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NCOs of the Indian Wars Period 1865-1898



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NCOs of the Indian Wars, 1865-1898

I. Introduction

A. References.

1. "40 Miles a Day on Beans and Hay" by Don Rickey Jr
2. "I Fought with Custer" by Robert and Frazier Hunt
3. "My Army Life and the Fort Phil Kearney Massacre" by Frances Carrington.

B. The excellent book written by Robert and Frazier Hunt about 1SG Charles Windolph was written as told to them by 1SG Windolph himself. In addition to the above references, I did quite a bit of research using the internet. I found the Command and General Staff College web site featuring NCO history to be especially useful.

II. Body

A. Timeframe of the Indian Wars

B. Location of the Indian Wars

C. Post Civil War Reorganization

D. NCO Duties

E. Heroes of the Indian Wars

III. Conclusion

NCOs of the Indian Wars Period 1865-1898

The Army of the Indian Wars period was largely responsible for the nation's successful westward expansion across the continent. Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs) of the period distinguished themselves as small unit leaders in combat as well as effective trainers and administrators under harsh frontier conditions.

The Indian Wars period officially began at the end of the civil war, although Americans had been fighting Indians sporadically since their arrival to the continent. Since the earliest colonies were formed, Americans expanded ever westward, displacing the Native American. This displacement reached its pinnacle with the discovery of gold in the west. The rush for gold and the availability of vast lands just waiting to be settled led to thirty years of intermittent warfare. The Indian Wars took place over a good portion of the United States. Everything west of a line drawn from modern day North Dakota, down through Nebraska, Kansas and Texas became an Indian Wars battlefield. The region we now know as the Midwest was, at that time, the wild frontier. The Army fought nearly every tribe in this vast territory. Among these tribes were the Sioux, Cheyenne, Kiowa, Apache, Navajo and Ute. These battles took place in territories we now know as the states of North and South Dakota, Wyoming, Colorado, Texas, Arizona, Utah and many others. The regular Army had to change significantly to meet the needs of this huge area of operations.

Soldiers during the Indian Wars period were subject to austere conditions on the frontier. The difficulties of service during this time required hardened men. Most of the NCOs at the outset of the Indian Wars, and indeed throughout a good portion of the period, were Civil War veterans. This was an all volunteer force and it took a special breed of man to voluntarily serve after experiencing the horrors of the Civil War.

During the Civil War and for about five years afterward, the Regiment was the level of unit with which a Soldier identified. In the 1870's the Army went through two reorganizations, adding new regiments and merging others. This reorganization placed Soldiers into regiments that they were unfamiliar with and lessened the regimental affinity and pride that was so common in the regular Army of the Civil War. During the Indian Wars period, the enlisted men came to closely identify with their company instead.

Each regular Army regiment of the Indian Wars Army consisted of ten to twelve companies. The strength of a company was usually about eighty men. These companies were rarely all stationed at the same posts. Soldiers lived in company barracks, ate in company mess halls and were primarily identified with their company. All of these factors created a strong affiliation for the company among the enlisted men. Many of these men would spend an entire career in the same company.

Noncommissioned men of the period had most of the same responsibilities that they have today, but enjoyed greater autonomy. The day-to-day administration of the company was left to the First Sergeant. The First Sergeant relied heavily on the sergeants and corporals. "A newly-joined Private was quite likely to view his company sergeants and the company First Sergeant as occupying positions only a little lower than that of the Almighty. This attitude had more than a slight basis in fact and all ranks had to get permission from the 1SG to even talk to an officer" (Rickey 58). Besides the daily administration of the company, NCOs were responsible for the training and discipline of the enlisted men. On the battlefield, NCOs were small unit leaders, relied upon by officers and enlisted men alike.

For an enlisted man, life began at the recruiting depots. Here, they were assembled, assigned to line units and shipped out. Although training for the enlisted man began in earnest

later during the Indian Wars period, early on the recruits received little or no training at the depots. One type of training that did occur at the depots was Physical Training (PT). At the time, PT was referred to as “setting up drills,” which later became known as calisthenics (Rickey 42). The only other training the recruit received was in discipline and teaching recruits their place in the Army.

Once assigned to a line unit, the new Soldiers were trained by NCOs and reenlisted Privates. The training was rudimentary and often the new Soldiers learned by observation. “On the Frontier, training of recruits was conducted when the rest of the company were at leisure or on some routine duty. Six in the morning and six in the evening were common times” (Rickey 34). In the 1860’s and 1870’s, they were trained mostly in close order movements, the manual of arms and the military duties and courtesies involved in mounting guard. During the mid-1880’s, the Army began to formalize training and issued all new recruits the Soldier’s Handbook. NCOs used this book to train Soldiers in everything from guard mounting and discipline to care of arms and public animals.

The Army may have been short on training during the Indian Wars period, but there was no shortage of discipline. Discipline of the troops was usually delegated to the NCOs. The NCOs of the period were hardened men, mostly Civil War veterans. They needed to be tough in order to discipline the soldiers of the time. Many of the Soldiers that enlisted in the Army were nothing more than street thugs escaping whatever trouble they were in at home. These new Soldiers quickly learned that punishment was swift for even the most minor infractions.

