Sully led the Sixth Iowa Cavalry out of its winter quarters to ascend the Missouri River and commence another campaign against the Sioux. The previous year’s fighting had failed to satisfy General Pope, who wanted to cow the troublesome Indians thoroughly by having a series of forts constructed in the heart of their territory. In addition,

12. Drips, *Three Years*, 26. Drips noted that Pattee’s men were dissatisfied with his command, but the colonel’s levelheaded leadership style seems to have won them over. See Lambert A. Martin to Bill Martin, September 12, 1863, Lambert A. Martin to All at Home, June 13, 1862, both in WA MSS S-1036, Lambert A. Martin Letters and Diary (hereafter Martin Letters), Western Americana Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut (hereafter Western Americana Collection).

13. Martin to Dear friends at Home, June 21, 1863, Martin Letters.

14. Ibid.; Samuel W. Pollock testimony, February 8, 1864, exhibits A and B, in “Proceedings [of] Board of Investigation.”

15. William Newman testimony, February 9, 1864, in “Proceedings [of] Board of Investigation.”

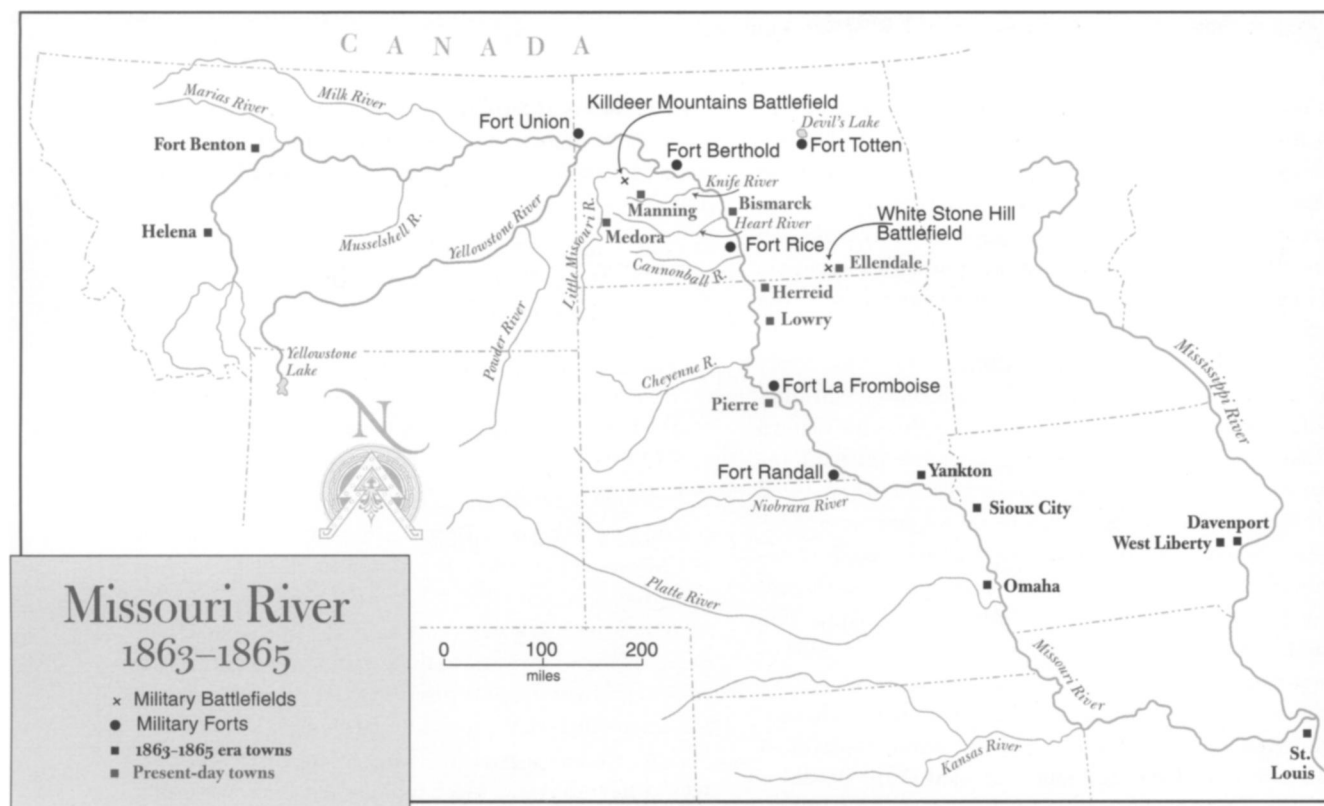
16. Abner M. English, “Dakota’s First Soldiers: History of the First Dakota Cavalry, 1862–1865,” *South Dakota Historical Collections*,

9:265. The differing accounts of this incident have been reconciled in this version based on an evaluation of the evidence presented at the hearing. Secondary accounts differ greatly and are valuable because they contain writers’ questions about the reliability of their contemporaries’ accounts. Wright’s diary is silent on the matter, but see Pattee, “Dakota Campaigns,” 5:293–94; Drips, *Three Years*, 33; English, “Dakota’s First Soldiers,” 9:265.

17. John W. Wright service record, Compiled Service Records of Union Volunteers from the State of Iowa, RG 94; Dewitt C. Train to S. M. Pollock, April 3, 1865, Miscellaneous Regimental Papers, Sixth Iowa Cavalry, RG 94; Alfred Sully to J. D. Denkins, April 17, 1865, WA MSS S-1311, Alfred Sully Papers, Western Americana Collection.

