

BLACK SUN

THE BATTLE OF SUMMIT SPRINGS, 1869

TERRY C. JOHNSTON



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Teaser

The Plainsmen Series by Terry C. Johnston

Praise

Copyright

for my wife Rhonda who gives me a serene and safe place to write. More than
inspiration, she is my motivation.

It has been said that the Battle of Summit Springs was one of the few in history of the frontier which would measure up to all the requirements of the writers of western fiction.

—James T. King

War Eagle—A Life of General Eugene A. Carr

The severe and well merited chastisement given these savages by General Carr in July produced the most marked effect upon the conduct of the whole Cheyenne tribe ... the Cheyennes concerned have come in to Camp Supply and begged for peace, declaring they have had enough of War. It is believed ... that there are no hostile Indians on the Plains of Kansas or Colorado.

—Major General John M. Schofield

Commander, Dept. of the Missouri following Battle of Summit Springs

This battle ended Indian terrorism in Kansas and Nebraska. The savages had never before received such a stunning blow in any engagement ... Considered as a complete success, the battle of Summit Springs takes rank with Washita Village; but in a broader sense it was of infinitely greater importance, as it forever secured to the white race the undisputed and unmolested possession of the Republican River and its tributaries.

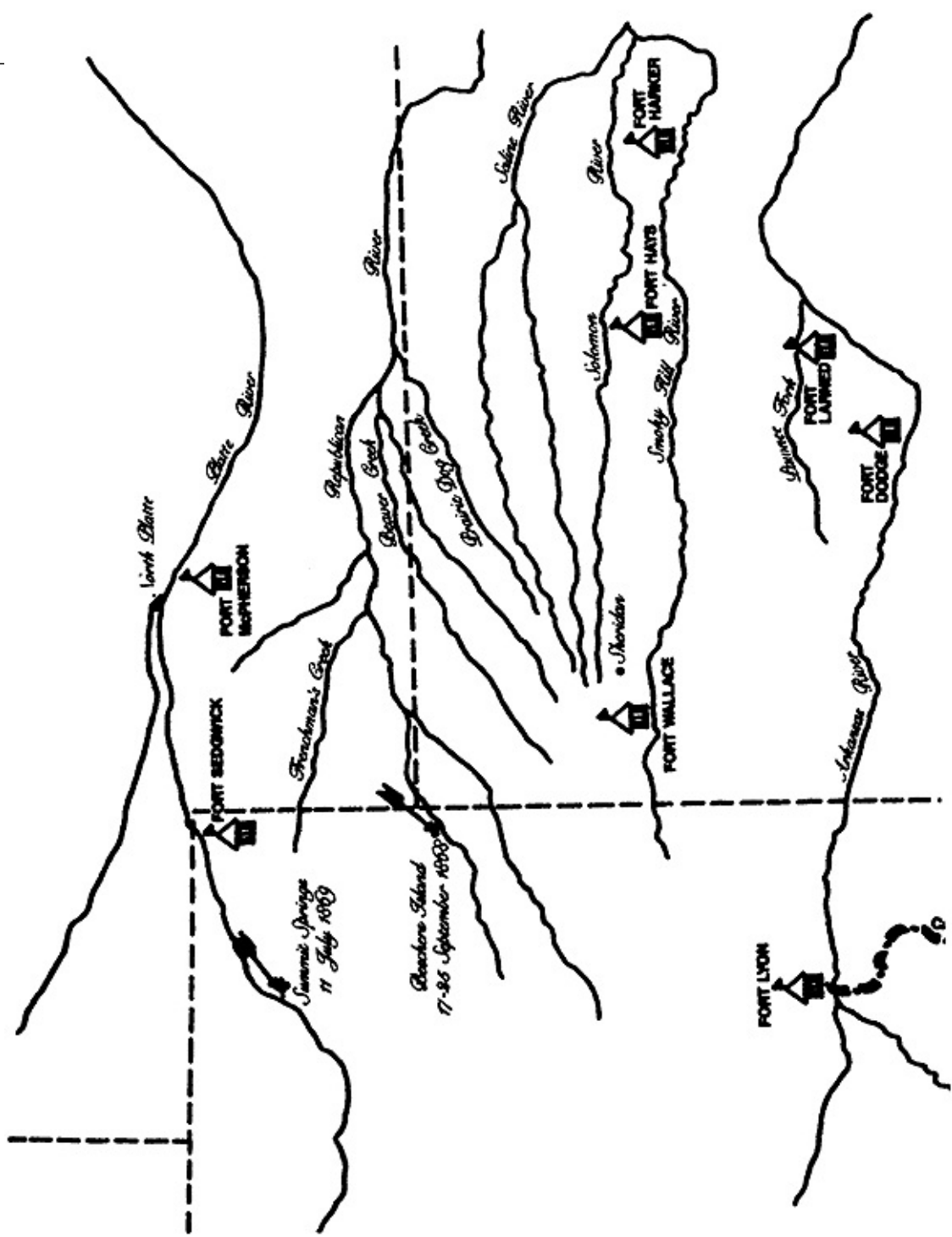
—George Frederic Price

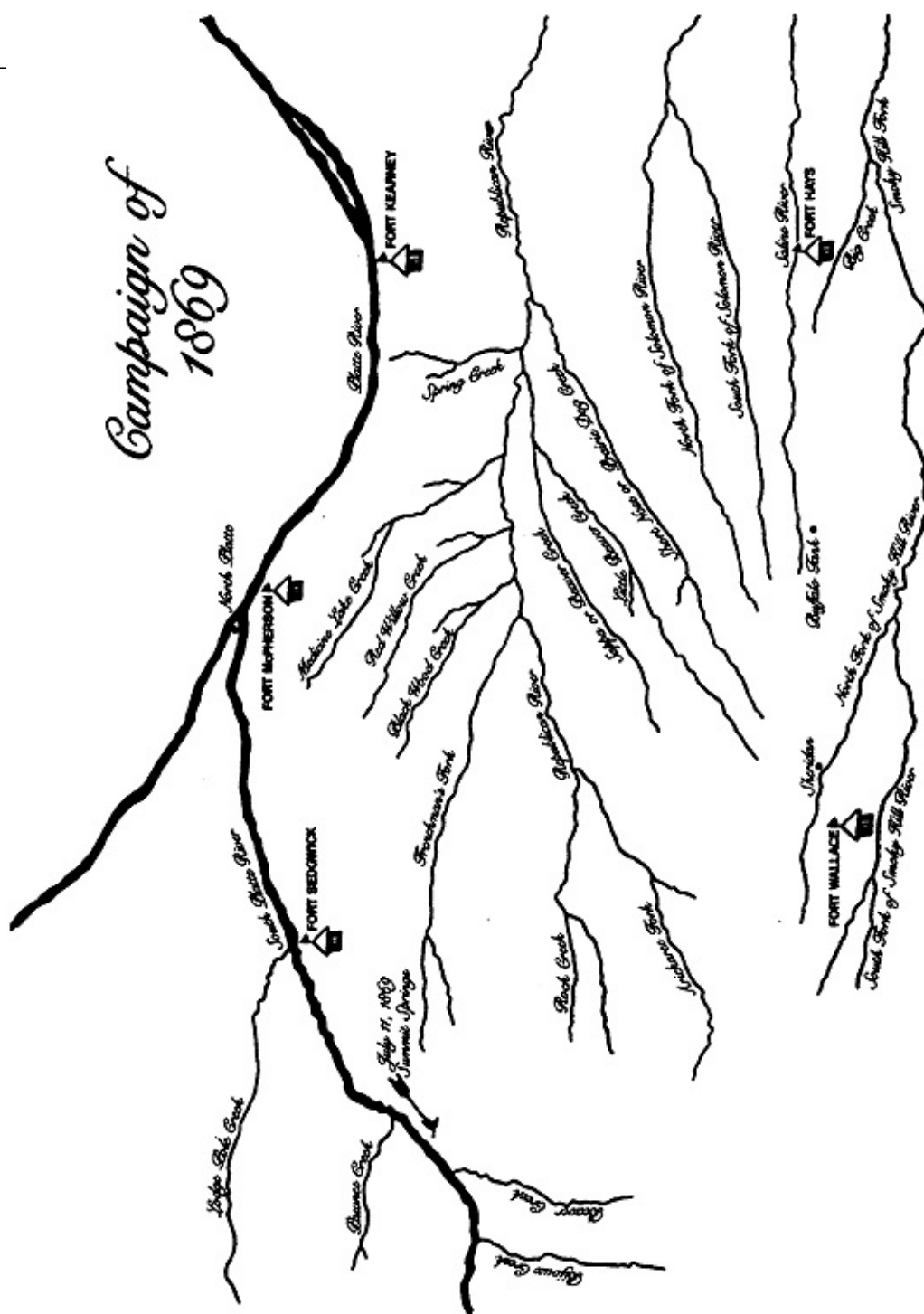
Across the Continent with The Fifth Cavalry

The [Summit Springs] fight was the last in that section of the plains ... Eight companies were in action, which makes it a major battle by Indian wars' standards ... Summit Springs ... was one of a very few of these fights that would satisfy Hollywood and the writers of Westerns. The cavalry charged with bugle blowing, a woman was rescued (and later married a soldier), the slaughter of Indians was large—as attested by a board of officers who counted the bodies—and the troops suffered no losses.

—Don Russell

The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill





Map drawn by author from an official map provided courtesy of the National Archives, Washington, D.C.

