

THE FIGHT ON MILK RIVER

CAPT. PAYNE'S ACCOUNT OF THE HEROIC DEFENSE.

THE MOVEMENTS PRECEDING THE ATTACK BY THE UTE—HOW THE FIGHTING WAS BEGUN—MAJOR THORNBURGH'S UNTIMELY DEATH—FOUR DAYS OF CONSTANT PERIL IN A CORRAL.

WASHINGTON, Nov. 8.—Gen. Sherman, in forwarding the following report of Capt. J. Scott Payne, of the Fifth Cavalry, to the Secretary of War, indorses it as follows:

HEAD-QUARTERS OF THE ARMY, Nov. 8, 1879. This modest and most admirable report is received after I have finished my annual report, else I should have embodied it almost entire, as a better description of the fight at Milk Creek on Sept. 29 last. W. T. SHERMAN, General.

The first portion of Capt. Payne's report is devoted to the organization of the command of Major Thornburgh and the march to Bear River, where it went into camp on the night of the 26th of September. The remainder of the report is as follows: "During the afternoon of this date several Ute Indians of prominence, among them Jack and Saarwick, of the White River Agency, and Ungice, an Uncompahque, who had a pass from the agent at Los Pinos, came into our camp, talked freely with Major Thornburgh, and departed about nightfall, apparently in good humor, and well satisfied at what they had learned. At Williams's Fork of the Bear River, where we camped on the 27th, one Eskridge, an agency employe—since killed as we have been informed, by Indians, near the agency—came in, accompanied by 'Colorado,' the Indian interpreter, 'Henry,' 'Bummer Jim,' and other Utes, with a dispatch from Mr. Meeker to Major Thornburgh. A reply was sent to Mr. Meeker by an Indian, Eskridge remaining with the command until the next afternoon, when he was dispatched to the agency with a second communication to Mr. Meeker. Copies of this correspondence were forwarded by Major Thornburgh to your head-quarters, and it is only necessary to refer to them here. It was observed that Colorado and the Indians with him in our camp on the 27th were surly and not disposed to talk, but upon departing they appeared to be better satisfied, and slight, if any, apprehension was entertained of the rapidly-approaching trouble. We camped on the 28th on Deer Creek, and began our march the morning of the 29th at 6:30 o'clock, reaching Milk River about 10 o'clock. After watering the horses at the stream, two companies—E, Third Cavalry, and F, Fifth Cavalry—under the immediate command of Major Thornburgh, turned off the road, taking a trail that bore away to the left, while Company D, Fifth Cavalry, remained with the train, which followed at a distance of, perhaps, a mile. At this time no signs of the Indians had been observed by Major Thornburgh, except a freshly-started fire in the bottom-grass, an incident with which we had grown so familiar that no apprehensions were excited by it. Lieut. Cherry, Adjutant of the command, accompanied by Guide Rankin and a small party of soldiers, was in the advance, and upon passing over some high ground intermediate between the road we had left and the trail, discovered the Indians in heavy force drawn up in line of battle, or, more correctly speaking, lying in ambush along the high ridges which completely covered and commanded the road. With a quick and soldierly perception of the situation, Lieut. Cherry turned back and made signals for the command to retrace its steps. Just as the leading company—F, Fifth Cavalry—was descending a ridge into the valley beyond, E Company was immediately conducted to the side of the hill on its left flank, while Company B, Third Cavalry, was halted on the high ground it occupied, and both companies at once dismounted, and deployed, by Major Thornburgh's orders, as skirmishers—Company E, of the Third Cavalry, on the right along the crest of the ridge, and F Company, of the Fifth Cavalry, as well up the side of the hill—which, constantly ascending, stretched away indefinitely—as the nature of the ground would permit. Our line at this time resembled the letter V, the points toward the Indians, and that portion of it formed by F Company, Fifth Cavalry, projecting considerably beyond the point of junction, and being deflected to the left, so as to prevent the enemy from turning our flank. At this time attempts were made by Major Thornburgh in person, and by Lieut. Cherry to communicate with the Indians, but efforts in that direction were met by a shot, and at once a hot fire was opened upon us and the fight began all along our lines. The Indians had displayed admirable skill in the selection of the ground upon which to give us battle, and it was soon apparent that our position in the face of the enemy, superbly armed and greatly our superior in force, was untenable. With sound judgment and a quick and thorough perception of the situation, Major Thornburgh determined to form a junction with Company D, Fifth Cavalry, which was protecting the wagon train, and with that end in view directed the companies engaged to fall back slowly. The command retired as directed in perfect order, the led horses being kept well protected between the skirmish lines of the two companies, while a heavy and effective fire did great execution among the savages and prevented an attempt on their part to break through our lines. Failing in their efforts in front, the Indians endeavored to cut the command off from the train, which had, by Major Thornburgh's order, gone into park on the right bank of the Milk River, and to accomplish this purpose, passed around our left flank beyond the carbine range and concentrated in great force upon a knoll to the left of and completely commanding our line of retreat. Major Thornburgh, upon discovering this new danger, directed me to charge the knoll with 20 men of my company, to sweep the Indians off, and then, at once, without attempting to hold the hill, to fall back upon the train and take measures for its protection. This duty being performed and the way opened for the return of the led horses, I repaired to the wagon train, and at once took steps looking to its defense. Major Thornburgh doubtless started for the train shortly after giving me the order referred to, and was shot and instantly killed just after crossing the river, and within 500 yards of the wagons. His gallantry was conspicuous from the first to the last, and grief for his death was general and profound.

