



Horses: The Army's Achilles' Heel in the Civil War Plains Campaigns of 1864-1865

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Article Summary: Civil War armies relied heavily on horses. Armies in the field equipped with artillery, cavalry, and supply trains required one horse or mule, on average, for every two men. Horses fit for service became scarce by the war's final years. Far from the major eastern battlefields, regiments such as the First Nebraska Volunteer Cavalry felt the brunt of the equine shortage.

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- HORSES -

The Army's Achilles' Heel in the Civil War Plains Campaigns of 1864-65

BY JAMES E. POTTER



The First Nebraska's
plight was a common
experience for the
volunteer cavalry
on the Plains during
the Civil War.

On August 18, 1864, after hastily re-mustering at Omaha from their veteran furloughs, the men of the First Nebraska Volunteer Cavalry left for Fort Kearny. Instead of returning to Arkansas where it had spent the first half of 1864, the regiment's new mission was to help defend the Platte Valley freighting, stagecoach, and telegraph route from an onslaught of Indian raids that had recently broken out.¹ Having been issued only sixty horses for three hundred men, the mostly dismounted cavalrymen probably appreciated the irony of being sent off on foot to chase down an elusive foe known for its horsemanship. A month later the First Nebraska's Lt. Col. William Baumer notified District of Nebraska headquarters in Omaha that five companies of the regiment at Fort Kearny and at Plum Creek Station, thirty-five miles to the west, were still without horses.²



Custer's supply train, Black Hills Expedition, 1874. Similar extensive supply trains hampered the army's mobility during the 1865 Powder River Expedition. Photo Courtesy of the Archives of the South Dakota State Historical Society



Pvt. Luther North, Second Nebraska Volunteer Cavalry, 1863. NSHS RG2320-43

Over the next several months, horses were gradually issued, but never enough to mount all the men. What's more, many of the horses the regiment did receive were mediocre at best, poorly fed, and could not perform the duty expected of them, a problem that persisted. On May 19, 1865, First Nebraska Col. Robert R. Livingston told District of the Plains commander Patrick Connor what Connor already knew: "Our horses cannot run an Indian down, too poor."³

The First Nebraska's plight was a common experience for the volunteer cavalry on the Plains during the Civil War. The rebellion placed enormous demands on the country's equine resources at a time when animals also furnished the principal motive power in the civilian world. Armies in the field equipped with artillery, cavalry, and supply trains required one horse or mule, on average, for every two men. Some 284,000 horses were consumed by the Union cavalry alone during the first two years of the war and Army Chief of Staff Henry Halleck rated the Union's 1864 expenditure of cavalry horses at slightly fewer than 180,000 animals, an average of about five hundred per day. Between January 1864 and February 1865 the Army of the Potomac's cavalry arm had twice been remounted.⁴

From January 1, 1864, until purchases ceased

on May 9, 1865, the quartermaster general's department bought approximately 193,000 cavalry horses. Only a relative handful of these made their way to the Plains. Although Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton claimed in his postwar report, "The supply of horses and mules for the army has been regular and sufficient," apparently the secretary had not paid attention to letters coming from commanders in the West. In late February 1864 Department of Kansas commander Samuel R. Curtis wrote Stanton from Fort Leavenworth recommending the purchase of Indian ponies for government use because "better horses are now becoming very scarce."⁵

Regulations provided that the ideal cavalry horse was from 15 to 16 hands high at the withers (5 feet to 5 feet, 4 inches), five to nine years old, weighing from 750 to 1100 pounds, and "sound in all particulars . . . in full flesh and good condition." As the war with its tremendous consumption of horseflesh dragged on, the "ideal" cavalry horse became little more than an abstraction. Union cavalryman Charles Francis Adams, Jr. described how the service ruined horses. Even a walking pace of four miles an hour was "killing to horses" carrying the average load of 225 pounds comprising the soldier and his equipment. During active campaigns, said Adams, the horse remained

The northern Plains in 1865.
Map by Steve Ryan





"Cavalry Charge of Sully's Brigade at the Battle of White Stone Hill, September 3, 1863,"
Harper's Weekly, October 31, 1863

saddled an average of fifteen hours per day. "His feed is nominally ten pounds of grain a day and, in reality, he averages about eight pounds. He has no hay and only such other feed as he can pick up during halts. The usual water he drinks is brook water, so muddy by the passage of the column as to be of the color of chocolate. Of course sore backs are our greatest trouble." Nonetheless, the horse "still has to be ridden until he lays down in sheer suffering under the saddle." Adams was describing conditions in northern Virginia in 1863, not those facing the cavalry on the distant Plains, with even fewer resources to call upon.⁶