(graphics drawn by Victoria Murray)

Author's Foreword

Perhaps most of you read this sort of thing last. After you've given the story a chance—and only when you're willing to come back here and give these thoughts a moment of your time.

But not while there's a story to be told.

That's all right with me. Just as long as you remember while this story is still fresh in your mind that what you have read is the true stuff of history. Everyone here lived and walked the high plains of Kansas, Nebraska and Colorado in 1868–69. Everyone except two: Seamus Donegan, the reluctant Irish warrior, and the mulatto-turned-Cheyenne, Jack O'Neill. The rest of the characters in this account were breathing, living beings.

Through them you will not only learn of an obscure fight on the high plains in the summer of 1868 but you will ride along as a participant in the months leading up to that fated confrontation between the Fifth Cavalry and the feared Dog Soldier Society of Tall Bull's Cheyenne which occurred at an obscure place given the name of Summit Springs—not far from present-day Sterling, Colorado—but the victorious leader of the blue-clad soldiers.

A time rich in momentum! Our grand republic speeding onward toward her centennial. At long last the nation had been joined by rail. In May of 1869 the Union Pacific and Central Pacific united in Utah by driving a symbolic golden spike to wed their rails. At the very least it was the hope for riches, if not gold itself, that would finally bring about the greatest of all Indian wars and effectively drive the nomadic tribes from the plains and back onto their reservations.

Furthermore, that year was a pivotal, fateful one for the frontier army. On March 3, just before the regiments took to the field for spring campaigns, Congress slashed both the appropriations and size of the army from 55,000 troops to almost 37,000. Those officers who remained after the Bazine Board got done paring away the Civil War "fat" were once again left reeling under the cuts of manpower and matériel, complicated by a lack of national will to get the job done.

Yet within that core of the victorious Union army there remained some of the best fighting men this country has ever known. Besides Grant—who was to be inaugurated that spring of 'sixty-nine—there were his two closest subordinates, William Tecumseh Sherman and Philip H. Sheridan. While the former reorganized the army and railed against the forces in Washington City who would emasculate the frontier army, the latter set about taking the fight to plains Indians.

Instead of merely reacting each time the Sioux or Cheyenne attacked a settlement, Phil Sheridan devised a plan whereby the army would search out and destroy those peaceful villages to which the guilty warriors returned after they had their fill of blood, booty and white prisoners.

Major Eugene Asa Carr's role in Sheridan's first winter campaign of 1868–69 is not generally known even by those conversant with General George Armstrong Custer's more glamorous defeat of Black Kettle's Southern Cheyenne on the Washita River. Yet Custer's Seventh Cavalry would not

have enjoyed success at the Washita in November of 1868, much less brought about the capture and eventual surrender of Satanta's Kiowa near Fort Cobb or Medicine Arrow's Cheyenne on the Sweetwater that following spring, had it not been for the fact that Carr's Fifth Cavalry had simply left the tribes no place to run.

Perhaps even fewer readers know of this dramatic Battle of Summit Springs and how it effectively brought to an end the Cheyenne depredations against the settlers and freight routes across the central plains. Truth is, historians agree the victory of the Fifth Cavalry was of more lasting consequence than was Custer's campaign against Cheyenne and Kiowa in Indian Territory. Carr broke the grip of terror and bloodshed at the hands of the Dog Soldiers along the upper Republican and Smoky Hill rivers. The Fifth Cavalry effectively ended all cohesiveness of the powerful warrior society. Never again would the Dog Soldiers be the force they were before that July day in 1869. The remnants of that once-great fighting fraternity split: while most wandered south under Bull Bear to surrender in small bands at Camp Supply in what is now Oklahoma, only a few pledged allegiance to White Horse, who hurried north with his faithful to continue the fight alongside their northern cousins.

So successful was the Fifth Cavalry in this victory that in the fall of 1869 both the Nebraska legislature and the Colorado territorial assembly presented Major Carr with their unanimous resolutions of commendation and appreciation. Nebraskans praised the Fifth Cavalry for "driving the enemy from our borders and achieving a victory at Summit Springs, Colorado Territory, by which the people of the State were freed from the merciless Savages." Soon afterward, the Coloradans praised both Carr and his soldiers for ending a reign of terror by the Cheyenne during which "the prosperity of the Territory has been greatly retarded during several years past ... [and] defenceless women and children of our pioneer settlements have been murdered by Savages, or subjected to a captivity worse than death."

As you read the story, realize there was a flesh and blood Tom Alderdice, Kansas settler and former scout for Major George A. Forsyth at Beecher Island.* There was as well a Mrs. Alderdice Susanna by name, kidnapped by Tall Bull's band in raids along the Solomon. In that same camp was the second white female captive, Mrs. Maria Weichel, whose husband Gustaf was killed in a like raid. In one of those interesting footnotes to history, one can note that at Fort Sedgwick, where Mrs. Weichel recuperated, she fell in love with one of her attendants, a hospital steward. They were married soon after the Fifth Cavalry departed on the August campaign north to the Niobrara River country.