18. Wright to Cousin Emilie, May 1, 1864, folder 27, box 5, Burlingame Papers.

19. Wright to Cousin Emilie, June 1, 1864, Burlingame Papers.



troops were to break the Indians' military power by striking them whenever they could be found en masse.<sup>20</sup>

Sully's column included four companies of Major John Brackett's Minnesota cavalry battalion, eleven companies of the Sixth Iowa Cavalry, three companies of the Seventh Iowa Cavalry, two companies of the Dakota Volunteer Cavalry, a company of Nebraska scouts, and a "prairie battery" of four mountain howitzers. In total, the force consisted of about eighteen hundred men. An additional four companies of the Thirtieth Wisconsin Infantry were to travel upriver on supply boats as an escort and to serve as construction crew for several forts being established at strategic locations along the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers. To a few of the transports Sully gave orders to ascend the Yellowstone as far as the mouth of the Powder River and there await his army's arrival.

While Sully led his force up the Missouri, another brigade led by Colonel M. T. Thomas pushed west from Minnesota to join the expedition at the designated rendezvous point just southeast of present-day Herreid, South Dakota. The Thomas column consisted of about twenty-one hundred men, including the Second Minnesota Cavalry, the mounted Eighth Minnesota Infan-

try, and part of the Third Battery, Minnesota Light Artillery. None of these soldiers had served in combat against the Confederates, all having been recruited since the 1862 Sioux outbreak, and they shared the resentment felt by the Sixth Iowa about being denied the opportunity to participate in the larger conflict. The Second Minnesota Cavalry, recalled for frontier service when en route to Mississippi, thoroughly resented the diversion.<sup>21</sup> The Minnesota recruits were particularly vengeful, having been touched either personally or by familial relation by recent conflicts with Indians at home. Their extant diaries and letters record incidents on the march as startling as the desecration of Indian graves by soldiers who paused to play kickball with the skulls.<sup>22</sup> This army's journey would prove to be a series of savage incidents interspersed with almost surreal episodes of tragicomedy.

The summer heat proved particularly brutal to men marching in hot wool uniforms, and the landscape stretched before them, an unending plain of scorched grassland. Among other impediments, Thomas had brought a brass band, a wagon train of more than one hundred families headed for the Montana goldfields,

20. Robert Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian, 1848-1865* (Lincoln, 1981), 275.

21. Martin Williams, "Narrative of the Second Regiment of Cavalry," *Minnesota and the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861-1865* (St. Paul, Minn., 1989), 543.

22. George W. Doud, "The diaries of George W. Doud, Eighth Minnesota Volunteers, Company F, September 14, 1862-October 15, 1864," July 9, 1864, typescript, P 2240, Minnesota Historical Society, Minneapolis (hereafter MNHS). On the Minnesota troops' desire for vengeance, see Louis Pfaller, "Sully's Expedition of 1864 Featuring the Killdeer Mountain and Badlands Battles," *North Dakota History*, 31 (January 1964), 30-32.



and a herd of cattle that would suffer loudly and die from lack of forage and water as the weeks passed. Stifling heat and the troopers' uneasiness slowed the march to a snail's pace. At one point an alarm that Indians intended to attack the rear of the column caused Colonel Thomas to deploy a force behind the immigrant wagons to defend against what turned out to be bushes distorted by a mirage.<sup>23</sup>

As both columns approached their rendezvous point, Captain John Fielner, topographical engineer for Sully's brigade, became the campaign's first combat casualty. Fielner had separated from the main column to examine geological phenomena when concealed Indian snipers shot and mortally wounded him.<sup>24</sup> Sully dispatched his company of Dakota scouts to pursue the warriors, and they managed to kill all three Indian men after a chase of several miles. By the time the incident was over, the heads of the warriors were impaled on stakes placed on a hill overlooking the military camp, but their presence seemed to have little effect on Wright and his comrades. Wright did not comment on the heads in his diary, and after Sergeant Drips described the placement of the grim trophies for his journal, he said simply: "We had a good camp here, having plenty of wood, water, and grass."<sup>25</sup> Whatever the effect of the macabre spectacle on the Sixth Iowa may have been as the unit marched out on the morning of June 29, it provided graphic evidence of the kind of treatment tribesmen could expect from Sully's army.

**Sully met Thomas on June 29** at a camp west of Swan Lake, near present-day Lowry, South Dakota. The combined force, along with the civilian wagon train, continued north along the Missouri River until it arrived a few miles north and opposite the mouth of the Cannonball River, south of present-day Bismarck, North Dakota, on July 9. The supply steamboats began to ferry all of them across to the west bank of the Missouri, where men of the Thirtieth Wisconsin Infantry were building a new post, Fort Rice. Word reached Sully that the Sioux had gathered at a large camp somewhere north of the Heart River, the next major drainage north, and the two brigades set out on July 18 to find it.

Under a searing sun, the expedition pushed northwest along the Cannonball River Valley. For the first few days, the country presented picturesque timbered

bottomlands and rolling prairie, but slowly it changed to a rocky landscape littered with buffalo bones and stagnant pools of undrinkable alkali water. Even more ominous was the lack of grass for the draft animals and periodic sightings of signal fires lit by warriors who monitored the army's progress.

When Sully's force reached the Heart River on July 25, scouts brought word that an immense camp of Sioux, consisting of sixteen hundred lodges, had been discovered near the Killdeer Mountains, an abrupt series of ridges rising from the plain about seventy miles northwest. As badly as he wanted to strike the enemy, the general knew the men would need to rest for a day before embarking on the forced march that would take them to their foe.