Not only were there too few horses to mount the Plains cavalry in 1864 and 1865, they broke down quickly from overwork and a shortage of grain. The full forage ration for an army horse was 14 pounds of hay and 12 pounds of grain daily, which Adams noted was not regularly provided even in the war's eastern theater. And unlike the Indian pony that ethnologist John Ewers described as "a tough, sturdy, and long-winded beast that possessed great powers of endurance" and which was acclimated to the Plains environment, American horses could not maintain their stamina by grazing alone. This was no secret to military men with Plains experience. Capt. Randolph B. Marcy's 1859 guidebook, *The Prairie Traveler*, advised "for prairie service, horses which have been raised exclusively upon grass and never been fed on grain . . . are decidedly the best and will perform more hard labor

than those that have been stabled and groomed." Overland emigrants also noted the contrast. John M. Shively, who went to Oregon in 1843, authored a guidebook that admonished emigrants to "Swap your horses for Indian horses and be not too particular, for the shabbiest Shawnee pony . . . will answer your purpose better than the finest horse you can take from the stables."⁷

Lengthy supply lines, bad weather, or Indian raids were serious obstacles to timely grain deliveries for the distant outposts west of the Missouri River. The quartermaster depot at Fort Leavenworth was about 286 miles from Fort Kearny and 600 more or less from Fort Laramie. Even shipping points farther north on the Missouri River were some 500 miles from Laramie. Making matters worse, requisitions for troops, horses, and the supplies to sustain them were processed by a cumbersome military bureaucracy. Regulations required all army horses to be purchased and issued through the quartermaster department's cavalry bureau. The nearest remount depot to the Plains commands was in St. Louis.⁸

Aside from supply problems stemming from geography and bureaucracy, the Union leadership devoted little attention or resources to the Indian conflicts in the West because its first priority was winning the war against the Confederacy. For example, the Minnesota Sioux uprising that so panicked the frontier broke out in August and September 1862 at the very time Robert E.



**District of Nebraska
commander Brig. Gen.
Robert B. Mitchell.** Library
of Congress Prints &
Photographs Division

Lee's Confederates had just whipped John Pope's Union army at Second Bull Run and then invaded Maryland. Similarly, the Plains Indian war that intensified in late summer and fall 1864 was overshadowed by Union campaigns against Lee in Virginia, Sherman's drive to capture Atlanta, and Confederate General Hood's subsequent invasion of Tennessee. Closer to home, Sterling Price's September/October Missouri raid that culminated in the October 23 Battle of Westport near Kansas City occupied Union troops and supplies that might otherwise have been available on the Plains. As the *Army and Navy Journal* put it, "the thunder of the Southern war silenced the casual and fugitive rattle of Indian hostilities, though the latter have been going on from the very outbreak of the Rebellion."⁹

On those occasions when the army high command did respond to what was happening in the West—mostly when the hue and cry coming

from western governors, legislatures, and military officers became too loud to ignore or when the Indians actually halted the mail coaches and tore up the telegraph line—it had a hazy grasp of what it took to conduct effective military operations across an unpopulated region nearly the size of the Confederacy with no railroads, few navigable waterways, and an often barren landscape. When Union victory in the spring of 1865 finally freed up more troops and resources, pressure from long-serving volunteers and state officials for their discharge, along with the war's staggering cost, led the War Department to rapidly demobilize the Union army and slash expenditures with little regard for the needs of the commands still fighting Indians in the West. By mid-summer 1865 the more than one-million-man Union army of that spring had already been reduced by 641,000 men; by October, the quartermaster's department had sold



**The flag of the First
Nebraska Veteran
Volunteer Cavalry, about
1866.** NSHS Museum
Collections 24272

nearly 130,000 horses and discharged three-quarters of the cavalry bureau's 5,300 employees.¹⁰