There is color beyond compare here during the fateful spring and summer of 1869 on the central plains—a story the reader can continue to study in many fine books he will find available in the library. If anything, this is a tale of the Fifth Cavalry at a crossroads in its own history. To enjoy the richness of that unit's activities on the plains, read *Across The Continent With The Fifth Cavalry*, compiled by George F. Price. From its pages I have drawn many firsthand reports and accounts of the winter and summer campaigns of 1868–69.

Herein you will come to learn of the stoic Eugene Asa Carr, senior major of the Fifth Cavalry. The story of his career fighting Comanches in the southwest following the Mexican War, all the way

through the end of the Indian Wars on the Northern Plains, is splendidly told in *War Eagle—A Life of General Eugene A. Carr* by James T. King.

A second firsthand account of that summer campaign and Summit Springs fight is given by soldier J. E. Welch, which appears in Cyrus Townsend Brady's book, *Indian Fights and Fighters*.

My firsthand accounts from the Cheyenne side of the fight were gleaned from George Bird Grinnell's monumental work, *The Fighting Cheyennes*, which in detail explores the skirmishes that led up to the defeat for the Dog Soldiers at Summit Springs.

Should any reader want to gain more of an overview of this period of the Indian Wars, he should put his hands on any of the following, highly readable studies: *The Long Death—The Last Days of the Plains Indian* by Ralph K. Andrist; *The Indian Wars of the West* by Paul I. Wellman; *War Cries on Horseback—The Story of the Indian Wars of the Great Plains* by Stephen Longstreet; *The Buffalo Soldiers—A Narrative of the Negro Cavalry in the West* by William H. Leckie; and most especially, one should read and reread Robert M. Utley's *Frontier Regulars—The United States Army and the Indian, 1866–1891*.

But as much as this is a story of the Fifth Cavalry and its soldiers, it is even more so a tale of the Indian and civilian scouts who led the soldiers across the plains, tracking the nomadic and highly mobile warrior bands. Of invaluable help to this novel in this regard was the book *Man of the Plains: Recollections of Luther North, 1856–1882*, edited by Donald F. Danker. Time and again I referred to it for the rich story of the North brothers and their famous Pawnee Battalion of scouts.

Standing more boldly outlined against lesser or more finely-etched characters is no less than William F. Cody himself. Unlike what the public is served in television's popular version of the shortlived era of the Pony Express, the real character is all the more exciting. In the brief period encompassed by this novel, Bill Cody first rides for General Philip H. Sheridan and the army. It is his taking on a dangerous task for Sheridan that no one else will accept that leads the general to select Bill Cody as chief of scouts for Carr's Fifth Cavalry. The legend was well on its way.

In addition, the first use of the now-famous nickname "Buffalo Bill" was made that winter of 1869 as the young scout was hailed by some buffalo soldiers who earlier had witnessed his incredible marksmanship among a buffalo herd near Fort Hays, Kansas.

The first of many controversies that would mark Cody's life began with his association with the North brothers and their Pawnee scouts in the summer campaign in 'sixty-nine. All of this and more are there for the reading in the best and the worst of accounts: *Last Of The Great Scouts—The Life Story of Col. William F. Cody (as told by his sister, Helen Cody Wetmore)*; *Buffalo Bill—The Noblest Whiteskin* by John Burke; *Buffalo Bill and The Wild West* by Henry Blackman Sell and Victor Weybright; and *Buffalo Bill—His Family, Friends, Fame, Failures, and Fortunes* by Nellie Snyder Yost.

Yet I can recommend no more highly any study of Cody's life than I do the marvelously written *The Life and Legends of Buffalo Bill* by Don Russell. The author brings to his story a wealth of knowledge and a lifelong study of the frontier period of the Indian Wars that provides a rich tapestry

against which the exciting career of Cody is splendidly portrayed.

By citing the most heavily used of my sources, I've attempted here to establish some of my credentials for telling this story. After all, the writer of historical fiction assumes a perilous task while he must remain true to history, there are the demands of fiction pressing in on the novelist every turn. So with not only the battle of Summit Springs studied and restudied, but the winter campaign of 1868–69 for the Fifth Cavalry as well, it remained for me to visit the sites, walking over the ground as I do with every one of these stories in hopes of gaining a sense of place and time, if not to hear the nearby ghosts speak at my shoulder. The story of that dramatic summer in 1869 spread itself before me.

Bill Cody and Bill Hickok, Frank and Lute North, and Major Eugene Asa Carr were there to help me—I had only to let them, indeed all the actual participants of that marvelous time, tell their tales.