NCOs commonly prescribed punishments that were physical, humiliating and often illegal. However, harsh discipline was not tolerated by everyone. In one instance at Fort Phil Kearney in 1866, after a Sergeant struck a Soldier, COL Henry Carrington spelled out his

instructions: "That perversion of authority on the part of noncommissioned officers which displays itself in profane swearing, verbal abuse, kicks and blows and which violates every social, moral and military principal, will be dealt with in the most decided manner." He went on to state: "Whatever degrades a man, destroys the Soldier" (Carrington 111). The usual punishment for the over-zealous NCO was to be reduced to the ranks. This led to misery for them as the Privates they tyrannized, now took it out on them.

Most newly assigned Soldiers endured about a month of hazing by NCOs and reenlisted Privates. The hazing was mostly harmless and served as a diversion from the boredom of life on the frontier. New Soldiers were commonly told that they could report to the First Sergeant for their butter allowance, or to the "hog ranch" next to the fort for their pork supply. H.C. Durgin, a Thirteenth Infantry replacement was the victim of one such hazing incident. "Durgin was assigned to the mess hall to make split pea soup. He was put to task splitting the hard peas with a paring knife. He continued until he noticed a dozen company men laughing at him" (Rickey 85).

"The Indian Wars consisted of a long series of engagements. These wars often consisted of numerous scattered skirmishes over wide areas. This type of war led to the further enhancement of the NCOs role as a small unit leader. Often fighting in small detachments, troops relied heavily on the knowledge and abilities of the NCOs" (Arms).

In combat, NCOs often led skirmish units on dangerous missions where they performed valiantly. The skirmish unit consisted of nine enlisted men and was commonly used for three different missions: scouting for Indian encampments and reporting on their activities, drawing out the hostiles so that larger elements could then attack the Indian flanks, and sweeping the battlefield after the main attack.

Today, when we think of heroes of the Indian Wars period we usually think of the Buffalo Soldiers. While these soldiers truly were heroes, there were many other, lesser known heroes. One such man was Sergeant Charles Windolph of the Seventh Cavalry. Sergeant Windolph fought in the Yellowstone Expedition of 1873 and the Black Hills Expedition of 1874. He fought in Captain Frederick Benteen's troop during the battle of Little Big Horn. Nearly seventy years later, Sergeant Windolph told his story for a book entitled, "I Fought with Custer."

Charles Windolph was born December 9, 1851 in Bergen, Germany. He learned shoemaking from his father, a master shoemaker. In 1870 he was drafted into the dragoons. War with Napoleon III was imminent. Instead of reporting for duty, Windolph made his way to America. According to Windolph, he was "the greenest thing that ever hit New York." He tried his hand at boot making for a couple of months but decided to join the Army to "learn English and amount to something" (Hunt 4).

He asked to be assigned to the cavalry and was assigned to the Seventh, located at Nashville, TN. He was sworn in by Captain Frederick Benteen who in many stories is Custer's antagonist. According to Windolph though, Benteen was the finest man he ever knew. Windolph often told anyone who would listen that he was prouder of the 7th Cavalry and especially H troop than anything in the world.

Windolph's first three years were spent smashing the Ku Klux Klan and running down illegal whiskey distillers. In 1873 the entire regiment was ordered north to the Dakotas and into the Sioux land. From South Dakota, the regiment traveled 500 miles to Fort Rice, North Dakota. Windolph's pride and youthful enthusiasm are evident in this statement: "It was wonderful to be young and to be riding into Indian country as part of the finest regiment of cavalry in the world" (Hunt 17).

Three years later on the eve of the Battle of Little Big Horn, Windolph was a battle hardened trooper. The battle has been glorified over the years, but Windolph recalls, "It would be easy to say that we were thinking of only glory on that hot June Sunday afternoon, but I reckon what most of the plain troopers were thinking about was how good a nice cold bottle of beer would taste" (Hunt 76). Whether seeking glory or not, Windolph was promoted to Sergeant on the battlefield that day and his actions earned him the Medal of Honor.

Sergeant Windolph, along with H Troop, was in a defensive position with approximately half the regiment, roughly 300 men. Captain Benteen had temporarily taken charge of the men. The other half of the regiment consisted five troops that accompanied Custer. Disaster had already befallen Custer and his men, but H Company had no way of knowing that. During the evening, Benteen's unit found themselves in an exposed position and attacked relentlessly by hostile Indians. As night fell, there were 12 dead and around three dozen wounded men.

The wounded had been crying out for water for several hours. In the morning, Captain Benteen asked for volunteers. The volunteers were to take up an exposed position and draw fire while a detail of men fetched water for the wounded. Sergeant Windolph was one of the four men to volunteer. The four volunteers stood exposed on a ridge for more than twenty minutes, drawing fire and returning fire. None of the four were wounded. Their actions allowed the water detail to safely fetch water for the injured men. All four were awarded the Medal of Honor.

Private Windolph was given a battlefield promotion to Sergeant that afternoon, something of which he was very proud. He was promoted to H Company First Sergeant in 1880, a position he held until 1883. He left the Army in 1883 and married his old sweetheart from Germany. He spent 48 years working for Homestake mines in Lead, South Dakota where he

retired with a pension. First Sergeant Windolph was the last surviving Soldier from the Battle of Little Big horn when he died in 1950.

It was certainly a hearty breed of men that served in this all-volunteer Army of the Indian Wars period. Although current history books now speak poorly of America's treatment of the American Indian, one cannot deny that the Army of the period successfully advanced America's objectives. With little or no training, and under austere frontier conditions, these men paved the way for America's westward expansion. The noncommissioned men of the period played a vital role in the defeat of the hostile American Indians.

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