Columns led by Generals Henry Sibley and Alfred Sully in the 1863 Dakota campaigns against the Minnesota Sioux experienced problems that would plague subsequent cavalry operations on the Plains. Sibley could have been speaking for his successors of the 1870s when he wrote, "My experience of last season [1863] fully confirms me in the conviction that in very long-continued marches, where grain forage cannot be obtained, American horses cannot be relied on to keep pace with infantry, without becoming so poor and out of condition as to render them comparatively useless in the rapid pursuit of the enemy." Sully's report of his campaign, culminating in the September 3, 1863, Battle of White Stone Hill, echoed Sibley: "The animals, not only the teams I have already reported to you as worthless, but also the cavalry horses, showed the effect of rapid marching and being entirely without grain. . . . I am afraid the loss of horses and mules will be considered very great, but it could not be helped." Even cavalry horses on duty near major Plains supply routes or military posts did not get the full grain ration. At Fort Kearny in October 1863, Lt. Eugene Ware of the Seventh Iowa Cavalry reported feeding the horses a quart of corn three times a day, less than half the regulation amount.¹¹

An enlisted participant in Sully's 1863 Dakota trek confirmed the generals' statements. On July 3, the Second Nebraska Cavalry's Corp. Henry Pierce noted in his diary that reveille sounded at 3 a.m., "breakfast got, ate, horses badly scared with a little corn, some wasn't scared at all, didn't see any." Four days later Pierce wrote, "nothing but buffalo grass for several days past & the scarcity of water makes it rather severe on our horses." As Lt. Thomas Flanagan of the Sixteenth Kansas Cavalry observed in the fall of 1864, after returning from an expedition to hunt Indians in northwestern Kansas, the nutritional quality of buffalo grass was not the problem: "This grass is good for horses, but so short that considerable time is required to collect a sufficient supply for any considerable number of horses." Usually there wasn't enough time.¹²

Just prior to the outbreak of the Platte Valley raids in early August 1864, District of Nebraska commander Brig. Gen. Robert Mitchell informed the cavalry bureau in St. Louis that he needed mounts for three companies of the newly enlisted First Battalion of Nebraska Veteran Cavalry, as well as two hundred horses for the Seventh Iowa Cavalry already serving in his district. Without more

horses, "it is impossible for me with the mounted men at my disposal to fully protect the long and important lines of the Platte Valley and those diverging from it."¹³

When word came that the First Nebraska Veteran Cavalry had been assigned to Mitchell, his adjutant asked department headquarters whether horses could be impressed. The reply was predictable: "There is no law authorizing the seizure or impressments of private horses, except the 'law of necessity' of which, in this case, General Mitchell must be the judge." A few days later army chief of staff Halleck reminded Department of Kansas commander Samuel Curtis that the law required all horse purchases be made by the quartermaster's department. Accordingly, Curtis ordered local quartermasters to buy horses but soon found that "vouchers are refused in payment because the Cavalry Bureau did not make the purchase. There are no representatives of the bureau either in Nebraska or Colorado. . . . Over half my cavalry in this region is without horses and purchases are quite suspended."¹⁴

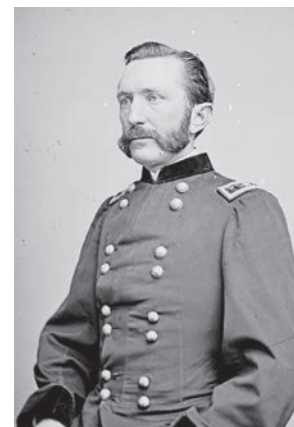
At least some horses were impressed in the Omaha area and others bought in the open market but not enough. Mid-August 1864 saw only fifty mounted men at Fort Kearny. First Nebraska morning reports reveal that in October 1864 Company H at Plum Creek Station had fewer than fifty horses for its eighty men, and more than half of the mounts were recorded as "unserviceable." Company I at nearby Mullally's Rancho listed only twenty horses for its fifty-two-man complement.¹⁵

These deficiencies became readily apparent when the First Nebraska's William W. Ivory led a Company H patrol after Indians who attacked a stagecoach near Plum Creek Station on October 12, 1864. Returning two days later Ivory reported, "I started out with twenty-seven horses, every one that was fit to travel out of forty-five horses. Two of them gave out the first five miles and four were unfit to travel out of a walk that I sent back; and out of the whole number of horses that I had the first evening, when I got to the Platte not five of them could have galloped five miles. I am almost certain with the men I had out if they were properly mounted I could have found the Indians and whipped them."¹⁶