Into their midst ride my two fictional plainsmen: Seamus Donegan, who is growing old before his time; and the mulatto-turned-Cheyenne Jack O'Neill, who is sent after the Irishman with a deathbed vow to Roman Nose at the Battle of Beecher Island.

Yet unlike the three previous volumes in the Plainsmen series, *Black Sun* will portray for the reader some other elements of the life of the frontier scout that were new and interesting to me: the hijacking of the beer shipment by Cody and Hickok did occur as I have portrayed it; in addition Cody's tracking down horse thieves to Denver City to regain Major Carr's animals is another actual incident. All in the life of that era and the hardy few who stood the test of all that was thrown against them.

As a historical novelist, I long ago assumed a task beyond the mere *retelling* of this history. For in picking up this volume, you demand of me to add something that history alone can't convey to most readers: a warm, throbbing pulse that truly allows you to *relive* the bloody, tragic, but always exciting history of the winning of the West.

So it is that this story of *Black Sun* tells something of the wide-ranging and often frustrating life of the frontier scout, besides the more dramatic tracking of the fierce Dog Soldiers, the battle, and the rescue of but one of two women captured by the Cheyenne.

The soldiers did gather around the grave they dug for Susanna Alderdice beside Summit Springs singing their hymns. They did stand their crude, hand-lettered headboard beside her resting place. And they did turn over most of the money found in the village to the sole surviving white woman, Maria Weichel.

The dramatic story chronicling this clash of cultures across a quarter-century will take over the next half-dozen years to relate. We began the Plainsmen, our account of this epic struggle of the Indian Wars, with that story told in *Sioux Dawn* of a bitterly-cold December day in 1866 as Captain William Judd Fetterman led eighty men beyond Lodge Trail Ridge and into history. The tale continued with *Red Cloud's Revenge* and *The Stalkers*, so that now with *Black Sun* we find ourselves more than two years into this captivating era, a time like no other, a time that would not come to an end until another bloody, cold December day in 1890 with another massacre along a little-known

creek called Wounded Knee.

The fever of that quarter-century made the Indian Wars an era unequalled in the annals of time when a vast frontier was forcibly wrenched from its inhabitants in a struggle as rich in drama and pathos as any in the history of man.

Into the heart of the red man's paradise of the central plains, both the government and daring entrepreneurs alike were thrusting the prongs of their railroad and freight roads. To protect both the settlers on the Kansas plains and travelers alike, the army erected its outposts: Forts Harker and Hays, Larned, Dodge and Lyon. And, far out on the Federal Road to Denver, Fort Wallace.

It is we who are left to wonder, as only a reader in the safety and comfort of his easy-chair can, how we too would have measured up. Here you have the chance to judge, for in these pages you are asked to *relive* the story of real people. Indeed, you are reading a story peopled with flesh and blood that walked and fought, cried and cheered on little-known but hallowed ground now swept clean beneath the relentless march of spring floods and prairie drought.

So it is that good historical fiction fuses the fortunes, adventures and destinies of numerous characters. Glory-seekers and murderers, settlers and cowards, army officers and soldiers. Remember as you read—these were actual, living souls striding across that crude stage erected on the high plains of western Kansas and Colorado Territory ... all, save Donegan and the blackhearted renegade, Jack O'Neill.

With each new volume in this Plainsmen series, which will encompass the entire era of the Indian Wars, you will follow Seamus as he marches through some of history's bloodiest hours, marching as well among a changing cast of actual historical characters.

Donegan is the sort who is not capable of always doing the right thing, yet he tries nonetheless.

History has itself plenty of heroes—every one of them dead. Perhaps the thing I like best about Seamus Donegan is that he represents the rest of us. Ordinary in every way, except that at some point we are each called upon by circumstances to do something *extraordinary* ... what most might call heroic.

That's the epic tale of the Indian Wars. If you will listen carefully now, you'll hear the grunts of the lathered horses and the balky mules straining to carry their riders into the midst of the Dog Soldier village after four grueling days of relentless pursuit. You'll hear the shrieking panic of the white women struggling to escape their captors and rushing for the blue-clad saviors on horseback. You can hear the war-cries of the warriors who will not retreat, but instead turn to fight, protecting the flight families and old ones.

Sniff the air—you'll likely smell the burning fragrance of gunpowder or the aroma of boiled coffee (if you're lucky enough to have any left). Run your tongue around the inside of your cheek or your last time now, trying to remember how good that mule haunch tasted last winter—especially when mule meat was all that stood between you and starvation in the snows of a winter wilderness.

The fight for survival that harsh winter happened every bit as did the gallant chase after the Dog Soldiers the following summer. Carr's Fifth Cavalry caught Tall Bull's camp at a little known spring

near the South Platte River. As history, this story needs no false glamour, no shiny veneer of dash and daring. What has through the centuries been the story of man at war—of culture against culture, race against race—needs nothing special in its telling.