The day seemed foreboding to Wright. As he watched his comrades amusing themselves chasing prairie dogs or attempting to bathe in the sluggish, muddy water, he reflected on what he faced. "We expect to have a hard battle with them," he wrote,

and God only knows who will be spared. We go to battle feeling that right and justice are on our side and we are resolved to conquer or die. Knowing that some must fall, we all feel that our lives will not be lost in vain and if perchance I fall, and fall I might, I bid my kind commander "Adieu" and loving friends at home, do not mourn me as lost but only gone before and may we all meet around that bright and shining throne where all contention ceases and all is in harmony and peace. God be with you until—<sup>26</sup>

The morning of July 26, General Sully sent out a force of scouts to monitor the Indian camp and, preparing to hasten his main force forward, ordered extra ammunition and rations packed on mules. Unfortunately, the mules refused to submit to the packsaddles, and the soldiers had to commandeer several light wagons from the civilians to haul the supplies.<sup>27</sup> Amid the tumult of braying mules, cursing officers, and protesting civilians, Sergeant Wright had ample time to indulge his premonitions because the striking force did not get underway until well after the noon hour.

Leaving a skeleton force behind to protect the wagon trains and his supply base, Sully took with him most of the artillery and enough cooked rations to sustain the soldiers for three days. They had gone only ten miles when Captain Christian Stuftt, commanding an advance scouting party, came racing back in a drunken stupor to report his men butchered by a war party they

23. Ebenezer O. Rice diary, June 30, 1864, A/R495, MNHS.

24. Without this officer's service there would be no maps of the Battle of Killdeer Mountain or of subsequent engagements in the badlands.

25. Drips, *Three Years*, 70.

26. John W. Wright diary, July 25, 1864, transcribed, folder 26, box 5, Burlingame Papers.

27. Official reports blame the mules' stubbornness on the rigidity of the leather cinches that came with the packsaddles.



had encountered. After placing Stuftt under arrest, Sully sent Major Brackett ahead with a squad of veterans to see what had really happened. When the main column arrived, Sully learned the scouts had not been killed at all but instead had routed the Sioux. Nonetheless, the skirmish seemed to have ruined all chance of surprise.<sup>28</sup>

Sully called a brief halt on the evening of July 27, but at daylight his men pushed on to the northwest, covering an additional thirty-five miles before resting for the evening near present-day Manning, North Dakota. By this time Wright had cause to be nervous. He tried for a few hours' sleep on the hard ground without benefit of a campfire or shelter while guards nervously patrolled the camp's moonlit perimeter. "Country rough, wood plenty, several alarms during the night," Wright remarked tersely in his diary.<sup>29</sup>

**I**n the predawn of July 28 the column moved out. Because the prior night's interruptions had proved false, Sully allowed the men to pause at midmorning to build fires for their coffee. The skirmish two days earlier had some of the men doubting the Indian camp would be found at all, but once the force got underway again scout Frank La Framboise returned from the northwest to report that the Sioux camp had been spotted just a few miles ahead on the slopes of the Killdeer Mountains. Colonel Pollock of the Sixth Iowa stood with the general when La Framboise made his report, and he cantered back to his regiment with obvious anticipation. "Well, Captain," Pollock called out, "we have found the sons of bitches at last!"<sup>30</sup>

Distances can be deceiving on the Dakota plains, and the optical distortion of a hot July day contributed to the soldiers' confusion as they made their approach. Sully thought the village was but three miles away and ordered the column into a giant square. Because the troops were actually about ten miles away, the maneuver allowed the warriors time to prepare. Sergeant Wright and his company were ordered to dismount and deploy as skirmishers well in advance of the square's center. On the slopes ahead, meanwhile, myriad tepees began folding up like the shutting of so many umbrellas, and mounted warriors the soldiers later estimated to number from two thousand to six thousand rode out from the village to meet the attack.<sup>31</sup>

Under a blazing sun, the men of Company G walked forward cautiously, the dry grass crunching under their boots as they handled the hot metal of their carbines. Stretching behind them more than a mile followed the massive line of dismounted soldiers spaced about four paces apart that formed the face of the giant square. The artillery and mounted horse holders remained in the center of the square between two additional columns of troops advancing on the formation's east and west flanks. The columns were to provide immediate assistance at any threatened point.

Whatever stagnant pools of alkali water Company G passed offered no relief for their thirst, nor did they allow the ponds to break their formation since they kept their line straight even if it meant walking directly through water waist deep. "The whole division then moved forward anxious to begin the battle," Wright recalled. "Firing soon commenced [and] Company G had the pleasure of opening." The rolling terrain allowed the tribesmen to conceal themselves, and when one lone warrior galloped out in advance of his fellows, the bluecoat skirmishers found their short-barreled carbines inadequate to bring him down.<sup>32</sup>

In the main line following Company G, Colonel Pattee watched the warrior carefully until a courier from General Sully galloped up and said, "The General sends his compliments and wishes you to kill that Indian for God's sake!"<sup>33</sup> Although the men of the Eighth Minnesota Infantry had Springfield rifle muskets that would reach the daring Sioux, they had been positioned on the far left of the square's front line, away from the target. Pattee knew a couple of men in the Seventh Iowa had retained their infantry rifles, and he called on them to fire over Wright's head to knock the warrior from his mount. The order was obeyed, and the Indian fell to the ground.

The battle opened in earnest after this incident, with warriors charging at the skirmishers who slowly rejoined the main line as it advanced. Amidst the swirling dust and gun smoke, Wright could see small groups of warriors gallop forward, discharge their weapons, and then retreat out of range. The roar of the artillery punctuated the afternoon's firing, and the gunners plied their trade to advantage. At one point, noncombatant Indians paused in their flight to observe the fighting from a hill on the left. The artillerymen lost no time getting their range and sent explosive shells into their

28. Pattee, "Dakota Campaigns," 5:306; Drips, *Three Years*, 76. Neither Pattee nor Drips identified the officer by name, but Captain Stuftt was the commander of the Nebraska scouts. See *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington D.C., 1893), ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 2:988 (hereafter *Official Records*).