Col. Robert Livingston, commanding the East Sub-District of Nebraska, addressed the horse problem in fall 1864 reports. His troops were then garrisoning eleven small posts from Little Blue Station east of Fort Kearny all the way west to Julesburg, plus Forts Kearny and Cottonwood. Most of the horses in Livingston's sub-district had just



Col. Robert R. Livingston.
NSHS RG2102-6-7



Brig. Gen. Patrick Edward Connor. Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division



Maj. Gen. John Pope. Best remembered for his defeat at the Second Battle of Bull Run, August 28-30, 1862, he spent the remainder of the Civil War in the West. National Archives



Maj. Gen. Grenville M. Dodge. Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division

returned from a futile expedition to suspected Indian strongholds in Kansas, during which they had been on short rations and “have been compelled to do a vast amount of duty, and are thin and somewhat exhausted.” Livingston’s few mounted troops escorted the overland stagecoaches between Fort Kearny and Fort Cottonwood, requiring 132 men and horses every day, which Livingston acknowledged “is very injurious to our horses.” There were so few horses available that only dismounted guards were provided at the posts west of Fort Cottonwood and east of Fort Kearny. By May 1865, after a renewed spate of attacks in the Platte Valley, one noncommissioned officer with eight mounted enlisted men were assigned to every stage station west of Fort Kearny with orders to escort every mail coach.¹⁷

Escort duty overworked the few and already worn out cavalry horses. While the overland stage line paid whatever it took to buy the best horses it could get, as much as \$200 per head, the quartermaster’s department paid no more than \$185 apiece for army horses during the fiscal year ending June 30, 1865. Nebraska District commander Mitchell recalled that in 1864 he had been authorized to buy 350 horses at no more than \$120 per head. After scouring the Omaha vicinity and across the river in Iowa, “I could not get a dozen cavalry horses at that price.” The result, said Col. Charles Otis, whose Twenty-first New York Cavalry served on the Plains in 1865, “the government horses did not compare with the stock on the stage line.” Nevertheless, the military escorts were required to keep pace with the coaches. On June 1, 1865, First Nebraska Pvt. August Scherneckau escorted a coach the eleven miles between Midway Station and Dan Smith’s Rancho in fewer than fifty minutes, a rate of about thirteen miles an hour, which he reported “is very trying on our horses.”¹⁸

District headquarters in Omaha tried to bolster the supply of horses in Livingston’s sub-district by sending eighty recently purchased mounts to Fort Kearny in November 1864. When the horses arrived, the company commanders refused them and a board of survey condemned them all. According to the fort’s quartermaster, “These horses have never seen any service, only traveling from Omaha to Fort Kearny, a distance of 215 miles, making slow marches. The animals were so poor that a number actually died on the road.”¹⁹

If the East Sub-District extending from Omaha to Julesburg could not be supplied with the quantity and quality of cavalry horses its troops required, it is no surprise that the horse problem became

worse the next spring after the Indian war intensified and expanded. In January and February 1865 the Indians twice sacked Julesburg, attacked the Mud Springs stagecoach and telegraph station, and tore up the telegraph line en route to concentrating in the Powder River country. Subsequently, on March 28 Brig. Gen. Patrick Connor was assigned command of the new District of the Plains stretching from the Missouri River to Salt Lake, and began assembling forces for an offensive against the Indians on Powder River, while at the same time defending the Platte Valley travel corridor from sporadic raids.

As early as mid-February 1865 Department of Missouri commander Grenville Dodge and his superior, John Pope, had begun trying to round up more troops and horses for the Plains, including the Sixteenth and Eleventh Kansas Volunteer Cavalry regiments. Part of the Eleventh Kansas made it to Fort Kearny by March 3 but it lacked at least two hundred horses. In mid-April Connor told Dodge there were not four hundred horses in his district in condition “to make the campaign at this season of the year without grain” and the pack mules he had were scarcely able to carry their saddles. Dodge had requisitioned some two thousand Canadian horses but when they arrived Connor reported them “utterly worthless,” and Dodge informed the quartermaster general in Washington that they were nothing more than “young colts and broken down ponies.”²⁰