My hope is that you will enjoy this ride stirrup to stirrup with Seamus Donegan and Bill Cody.

Come on along—we've no time to waste. Tall Bull and his band of deadly warriors are four days ahead of us now and gaining ground. If you're of a mind to, you'll sleep this night curled up in a blanket on the frozen ground and warm your hands over buffalo-chip fires.

Saddle up, my friend. We're riding out now and not looking back.

—Terry C. Johnston
Summit Springs Battleground
Colorado Territory
July 11, 1988

Characters

Seamus Donegan

Cheyenne

Tall Bull (Tatonka Haska)
Feathered Bear
Breaks The Arrow
Big Head
Yellow Nose
Plenty of Bull Meat
Pile of Bones
Red Cherries
Heavy Furred Wolf
Pretty Bear
Bullet Proof
Bobtailed Porcupine
White Man's Ladder
Wolf Friend
Two Crows
Lone Bear
Bad Heart
Standing Bear
Tall Sioux
White Horse

Sioux

The Whistler
Pawnee Killer

Army Scouts

William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody
James Butler Hickok
James Curry
John Donovan
Bill Green
Jack Farley
Eli Ziegler
Thomas Ranahan

Pawnee Battalion

Major Frank J. North
Captain Luther ("Lute") North
Lt. Gustavus W. Becher
Mad Bear

Civilians

Louisa/Lulu Cody

Arta Cody (daughter)

Mrs. Gustaf (Maria) Weichel

Tom Alderdice

Mrs. Thomas (Susanna) Alderdice (and infant)

Nebraska Governor David Butler

J. E. Welch

I. P. Boyer (trader @ Fort McPherson)

William McDonald (contract sutler @ Fort McPherson)

William Reed (clerk for sutler McDonald @ Fort McPherson)

Dave Perry (owner/California Keg House Exchange—North Platte)

Walt Mason (innkeeper—Sheridan, Kansas)

Dave Cook (Denver City Marshal)

Robert Teat (son: Eugene Teat)—owners of Elephant Corral

Nate Williams—horse thief

Bill Bevins—horse thief

Reuben Wood (contract sutler at Fort Sedgwick)

John Wilson—wagon-master, winter campaign, Fifth Cavalry

Soldiers

Major General C. C. Augur—Commander, Dept. of the Platte

Colonel Henry C. Bankhead

Captain Samuel B. Lauffer—Fort Wallace Quartermaster

Captain Israel Ezekial

Captain George Wallace Graham

Captain William H. Penrose—Third Infantry

Reuben Waller—10th Negro Cavalry

FIELD AND COMPANY OFFICERS

Fifth U.S. Cavalry

Colonel—William H. Emory
Lieutenant Colonel—Thomas Duncan
Major—Eugene A. Carr
Major—William B. Royall
Major—Eugene W. Crittenden
Captain Sylvanus E. Cushing
Adjutant—Robert H. Montgomery
Quartermaster—Alfred B. Taylor (till 6/22/69)
—Edward M. Hayes (after 6/22/69)
Sergeant-Major—Joseph H. Maynard
Quartermaster-Sergeant—John Young
Chief Bugler—John Uhlman
Saddler-Sergeant—Jacob Feathers
Surgeon—Louis S. Tesson
Veterinary Surgeon—Francis Regen

Company A

Captain—Robert P. Wilson
First Lieutenant—George F. Price

Company B

Captain—Robert Sweatman
First Lieutenant—Jules C.A. Schenofsky
Second Lieutenant—Charles H. Rockwell

Company C

Captain—Thomas E. Maley
First Lieutenant—Edward P. Doherty
Second Lieutenant—Frank C. Morehead

Company D

Captain—Samuel S. Sumner
First Lieutenant—Calbraith P. Rodgers
Second Lieutenant—Robert A. Edwards

Company E

Captain—Philip Dwyer
First Lieutenant—Robert P. Wilson (till 6/12/69)
—Robert H. Montgomery (after 6/12/69)
Second Lieutenant—Jacob A. Augur

Company F

Captain—William H. Brown

First Lieutenant—Edward W. Ward

Second Lieutenant—William C. Forbush

Company G

Captain—John H. Kane

First Lieutenant—Jacob Almy

Second Lieutenant—J. Edwin Leas

Company H

Captain—Leicester Walker

First Lieutenant—Peter V. Haskin

Company I

Captain—Gustavus Urban

First Lieutenant—George F. Mason

Second Lieutenant—Earl D. Thomas

Company K

Captain—Julius W. Mason

First Lieutenant—James Burns

Second Lieutenant—Bernard Reilly, Jr.

Company L

Captain—Alfred B. Taylor

First Lieutenant—Charles B. Brady

Company M

Captain—Edward H. Leib

First Lieutenant—John B. Babcock

Second Lieutenant—William J. Volkmar

Corporal—John M. Kyle

Prologue

October 1868

As bad as the whiskey was, it proved the cure.