29. Wright diary, July 27, 1864.

30. Drips, *Three Years*, 77.

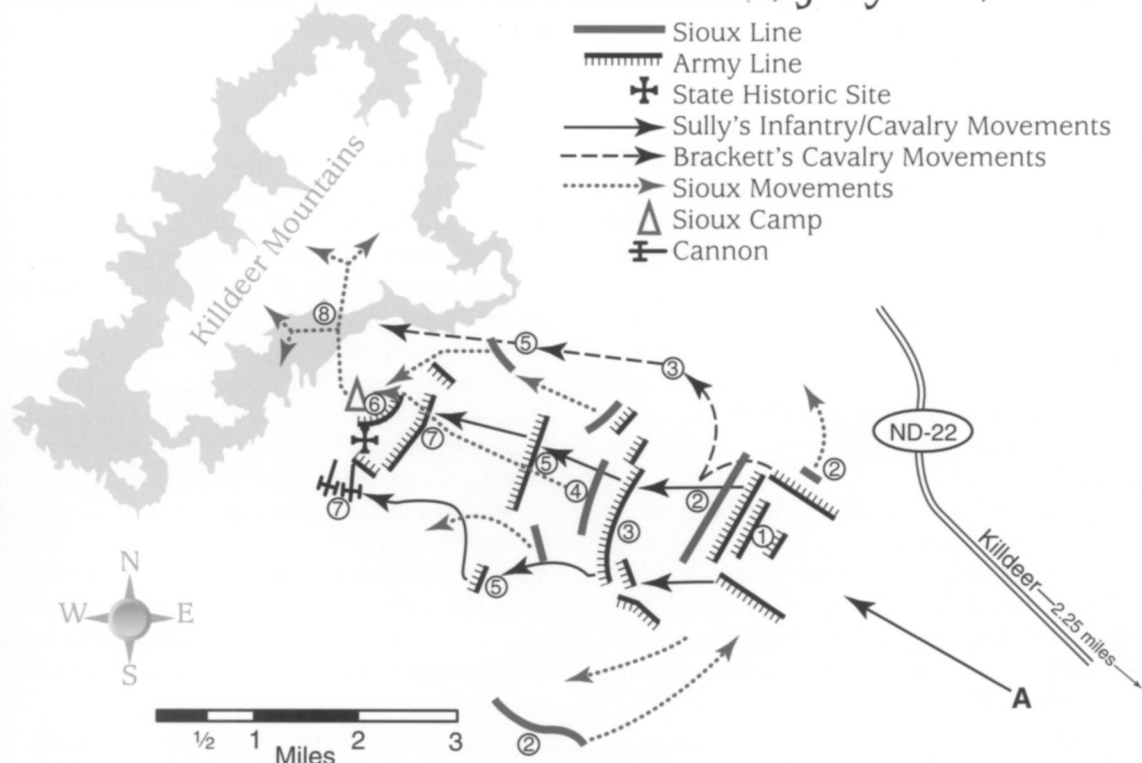
31. George T. Campbell reminiscence, typescript, A/C174, George T. Campbell and Family Papers, 1857–ca. 1890, MNHS.

32. Drips, *Three Years*, 78; Wright diary, July 27, 1864.

33. Pattee, "Dakota Campaigns," 5:308.

34. Frank Myers, *Soldiering in Dakota 1863, 1864, 1865* (Huron, S.D., 1888), 18–19; Wright to Cousin Emilie, September 25, 1864.

# Killdeer Mountains Battlefield, July 28, 1864



**A** Sully approaches from the southeast.

- ① Sully's forces form a phalanx and advance across a flat plain toward the higher ground to the west.
- ② Sioux confront the phalanx on the front and flanks.
- ③ Forward section of phalanx presses Sioux line back; Brackett's cavalry breaks towards the northwest to flank the Sioux.
- ④ Sioux abandon advance on rear guard, probe south flank; forward line retreats slowly toward village.
- ⑤ Sully's forces continue a steady advance; Brackett confronts Sioux at the cone-shaped mountain.
- ⑥ Sioux retreat to village.
- ⑦ Sully's forces encircle the village, artillery flanks the village from the south and begins shelling.
- ⑧ Sioux abandon the village and retreat into Killdeer Mountains' ravines.

midst. Wright later estimated that "one shell killed 25 Indians and several horses."<sup>34</sup>

As the soldiers moved toward the village, the Sioux took advantage of the terrain and stalled the onslaught while their families fled over the top of the mountains beyond. Major Brackett's battalion, in the army's only mounted charge of the day, rushed some warriors harassing the right of the line. The assault pushed the warriors back to the slopes of a cone-shaped hill at the cost of two troopers' lives. From that strong point the warriors continued to fire until Brackett sent a company forward to storm the position on foot. Observing

the activity on the right, Wright estimated "100 men with artillery could have held the place against any force," but with only their guns and bows the warriors were dislodged and driven back to join the general retreat. The Sioux fled over the saddle between the hogbacked ridge and the conical hill, and as darkness descended, pursuing soldiers found that the badlands beyond stymied their chase.<sup>35</sup>

On the battlefield, soldiers found small pockets of resistance as they explored the abandoned camp and timbered slopes. Captain Stuff's Indian scouts fired on some warriors hiding in a thicket, and a wounded



Sioux was dragged out and propped against a bush. The scouts then mounted and rode in a circle around him, pumping bullets into his body until they paused to scalp and behead him. They gave the same treatment to two other wounded warriors they found. Sergeant Drips and the men of Company L managed to kill an Indian they found hiding in the brush, and some of the Iowa boys may have witnessed the execution of several Indian babies found abandoned in the camp.<sup>36</sup>