It may have been some of these horses that were issued to August Scherneckau’s First Nebraska Company H at Midway Station on May 10, which he termed “wretched things. Many of them were still unbroken, never ridden.” On May 18, 1865, Lt. Martin Cutler of the First Battalion, Nebraska Veteran Cavalry, led a twenty-three-man patrol after Indians who had raided Smith’s Rancho. While trying to ford the Platte, Cutler’s troopers lost one horse in the river and sent back three others that could not make the crossing. Of the remaining horses, “some . . . were not able to carry their riders but a short distance, the men having to swim or wade by the side of their horses a good share of the way, thereby losing their ammunition.” These also may have been some of the “wretched” horses Scherneckau mentioned.²¹

Almost no grain was available to feed the stock. The Indians had destroyed some 3,500 sacks (7,000 bushels) during the January-February raids on Julesburg. When the Sixteenth Kansas Volunteer Cavalry was ordered from Fort Leavenworth to Julesburg on February 11, the regiment had to

buy forage from civilians along the way to feed its animals on the march to Fort Kearny. Connor kept the regiment in camp near Fort Cottonwood from April 9 until early May “in order to get something to eat for their horses.” The regiment finally reached Julesburg on May 15, although there was little or no corn on hand there, or at Fort Laramie and Fort Cottonwood. Only 1,500 sacks (3,000 bushels) were available at Fort Kearny.²²

It was almost impossible to stockpile grain at remote sites over the winter. Stage company employee E. F. Hooker explained why. It was customary to burn off the grass in the fall and winter to promote new spring growth and, in fact, the army itself had burned the Platte Valley in October 1864 trying to drive the Indians away. Accordingly, supply trains traveling in winter would have to feed their own teams on the grain they hauled. “[T]ransportation would require more feed than a train could haul to supply them both ways, and consequently they could not leave any at the different stations.” By spring 1865 Indians resumed raiding along the Platte, which also complicated freighting of grain. George Carlyle, also a stage company man, remembered Connor offering ten dollars per bushel to anyone who would deliver

grain to Julesburg: “I tried from the 1st of May until the 14th of June and could not get anybody to deliver it. Nobody was willing to take their chances and life in their hands in hauling that grain.”²³

On May 15 the quartermaster at Fort Leavenworth told Dodge that contracts had been made to procure 105,000 bushels of corn for Julesburg, and Forts Kearny, Cottonwood, and Laramie, but the deliveries would be made over a three-month period. The quartermaster general’s office in Washington did not let the contracts for forage and other supplies on the Plains until May 1, 1865, and then with a generous deadline of December 1 for fulfillment. Once the mostly oxen-drawn supply trains did get off from Fort Leavenworth and other depots, unusually wet weather delayed them. According to Dodge, some trains took two to three months to reach their destinations, which nevertheless conformed to contract provisions. When trail conditions were bad, the trains sometimes averaged no more than a mile per day. What’s more, during much of the 1865 transportation season orders from Dodge himself required all wagon trains to stop at posts such as Fort Kearny until, collectively, they could muster at least a hundred armed men for their own protection. Then as the trains moved

Yoking Up in Corral, by William H. Jackson, from his 1866 sketch. The ox-drawn freight wagons that carried grain and other supplies to the western military posts averaged about fifteen miles per day, fewer when the weather was bad. NSHS Museum Collections 481P-2



Soldiers resorted to killing their exhausted mounts for food during Gen. George Crook's 1876 campaign against the Lakota, a level of hardship reminiscent of the Plains campaigns of 1864-65. NSHS RG2278-19-1



**"I have lost by
death 46 horses
and many others
just live to carry
their empty
saddles."**

on, some of the forage they carried was seized by officers commanding posts to the west and by regiments en route to Fort Laramie for Connor's pending expedition.²⁴

It was no simple task to haul grain in the quantities needed by the distant posts. Corn, for example, was transported in gunny sacks that held two bushels each and weighed 112 pounds. According to the quartermaster general, the average wagon used to transport supplies on the Plains could carry some 5,500 pounds or about 49 sacks of corn totaling 98 bushels. Therefore, the 105,000 bushels of corn for Julesburg and Forts Cottonwood, Kearny, and Laramie that the May 15 contract called for would constitute more than a thousand wagonloads. Gunny sacks were a critical element in the process. Unconfined shelled grain could not be easily transported and sometimes there was a shortage of gunny sacks, particularly at the Plains forts and trailside enclaves.²⁵

Following the final surrender of Confederate forces and the Grand Review of the Union armies held in Washington, D.C., on May 23 and 24, army commander-in-chief Grant dispatched more cavalry to the West, including the famed Michigan