By the time he had thrown the fourth splash of its liquid fire against the back of his throat, Seamus Donegan sensed the tension easing the long cords in his neck. Not to mention the tension seeping from those great muscles in his back which bore the scar carved there by Confederate steel. Slowly, even slowly, his big frame strung with muscle was loosening like a worn-out buggy spring after a long haul of it over a washboard road.

It had been some ride for the Irishman. His great bulk now sat hulking like a predator over the small glass all but hidden within the big, roughened hands. Returned from the dead he was again, and working steadily to pickle himself even more than the last.

Back from the grave that had done its best to swallow the Civil War veteran at Beecher Island.

In the space of the past three weeks, Donegan had returned with Major George A. Forsyth's band of civilian scouts to Fort Hays, where the survivors of the bloody, nine-day island siege were promptly reorganized under Lt. Silas Pepoon. Yet, without a look back, the Irishman decided he had had himself enough of the plains and Indians, enough of blood and sweat and death to last him for some time to come. Seamus pointed his nose north, aiming for Nebraska. He had started there once before—a year gone now.

Nebraska. There in the Platte River country near Osceola, the widow Wheatley had promised she would be waiting for him to fetch her.

But Donegan's quest for Uncle Liam O'Roarke had pulled him off that trail to Osceola and Jenny. That quest, and the Cheyenne of Roman Nose.*

Seamus was too late getting out to the Wheatley place.

He angrily threw another splash against the back of his throat, remembering the old woman's eyes as she glared up at him in the late afternoon light from beneath her withered, bony hand.

"No, mister. Jenny took herself and the boys back east. Dead set on getting back to her own folks she was," James Wheatley's mother confided.

"Ohio?" he had asked numbly.

She had nodded, her eyes softening, perhaps recognizing what crossed the tall Irishman's face. "Ohio."

He had thanked her, crawled into the saddle without feeling much, and reined about toward the south. Kansas and Fort Hays.

Nursing his grief and anger like a private badge of passion he alone could wear.

For some time he had looked forward to this moment with the tall-necked bottle. Promising

himself all the way down that long trail from Osceola that he would sit here and drink the night through if he had to—until he decided where next to go and what next to do. Feeling adrift and lost, having no clue worth a tinker's damn where he could find his second uncle, Liam's brother, Ian O'Roarke—was Seamus cursed now to wander aimlessly, searching the California Territory where Liam had hinted Ian would be found?

Yet that was the only thing left for him now that Jenny Wheatley had moved on after a year of waiting for a restless man.

"Maybe 'tis better, after all," he murmured, bringing the chipped glass to his lips beneath the shaggy mustache once more. "Better a woman like that has her a man who can work the land and stay in one place. I could never give her kind of woman something like that."

Over and over in his mind on that long ride south a scrap of Irish poetry had hung in his thoughts like a piece of dirty linen. John Boyle O'Reilley's words reminded him most of her.

The red rose whispers of passion,
And the white rose breathes of love;
Oh, the red rose is a falcon,
And the white rose is a dove.
But I send you a cream-white rosebud
With a flush on its petal tips;
For the love that is purest and sweetest
Has a kiss of desire on the lips.

Too much of an unquenched burning inside him yet. Unanswered yearnings. Better for everybody now that Jenny moved on without him. Seems she needed something more than he could give, and he was sure as hell needed more right now than any one woman could find herself giving him in return.

Slowly the whiskey reddened his gray eyes, appearing to soften the harsh edges on things, especially the noise of this dimly lit Hays City watering hole. Soldiers and wagon-bosses, teamsters and speculators, all shouldered against one another at the rough bar beneath a growing cloud of blue smoke. The smoky oil lamps cast dancing shadows on the murky canvas walls and muddy plank floors each time the door swung open to admit some newcomer along with a cold gust of October wind.

He would need something to eat eventually ... hell, it could wait until morning now.

Perhaps if he wasn't careful, he'd end up spending the night right here at this table near the corner where the stench of old vomit and dried urine could make a strong man lose his appetite for anything but whiskey. Perhaps if he punished the bottle until he passed out right here, Seamus would not need to fill the gnawing hole inside his soul with one of the pudgy chippies who worked the half-dozen cribs in the back of this place. Lilac-watered women all, come to ply their trade in the fleshpots that followed the army and the railroad west.

"Lookit this, will you? I wouldn't've gambled a warm piss that I'd find Liam O'Roarke's favorite nephew hugging up to a bottle of saddle varnish here in Hays City ever again!"

Through the late afternoon light sneaking through the few smudged, smoky windowpanes, Seamus immediately recognized the war-lined face of Sharp Grover. Major Forsyth's former chief of scouts

strode across the crowded room, heading directly for Donegan's table. Abner Grover—comrade in arms from the private hell that had been Beecher Island.