As the weary soldiers prepared to sleep on the battleground, General Sully ordered them to forgo the small luxury of campfires. Some of the Sixth Iowa troopers, not aware of a wonderful spring found in the abandoned village, strained water from a mud pool through a towel to slake their thirst.<sup>37</sup>

At first light the next day, Sully tried to pursue the fleeing warriors, but after seeing firsthand the rough country beyond called off the chase and ordered the Indian camp destroyed. All day tepee poles, lodge skins, dried meat, cooking utensils, and other paraphernalia from the abandoned Sioux village were stacked in huge

piles and set afire. Black smoke with a disgusting odor roiled over the field as the fires spread to the brush and ignited the mountainside. As the sacking continued, Sergeant Wright and his company withdrew several miles southeast to help establish the next night's camp. Most of the force joined them by nightfall of July 29, but some of the troopers were posted far from the main camp to graze the horses. Enraged at the attack and eager for revenge, Sioux warriors cornered three troopers of the Second Minnesota Cavalry four miles from the main camp and killed two of them. The third ran back screaming for help.<sup>38</sup>

Sergeant Wright himself may have had his closest brush with death on this evening. In the darkness, Isaac Winget, a sergeant from the Sixth Iowa Cavalry's Company E, was returning from checking on guards when he was shot dead by a nervous soldier on watch. If Company G had not been assigned to picket guard duty the previous night, it might have been Wright's turn to check the sentries.

Next day, Sully led his army back toward the corralled wagon train on Heart River, reaching the anx-

Following the July 28, 1864, attack on a Sioux village at the Killdeer Mountains, soldiers destroyed the camp's tepees, provisions, and other property; then Sully led his army back south to the civilian wagon train he had left corralled on the Heart River. From there they headed westward through the badlands, including Painted Canyon (pictured below), which Sully described as "hell with the fire burned out." Located north of Interstate 94 near Medora, North Dakota, Painted Canyon is part of present-day Theodore Roosevelt National Park.



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

ious civilians on the evening of July 31. The gold seekers may have considered turning back, but Sully was determined to continue on to the Yellowstone River. Having chastised the Sioux and destroyed their supplies, Sully now wanted to accomplish his second objective of establishing a fort at the mouth of the Powder River by marching his army west to meet the supply boats. Although some of the officers tried to persuade him not to go directly west, a young Indian scout declared that he could pilot the army through to its goal, and Sully agreed.

**A**fter resting two days the troops began their trek westward. At first Wright reported "grass and water good," but on August 4, about fifty miles from the corral on Heart River, the grass began to disappear and the sun beat down mercilessly. Also disturbing were sightings of Indian scouts shadowing the column, but nothing could have been more demoralizing than the sight they beheld at the edge of the North Dakota badlands on August 5. Gazing in awe at the seemingly endless labyrinth of arid bluffs and eroded buttes, Wright noted that it "would take an abler pen than mine to describe and do it justice. Suffice to say they are a succession of hills and deep ravines which at first sight one would think no sane man would attempt to pass [through]."<sup>39</sup>

Sully's army descended into what the general described as "hell with the fire burned out" on the morning of August 6. The guide led the way, and the general assigned companies of soldiers to use picks and shovels to widen canyon bottoms for the wagons. As they pushed through the bizarre landscape, Wright and his comrades followed such a twisting, meandering route that the column's head would often be no farther than 450 yards as the crow flies from the rear after two hours' marching. The soldiers had water again when they reached the Little Missouri River that evening, but the

scarcity of grass dangerously weakened the civilians' draft animals, and they bellowed loudly in protest.<sup>40</sup>

On August 7, as Sully's expedition prepared to move out, a Sioux raiding party attempted to drive off some of the military horses. The warriors were rebuffed, but the column only made four miles before warriors again attacked from the high bluffs overlooking the column's advance. Adding to the surreal quality created by the heat, danger, and frustratingly slow pace, Sully ordered the band to play. The eerie, wailing notes of marches and polkas echoed through the canyons, mixing with Sioux war cries. That night from their concealed positions warriors who spoke English taunted the soldiers, some of whom replied defiantly across the darkness. "We shelled them as long as we could see," Wright recalled. "They told us to come on, they were at home now and would whip us. We told them we would be along the next day. Accordingly the next morning was ushered in by the roar of artillery and the sharp crack of our rifles."<sup>41</sup>

The soldiers fought all day August 8 as they pushed through the broken country, making a little over six and half miles by nightfall. When the Indian scout, on whom General Sully had placed all their hopes of navigating the badlands, was dangerously wounded, apprehension engulfed the entire command.<sup>42</sup> At the end of the long day, the expedition found itself closely camped around a stagnant pool that the desperate animals quickly churned into a mud hole. The Indians attacked again at dusk, but they were held off by rifle and cannon fire.

On the morning of August 9 the Sioux again tried to annihilate the soldiers, firing down from hilltops as the column snaked on. At one point Wright and Company G were ordered to charge up the slopes of a bluff on foot "which we did with a yell that seemed to terrify them, savages though they were." The charge proved to be "too much for the nerves of the sensitive aborigines," who, Drips recalled, "as soon as they saw them [the soldiers] getting into a good shape to fight, fled as they always did before us."<sup>43</sup>

35. Granite Falls, Minnesota, *Journal*, August 20, 1914, p. 1; Wright to Cousin Emilie, September 25, 1864. Bennett, a veteran of Brackett's battalion, visited the battlefield fifty years later and toured by automobile the same terrain he had charged over on horseback in 1864. His 1914 description of the field allows for the accurate placement of the combatants at the cone-shaped hill on the right. Bennett said L. K. Houlton and Carl Boekman took "Kodaks" along to photograph the sites the veteran pointed out, but the film was ruined in both cameras. Boekman took field sketches, however, to produce the mural of the battle currently at the Minnesota State Capitol.