Brigade that had served under Custer. When the Michigan cavalrymen reached St. Louis on June 12, Pope ruefully reported that only 600 horses came with them, while they needed 2,300. The Michiganders were sent on to Fort Leavenworth with promise of nine hundred more horses to come from St. Louis. Then they would march for Julesburg. Because the enlistments of half the men were soon to expire, only two of the Michigan Cavalry regiments subsequently went west. Dodge also got permission to mount the Second Missouri Light Artillery as cavalry to join elements of the Twelfth Missouri Cavalry to form the eastern column of Connor's planned three-pronged Indian expedition. The Missouri troops would march from Omaha through the Nebraska Sandhills to rendezvous with Connor in the Powder River country.²⁶

In the meantime the army high command began issuing orders and sending signals that did not bode well for the future of the ambitious campaign Dodge and Connor were trying to get underway. On May 9 Pope received War Department general orders for the immediate muster out of all volunteer cavalry officers and men whose terms expired before October 31, although Dodge managed to

have Connor's District of the Plains exempted. Then on June 19 Grant expressed concern over what he called the enormous cost of the cavalry on the Plains and ordered Pope to cut expenses by grazing the horses whenever possible. This order came about a week after Connor had reported, "There is not a horse at Laramie [fit] for the service. No grass there. Not a pound of corn has arrived for Laramie."²⁷

Inept leadership, combined with Indian horse stealing skill, made the army's problems worse. After Indians killed several soldiers in a fight on Horse Creek, Col. Thomas Moonlight led troops out of Fort Laramie. On June 17, in the vicinity of today's Fort Robinson, the colonel turned his horses out to graze and Indians ran off 74 of his 131 mounts. They were California-bred horses recently sent from Utah, which Connor termed, "The best horses I had for the present service." Half of Moonlight's men stumbled back to Fort Laramie on foot.²⁸

Many horses and mules sent to the Plains arrived unshod, which caused additional delays. When the Third Wisconsin Cavalry left Fort Leavenworth in June 1865 to guard supply trains along the trail to Fort Kearny, it had to stop at Marysville, Kansas, to shoe many of its horses that were "unable to go forward on account of having been barefooted ever since we left the fort." Col. Nelson Cole's eastern column of the Powder River expedition was delayed leaving Omaha because supplies failed to arrive on time and also because the mules that would pull his supply wagons had to be shod. Just before Connor left Fort Laramie for Powder River on July 31 he reported, "I start on my expedition with . . . many barefooted horses." Earlier that year the commander of a detachment of Colorado cavalry near Julesburg reported half his horses were lame because "the horseshoes . . . are of different weight and sizes on single horses."²⁹

The cumulative effect of poor horses, lack of forage, overwork, and a harsh environment compounded by the decisions of a distant bureaucracy unacquainted with Plains conditions, became painfully obvious during the Powder River Expedition. Within a week of leaving Fort Laramie on July 31 Connor's horses and mules began giving out. On August 15 Capt. Edwin Nash of the Omaha Scouts (actually Winnebago Indians) recorded, "I have lost by death 46 horses and many others just live to carry their empty saddles." The unit's morning reports tallied dying horses daily, along with somber notations on the landscape through which they marched, such as "One horse died—Nothing in the country for horses to eat or drink," and "Two horses

Morning reports of the Omaha Scouts tallied dying horses daily, such as, "One horse died—Nothing in the country for horses to eat or drink," and "Two horses died—Nothing, nothing, nothing,"

died— Nothing, nothing, nothing," followed by August 19's bleak entry, "Two horses died—starved to death." On September 25 Nash wrote Omaha Indian agent Robert Furnas, "during the expedition we used up and left dead on the road 108 horses," this in a company of ninety officers and men. At the campaign's end, the Omaha Scouts were riding Indian ponies captured at the August 29 Battle of Tongue River.³⁰

Connor's eastern column under Cole fared even worse. After floundering through the Nebraska Sandhills and then failing to link up with Connor and his supply train, the exhausted men and horses came under frequent Indian attacks. By this time the horses had been without grain for some sixty days with nothing to eat but grass and cottonwood bark, causing the death of 225 horses and mules from heat, exhaustion, and starvation. Some four hundred more died or had to be shot from the effects of a winter-like storm that struck on the night of September 8.³¹