"If it ain't Mother Grover's ugliest son!" Seamus cheered, momentarily eyeing the younger man who came up close on Sharp's heels. "Sit, gentlemen!"

"You're in a better humor than when I found you here in the Shady Rest end of last winter," Grover said, dragging a wobbly chair close.

"And you a goddamned scout, Abner. You're supposed to know where to find me." Seamus held up his cup of amber whiskey to them both, then tossed it back.

"You're drinking alone again?"

"Till the two of you sat down."

"You going to invite us to drink with you?"

He glanced at Grover's young blue-eyed companion who sported a long, blond bantam tuft below his lower lip. Then he answered. "I never enjoyed drinking alone, Sharp."

"Get us some glasses, will you, Bill?"

Grover's companion nodded and rose from the table without a word, shoving his way into the crowd milling at the bar.

"He's a big one," Donegan whispered.

Grover agreed. "Almost tall as you, Seamus."

"He a scout for you ... riding with Pepoon now?"

"Not working for me. Bill tells me General Sheridan's wired him orders to sit right here till the Fifth Cavalry comes through."

Seamus went back to regarding his whiskey glass as Bill came back to the table with a pair of glasses and another bottle of whiskey. "Didn't figure none of you'd still be hanging 'round Haystack, Abner."

"We're getting ready to hove away for Fort Dodge soon enough, Seamus," Grover replied. "An' you could go too. It'll be good winter's wages—riding with Pepoon's scouts."

"Where you riding this time?" he asked, watching Grover's young companion pour two glasses from the whiskey from the new bottle.

"Word has it that most of us will be marching with Sheridan himself—down into The Territories."

"Right into the heart of Injin country, eh?"

"That's right, Irishman. Them young bucks been busy since late last summer."

"Don't we know it, Sharp? Penned up like we was on that island far out in the middle of hell itself."

"No," and Grover shook his head. "This is something different. The Cheyenne been raiding up on the Solomon and Saline rivers. Burning, raping, killing stock. Carrying off white women and children."

"Sheridan's going down into The Territories to get them women back, is it?"

"He's called Custer back to do it for him."

That struck Donegan like a chunk of winter river-ice thrust into the middle of his chest. Seamus leaned back in his chair, a fingertip playing at the chipped lip of his glass. "Custer, you say? I heard he was serving out his year away from the Seventh—for having them deserters shot."

Grover hunched over the table as he glanced about quickly. "Hays is Custer country, Seamus."
"I damned well know that."

"You're aiming to start a fight of it?" Grover asked.

"If one steps up, I won't back away."

"Best keep your voice down in this town when you're speaking your mind about Custer."

"I'm touched you care so much about me spilling me blood, Abner."

"I do, you thick-headed Irishman," he said, slapping Donegan on the shoulder to show all was forgiven. "Best you know—Custer's already back with his regiment."

His eyes narrowed and he felt his windpipe constrict. "Here?"

"The Seventh's marched on to Fort Dodge, where they're training for the coming campaign. Custer's there with 'em."

Donegan's teeth ground with disappointment.

"You were hoping to meet up with the boy general again, were you?" Bill asked, speaking for the first time.

Seamus looked at Grover's companion. Then smiled. "We—We just go back to the war, let's say."

"Never fought in the war myself," the young Bill admitted, speaking for the first time with some wistfulness in his voice. "Too young. But I have heard all about Custer's part in Hancock's campaign last year. Sure glad I wasn't no thirteen-dollar-a-month private ... living on beans and dreams and whores—following that curly-headed bastard. For a time last month I worked 'round some of his soldiers. Out to Fort Larned."

"Larned is some way from here," Seamus muttered.

Grover nodded, saying in praise, "Bill here just come in from one hell of a ride, Seamus."

"First job I had for the army, Lieutenant Billy Cooke signed me on ninth of September to resupply forage for their mounts. Week later on the fifteenth, Cooke finally hired me as a scout."

Seamus regarded the young man more carefully, recalling the youth of Jack Stillwell who had handled a man's job and more during Forsyth's chase after the Cheyenne. Donegan looked down into the amber of his glass. "The fifteenth, eh ... Sharp and me was less than two days out from the godforsaken island in September."

"Bill here is the kind what could have held the muster for them nine days on Beecher Island."

Seamus studied the young man. "Sharp said you had quite a ride in from Larned."

"Over sixty miles," Bill accounted. "Bringing word that the Kiowas and Comanches finally broke out. They're joining the Cheyennes on the warpath."

"Bill gave Sheridan that report at Fort Hays—the sort of news that the general had to send out to other posts as well. Seems Sheridan asked around for a horseman to ride down to Dodge with his report." Grover wagged his head a moment. "But too many been killed on that route lately. No one"

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