36. *Official Records*, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1:163; Myers, *Soldiering in Dakota*, 21; David L. Kingsbury, "Sully's Expedition against the Sioux in 1864," *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society*, 17 vols. (St. Paul, Minn., 1872-1920), 8:456; Pfaller, "Sully's Expedition of 1864," 52; Drips, *Three Years*, 79.

37. Myers, *Soldiering in Dakota*, 20.

38. The graves of the slain pickets were exhumed in 1991 and identified as cavalry troopers by the presence of military spurs with the remains. See Killdeer, North Dakota, *Dunn County Herald*, June 28, 1991.

39. Wright to Cousin Emilie, September 25, 1864.

40. Nicholas Hilger, "General Sully's Expedition of 1864," *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana*, 10 vols. (Helena, Mont., 1876-1940), 2:317; Drips, *Three Years*, 82.

41. Pfaller, "Sully's Expedition of 1864," 60; Rice diary, August 7, 1864; Wright to Cousin Emilie, September 25, 1864.

42. Drips, *Three Years*, 83; Myers, *Soldiering in Dakota*, 25; Doud diary, August 8, 1864.

43. Wright to Cousin Emilie, September 25, 1864; Drips, *Three Years*, 84.



Once the attack was foiled, the column moved forward and eventually emerged on the plains beyond the badlands. There, stretched before them lay a motionless, scorched prairie. No one knew exactly how far away the Yellowstone River was, and the prospects of obtaining water and forage seemed slim. "We marched over the roughest country in the last four days that I ever saw," Wright recorded. As the column filed across the vast tableland, sharp reports of rifle fire could be heard from the rear as the trailing company shot horses and oxen too weak to continue. Wright, preoccupied with mere survival, did not detail his daily experiences on the march to the Yellowstone. Major Ebenezer Rice, however, managed to compose a moving word portrait. "Not a spear of grass to be had," Rice wrote,

and the Sun scalding hot as it has been for the last fortnight. Not a day, for six or eight days at least, has the mercury stood lower than 100 degrees, without a tree or shrub to shade one. Water, miserable, muddy or stagnant liquid and all we have used for a week has been rain water standing in holes and gullies. Our stock having had scarcely any water for the last 36 hours, neither grass, begin to fail. It is cruel to see dumb beasts suffer this way.

The immigrants tried to feed their draft animals flour and crackers to keep them alive, while Wright and his comrades began to walk alongside their mounts to conserve their strength.<sup>44</sup>

On the morning of August 11, following a fitful night's sleep interrupted by the bellowing of tortured animals, the column pushed on, grateful for the mercy of an overcast sky. "Again the ravages of the grasshopper show," Major Rice observed. "The grass is literally cropped to the earth, the roots seared and sunburnt. Starvation for the stock seems to stare us in the face." At two in the afternoon, the column crossed a dry creek bed with a few stagnant pools, but as Sergeant Drips remembered, "when we tasted the water we found it to be alkali or salt water, worse than any we had yet had."<sup>45</sup>

Things did not improve. What little grass they found was encrusted with alkali soil, which only exacerbated the animals' thirst. "Marched 32 miles over rough barren country destitute of both water and grass," Wright

recorded that day. "Did not reach camp until 9 o'clock at night. Camped near a small alkali pool not fit for man or horse to drink."<sup>46</sup> As darkness fell, however, the column heard a steam whistle in the distance, a whistle that could have only come from one of the supply boats sent upriver. Sully ordered a rocket fired to help guide the trailing elements of his army and the civilians that followed. The sharp light against the night sky also signaled the supply boats.

**A** final push remained for Wright and his comrades on August 12, and at two o'clock in the afternoon they reached the banks of the Yellowstone. Some of the men broke ranks in a furious gallop to the river where they gulped water in joyous abandon. But as welcome as the river water was to their swollen tongues and cracked lips, they noted how a summer grasshopper plague had stripped the grass from the riverbanks. To make matters worse, only two of the three supply vessels had made it to the Yellowstone, and the one that had sunk near Fort Union had been the most heavily laden with the corn their animals needed. In desperation the men stripped bark from cottonwood trees to feed their animals and rationed what fodder there was, which came to only about four pounds for each of the command's starving mounts.<sup>47</sup> As night fell Sully again ordered the band to play, and through the darkening gloom the civilians stumbled the remaining miles to the river to the incongruous strains of patriotic marching music.

General Sully's plans to establish a fort at the mouth of the Powder River were dashed by the supply boat wreck and also by the failure of the other two to reach the river due to low water. Recognizing the inevitable, he ordered the entire expedition to return the thirty-two miles to the Missouri River. From there, he promised, the civilians could follow that stream to Fort Benton, jumping-off point to the gold camps. Wright may not have been sorry to see the Powder fort project abandoned, but the march down the Yellowstone River

44. Wright diary, August 9, 1864; Rice diary, August 9, 1864; Doud diary, August 11, 1864.

45. Rice diary, August 11, 1864; Drips, *Three Years*, 85.

46. Wright diary, August 9, 1864.

47. Drips, *Three Years*, 85.

48. Wright diary, August 13, 1864.

49. Fort Union, North Dakota *Frontier Scout*, August 17, 1864, p. 4.

50. Wright to Cousin Emilie, September 25, 1864.

51. Rice diary, August 28, 1864.

52. *Official Records*, ser. 1, vol. 48, pt. 1:701.