Just as the Powder River expedition got underway, the president, secretary of war, secretary of the treasury, and quartermaster general began expressing alarm at the "large and unexpected" expenses being incurred by the Plains commands. Despite having approved Dodge and Pope's plans and issuing orders transferring additional regiments and horses to the Plains for the Indian campaigns, Grant now claimed ignorance of their necessity and pressured Pope to curtail them. Pope, in turn, ordered Dodge and Connor to "reduce everything at once to the lowest possible necessity."³²

In July and August eight "eastern" volunteer regiments totaling more than four thousand men reached Fort Leavenworth. The Third Massachusetts Volunteer Cavalry and three Illinois infantry regiments then marched to or near Fort Kearny only to be ordered back to Fort Leavenworth and mustered-out without performing any service on the Plains at all. Pope and Dodge tried and failed to

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save Connor's expedition. On August 11 Pope conceded to Dodge, "I cannot apply for more horses or anything else. If you cannot accomplish results with what you have, they must be left undone." The final blow came August 22 when Pope, under tremendous pressure from Washington, abolished the District of the Plains, reassigned Connor to the District of Utah, and reduced the mission to "simple protection of overland routes." Given the mutinous temper of the remaining volunteers and the decimated condition of their livestock, even that limited task would prove difficult as they waited anxiously for army regulars to relieve them.³³

Not only did the desertion rate spike in the volunteer regiments remaining on the Plains, their horses continued to break down. On August 16 Dodge reported that the stage company would not run its coaches unless "we guard it every mile. This guarding stages is terrible on our stock." Finally, in late October 1865 Pope asked Grant if his soldiers could cease escorting the stagecoaches which "kills up both horses and men at a fearful rate and requires a very large force, more than the government is willing to allow." Grant authorized a halt to stagecoach escorts on October 25. While this step may have reduced stress and fatigue on the soldiers and their livestock, most of the long-serving volunteers still had to endure several more months of arduous Plains duty until the last of them were finally discharged in mid-summer of 1866.³⁴

Officers with experience in the West, such as Col. Philippe Regis de Trobriand, were not optimistic that the U.S. Cavalry as then constituted could prove effective against Indians. It would continue to be handicapped, he wrote in 1867, by "the superabundance of recruits who are not horsemen . . . the task of transporting grain, shoeing equipment, and supplies to pursue an enemy who has no need of these *impedimenta* [and] the character of the horses which are almost as inferior as the men for this type of service." Lt. John G. Bourke writing in 1876 said, "Cavalry, as constituted at the present day, is a mere freight train, every horse loaded down like a baggage wagon, with the necessities or supposed necessities, of the soldier. . . . We have much to learn from the savage in the matter of cavalry training." A few officers, such as George Crook, bowed to frontier reality by replacing ponderous supply wagons with mule pack trains and used them effectively.³⁵

As the 1865 Plains Indian campaign unfolded and then disintegrated with many of its objectives unrealized, General Dodge grew ever more frustrated. On August 2, 1865, he wrote, "[The]

government does not take into consideration that never before have we had so extensive a war on the plains. Never before have we had one-half or one-third the country that we now have to protect. . . . [O]perating 15,000 troops on the plains requires more labor and care than to operate 100,000 troops where there is water and railroad communication and a settled country." One can only imagine Dodge's reaction after he read Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs's statement in the latter's postwar report: "During the whole year—I believe I may say during the whole war—no movement was delayed, no enterprise failed, for want of means of transportation or the supplies required from the Quartermaster's Department." Dodge was still bitter when he penned his 1911 reminiscence, *The Battle of Atlanta and Other Campaigns, Etc.*: "In all the days of Indian warfare there never was such a farce, a failure to comprehend the frontier situation, as in the years 1865 and 1866."³⁶ ■

NOTES

¹ I credit John D. McDermott, *Circle of Fire: The Indian War of 1865* (Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 2003), 158, for the "Achilles' heel" metaphor and for providing horse-related references from his own files.

² John Pratt to Robert Mitchell, Aug. 18, 1864, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1882-1901), ser. 1, v. 41:2, 765 (hereafter *OR*); William Baumer to Pratt, Sept. 14, 1864, Fort Kearny letterbook, RG505, roll 6, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln (hereafter *NSHS*).

³ Livingston to Connor, May 19, 1865, *OR*, ser. 1, 48:2, 514.