In the meantime Capt. Lawson, with E Company, of the Third Cavalry, and Lieut. Cherry, with a detachment of E Company, of the Third, and F, of the Fifth Cavalry, gallantly held the Indians in check in front, gradually retiring, Lieut. Cherry, with his detachment, covering the retreat. Upon reaching the train, I found it parked on the right bank of Milk River, about 200 yards from water, the wagons forming the north side of a corral elliptical in shape, its long axis running east and west, and the south side exposed to a fierce fire from the Indians, who, massing in the ravines along the river and upon commanding heights, were making a determined effort to capture and destroy the train before it could be placed in condition for defense. The animals were crowded in the area indicated, and I at once directed some 20 or more of those wounded to be led out and shot along the open space referred to, thus making continuous our line of defense and affording cover for our sharpshooters. As soon as these arrangements were completed, the men were ordered to unload the wagons and use bedding and grain and flour sacks for breast-works. I cannot speak too highly of their conduct at this time. Though exposed to a galling fire, by which many men and horses were stricken down, they worked with alacrity and courage, and in a short time our corral was in as good a state of defense as the means at hand would permit. About this time, Lieut. Paddock, who was encouraging the men by the exposure of his person and intelligently and courageously carrying out my instructions, was wounded in the hip. As Capt. Lawson and Lieut. Cherry, whose gallant fight in covering the retreat deserves high commendation, had not returned to camp, I became solicitous for their safety, and detached Sergt. Poppe, of my company, with 12 men, to proceed down the road in the direction from which they were approaching. In a short time thereafter I was greatly relieved at seeing Capt. Lawson and Lieut. Cherry, with their commands, enter the intrenchments. A new and critical danger now threatened us. The Indians, foiled in their efforts to prevent the concentration of the cannon at the train, or to drive us out of it by a furious and concentrated fire, took advantage of a high wind, blowing directly toward us, and fired the tall grass and sage-brush down the river. At the moment this peril was realized, I observed that the Indian supply train of Mr. John Gordon was parked within 75 yards of my position, and so situated as to command our approach to water. Seeing this, and fearing that under cover of the smoke the Indians might make a lodgment in this train, which in my judgment would have been disastrous to the command, and with

the further view of burning the grass on the north side of the corral to present as little surface as possible to the Indian fire when it should approach, I directed the grass on that side to be fired, and in a few moments was gratified to see Gordon's train in flames. The fire from down the valley approached with great rapidity and struck the exposed point of the corral, and for a few moments threatened us with destruction. The officers and men at the critical moment, when the Indians made their most furious attack, displayed superb gallantry. Several lives were lost and many wounds received, but the fire was extinguished and our greatest danger passed.

From this time—about 2:45 P. M.—until night-fall, the Indians kept up a furious fire, doing great damage to our stock, fully three-fourths of them being killed, or so severely wounded that they were killed by my order. At dark, a large body of Indians charged down behind Gordon's burning train, delivering volley after volley. They were repulsed easily and fled, suffering the loss of several warriors, who were distinctly seen to drop from their saddles. During the night our dead animals were hauled off. A full supply of water for 24 hours was procured; the wounded were cared for; intrenchments were dug, and by daylight the corral was in a good condition for defense. Carriers were sent out with dispatches at midnight, and a general feeling of confidence inspired the entire command. Ammunition and rations were distributed in the several trenches, and I felt that sense of security for my command which sprang from a knowledge of its gallantry and fortitude.

During the next day the Indians kept up an almost incessant fire, killing all our animals but 14 mules, but doing no other damage. We were uninterrupted on the night of the 30th, but after that time the enemy gave us no rest. During the night of the 1st our water party were fired upon at short range, and one man of F Company, Third Cavalry, was shot through the face. The guard for the water party returned this fire with effect, killing one Indian. On the morning of the 2d Capt. Dodge and Lieut. Hughes, with D Company, Ninth Cavalry, came into our camp, adding materially to our fighting strength and bringing the welcome news that our couriers had gone through safely. I cannot express in too high terms my appreciation of the gallantry of these brave officers and men, and it is peculiarly gratifying to know that they have received the praise which such courage richly deserves.

Col. Merritt, with his command, after a march which has no parallel, reached us this morning, and were received with hearty and prolonged cheers by my gallant men, whose patriotic fidelity and courage was thus speedily rewarded by rescue from great and impending peril. I can find no suitable words in which to express my admiration for the officers and men of my command. Their conduct was beyond all praise. They were gallant under fire, patient during suspense, and confident through all. It is my greatest pride to have commanded them, and to know that one more page in the glorious annals of the American soldier has been illustrated by their valor.

J. SCOTT PAYNE,
Captain Fifth Cavalry, Commanding.