53. Drips, *Three Years*, 131.

54. *Ibid.*, 112.

55. Wright diary, October 17, 1865.

56. *Ibid.*, November 1, 1865.

57. Virginia S. Burlingame to Officers of the Christian Church, West Liberty, Iowa, June 9, 1963, folder 28, box 5, Burlingame Papers; West Liberty, Iowa, *Weekly Enterprise*, January 19, February 16, 1882.

58. West Liberty, Iowa, *Weekly Enterprise*, November 23, 1883.

59. John Greenleaf Whittier to John W. Wright, November 23, 1883, folder 27, box 5, Burlingame Papers.

60. Alice Cary, *Ballads, Lyrics, and Hymns* (Cambridge, Mass., 1876), 258.

to Fort Union would require two river crossings, each made without benefit of a decent ford and with animals that had nearly starved to death. "We are laying in camp today," he recorded on August 13, "fixing a road to the river so we can cross. . . . We had to swim the river which is deep and very rapid. We lost five mules and two wagons. The 2nd Brigade lost six men drowned, 15 mules, and several wagons besides much other Government property."<sup>48</sup> The expedition's final irony was that some of those who had almost perished of thirst lost their lives by drowning.

Once General Sully's army reached Fort Union, the civilian wagon train, safely beyond Sioux country, continued west on its own. The soldiers, meanwhile, refitted themselves for a descent of the Missouri River to Fort Randall, their starting point. Fort Union, an old trading post the military had pressed into service, seemed like a metropolis to the weary soldiers. It offered such amenities as a soldier-published newspaper that heralded their recent victory.<sup>49</sup>

After a week of rest and provisioning at the post, Sully prepared to move his army downriver, and Wright found himself the recipient of a dubious promotion. On August 23, 1864, he boarded the steamer *Alone* as a quartermaster sergeant, overseer of the supplies for Fort Berthold, the post about 125 miles downriver from Fort Union. If he thought he would return home with the rest of the regiment, he was quickly disappointed. "We landed here [on the thirtieth] and learned to my dismay that this was to be the future home of Company 'G' for one year at least," he wrote to his cousin Emilie.

Their trek punctuated by skirmishes with the Sioux, starvation, and thirst, Wright and his fellow soldiers struggled through the badlands, finally reaching the Yellowstone River on August 12. From there, the troops pushed on to Fort Union (below, 1866) and Fort Union trading post (right, 1866), where they refitted for the trip back down the Missouri River to Fort Randall.

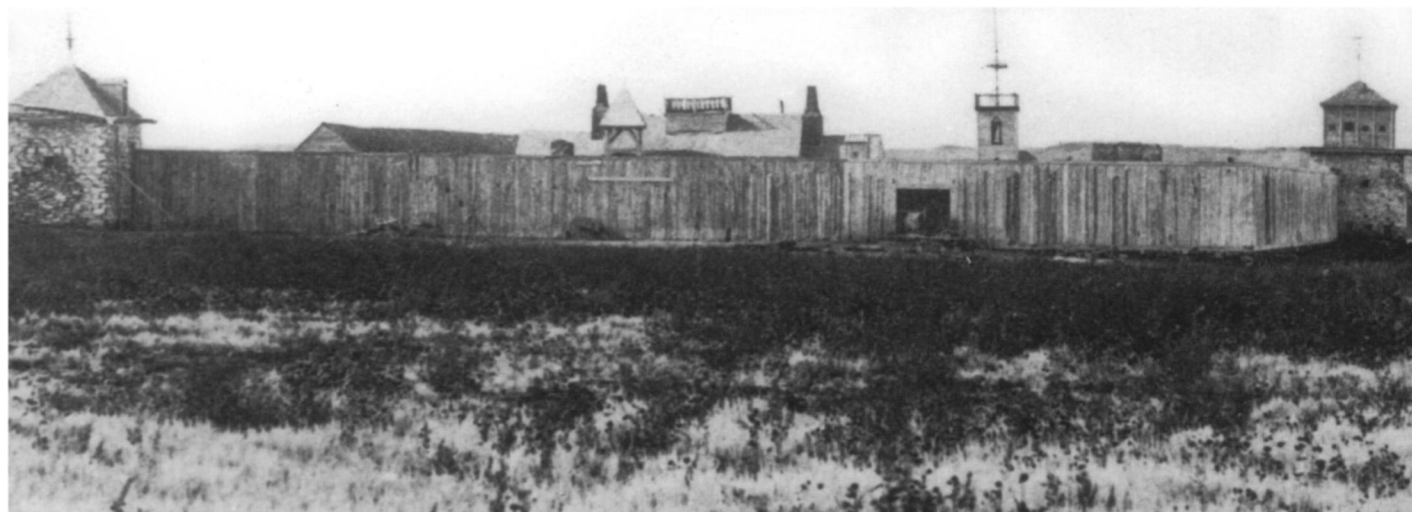
"The fort is very pleasantly situated on the north bank of the Missouri 1,500 miles above Sioux City. There is three tribes of friendly Indians camped here. . . . They are very good to us."<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps the tribes were too good to the soldiers, or at least that was what Sully feared. As his column approached the post on its overland march, the general ordered officers to caution the men against consorting with Indians. "If any one is fool enough after this warning to expose himself [to venereal disease] he can only blame himself for the consequences," Sully's circular advised.<sup>51</sup>

With Captain Moreland in command of the post, Wright and the rest of Company G spent nine months in dreary, tense isolation. The tiny garrison consisted of forty-nine men who lived in constant terror of an enemy attack once the river froze and thus closed communication with the outside world. Captain Moreland reported on January 31, 1865, that he feared the Sioux had been supplied with ammunition by Canadian traders. "Their hosts gathering like birds of ill-omen around us," he wrote, "and their threats reaching us daily, our situation is one of extreme peril."<sup>52</sup> The attack never materialized, however.



Both photos Illingworth and Bill, photographers, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena





On May 14, 1865, the first steamboat of the season arrived at Fort Berthold with orders for Company G to withdraw downriver to Fort Rice. Also confirmed as true were the rumors of Lee's surrender the previous month. Wright's enlistment would not expire until September, and once they arrived at Fort Rice the soldiers found themselves sharing quarters with a motley regiment of former Confederate prisoners who had enlisted in the Union Army to escape slow starvation in Northern prison camps. Realizing that if they had remained in prison they would now be liberated, these galvanized Yankees may have wanted to return home even more keenly than the Iowa troops.

Wright's company lost no time renewing its reputation for harsh treatment of Indians, showing little tolerance for cattle thieves among the friendly tribesmen camped near their post. "Captain Moreland and the infantry at the fort gave the reds to understand they were not to interfere with Uncle Sam's property," Sergeant Drips reported, "and when they persisted the soldiers pitched in and gave them a pretty severe handling. The boys of Company G had not much sympathy with the Indians anyway."<sup>53</sup>

On July 28, 1865, those "severely handled" Sioux may have joined with other warriors to attack the fort shortly after sunrise. Sergeant Charles F. Hobbs, Wright's fellow noncommissioned officer in Company G, reported with satisfaction that his troop alone accounted for a dozen kills in the encounter. "Poor dear creatures! As though Indians possessed the attributes of humanity or the affectionate instinct of the higher order of brutes!" he waxed poetic.

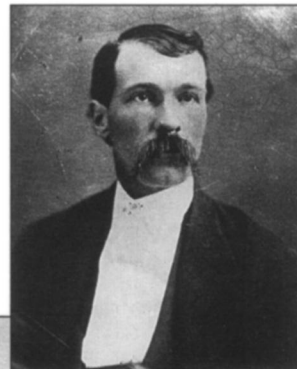
As though their fiendish hearts were susceptible of one spark of the anguish they so gloatingly inflict upon others. They are devoid of ever embling [*sic*]

emotion of the human heart, instinctively brutal, preternaturally degraded, essentially heartless, vindictive and remorseless. Their stately pride and nobility of character exists only in the ideal fancies of imaginative flash novel writers.<sup>54</sup>

Company G returned downriver to Fort Randall on September 17 where Wright received the welcome news that he was to return to Sioux City and be discharged. "Mustered out of the U.S. Service," he wrote on October 17, "the most eventful period in our lives since being mustered in. Good bye, Uncle Sam, we part, as we have ever been, *Good Friends*."<sup>55</sup>

Good friends with Uncle Sam, but after all he had been through, all the horror he had witnessed, John Wright would likely never be a religious Friend again. A sense of loss overcame him as he contemplated leaving his comrades. "Today we are paid off and discharged. Oh what shouting! I'm free! I'm free! I'm going home! can be heard on every side," he wrote in what would be his last diary entry, penned on November 1, 1865, at a post near Davenport, Iowa.

Everybody is shaking hands for a final parting. Oh how sad, for near four years we have shared each others joys and sorrows, stood hand in hand when danger threatened and when the foe was put to flight, sharing equally the joys of victory, comrades one and all, good bye. God bless you always.<sup>56</sup>



John Wright finished his enlistment at Forts Berthold and Rice, mustering out on October 17, 1865. He eventually settled in West Liberty, Iowa, and married Martha Morning, who is pictured at left beside their West Liberty home. Wright (above) died in January 1884, from complications of the wound he received during the Sioux campaign more than twenty years earlier.

John Wright eventually settled in West Liberty, Iowa, where he again took up the carpenter's trade. He joined the Christian Church and became an elder, marrying Martha Morning, another former Quaker, shortly after the war. Together the couple had four children. The family prospered as Wright invested in real estate and quietly worked his trade. He even served on the town council, and as the years passed he continued to turn out wood trim and beehives at his little shop on Calhoun Street.<sup>57</sup>

The war on the western frontier never really left him, however. In November 1883, he joined with twenty-six other veterans in West Liberty to form the Silas Jackson Post of the Grand Army of the Republic and accepted the position of chaplain.<sup>58</sup> The physical legacy of Wright's service was less pleasant. In January 1884, he died at age forty, allegedly from complications of the wound he had received at White Stone Hill nearly nineteen years earlier. The wound, which had never fully healed, always troubled him.

Perhaps Wright knew the end was near, for shortly before the GAR post was organized, he read an anonymously published poem that seemed to speak to him, mistakenly believing John Greenleaf Whittier, a Quaker like he had once been, had written it. He wrote to Whittier to compliment him on his work. Responding on November 23, 1883, Whittier replied:

Dear Friend,

Alice Cary was the author of the poem referred to in thy note.

I am thy friend,  
John G. Whittier<sup>59</sup>

We will never know which one of Alice Cary's poems Wright had seen, but perhaps on that day as he read her words the faith the former soldier had learned in his youth and his feelings regarding the service he had

experienced on the plains uncomfortably collided. Cary wrote many religious verses, but the ones that seem to best fit John Wright's experiences are from "The Law of Liberty":

Not anothers; Thou alone  
Keepst judgement for thine own;  
Only unto Thee is known

What to pity, what to blame;  
How the fierce temptation came;  
What is honor, what is shame<sup>60</sup>

These words could easily be an epitaph for a young Quaker boy who had gone to, and returned from, the Heart of Darkness. ~

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From *Done in the Open*, Drawings by Frederic Remington (New York, 1902), p. 8