⁴ John S. Gray, "Veterinary Service on Custer's Last Campaign," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 43 (Autumn 1977), 249, citing Louis A. Merrillat and Dalwin M. Campbell, *Veterinary Military History of the United States* (Chicago: 1935); Halleck to U. S. Grant, Feb. 13, 1865, *OR*, ser. 3:4, 1167; Report of Sec. of War Edwin M. Stanton to President Andrew Johnson, Nov. 22, 1865, *ibid*, ser. 3:5, 526 (hereafter Stanton Report).

⁵ Report of QM Gen. Montgomery Meigs, Nov. 8, 1865, *OR*, Ser. 3:5, 220 (hereafter Meigs Report); Stanton Report, 526; Samuel R. Curtis to Stanton, Feb. 28, 1864, *OR*, ser. 1, 34:2, 462.

⁶ G. O. No. 43, Quartermaster General's office, Sept. 23, 1864, cited in James S. Hutchins, *Boots and Saddles at the Little Bighorn: Weapons, Dress, Equipment, Horses, and Flags of General Custer's Seventh U.S. Cavalry in 1876* (Fort Collins, Colo.: Old Army Press, 1976), 55; Charles Francis Adams, First Massachusetts Cavalry, to mother, May 12, 1863, reprinted on the website of the 15th New York Cavalry, www.15thnewyorkcavalry.org, accessed Nov. 22, 2010.

⁷ *Revised United States Army Regulations of 1861, with an Appendix . . . to June 25, 1863* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1863), 166; John P. Ewers, *The Horse in Blackfoot Culture* (Washington, D.C.: BAE Bulletin 159, 1955), 34; Randolph B. Marcy, *The Prairie Traveler* (New York: Harper & Brother, 1859), 111-12; John M. Shively, "Routes and Distances to Oregon and California" (Washington, D. C.: 1846), quoted in Merrill J. Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969), 37-38.

⁸ Meigs Report, 311; Mattes, *Great Platte River Road*, 54; G. O. 236, July 28, 1863, *OR*, ser. 3:3, 580.

⁹ *Army and Navy Journal* 2 (Aug. 5, 1865).

¹⁰ See Dodge report to Mil. Div. of the Missouri, Nov. 1, 1865, *OR*, ser. 1, v. 48:1, 346-47; James M. McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), 486; Stanton Report, 527.

¹¹ Sibley to Pope, Jan. 25, 1864, *OR*, ser. 1, 34:2, 155, and Sully Report, *ibid.*, 22:1, 560; Eugene F. Ware, *The Indian War of 1864*, ed. Clyde C. Walton (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), 39.

¹² Pierce diary in Richard Rowen, ed., "The Second Nebraska's Campaign Against the Sioux," *Nebraska History* 44 (March 1963): 30; Thomas Flanagan to AAG, District of N. Kansas, Nov. __, 1864, *OR*, ser. 1, 41:1, 244-45.

¹³ Mitchell to Lewis Merrill, July 16, 1864, *OR*, ser. 1, 41:2, 217-18.

¹⁴ John Wilcox to C. S. Charlot, July 27, 1864, *ibid.*, 428; Charlot to Wilcox, July 28, 1864, *ibid.*, 448; Halleck to Curtis, July 30, 1864, *ibid.*, 483; Curtis to Halleck, Aug. 30, 1864, *ibid.*, 944.

¹⁵ S. W. Summers to John Willans, Aug. 12, 1865, *ibid.*, 41:2, 673; First Nebraska morning reports, RG18, roll 3, NSHS. The *Omaha Republican*, Sept. 9, 1864, reported that there had been "much complaint" about the government's impressment of horses.

¹⁶ W. W. Ivory to Louis J. Boyer, *OR*, ser. 1, 41:1, 842.

¹⁷ Livingston to AG, Washington, D.C., Nov. 1, 1864, *ibid.*, 830; Livingston to AAG, Dist. of Nebraska, Dec. 1, 1864, *ibid.*, 836; Circular, Fort Kearny, May 8, 1865, RG18, roll 3, NSHS.

¹⁸ Cavalry Bureau report, Oct. 17, 1865, *OR*, ser. 3:5, 256; Robert B. Mitchell and Charles G. Otis, in "Testimony as to the Claim of Ben Holladay for Losses and Damages Sustained by Him on the Overland Stage Line during the Years 1862, 1863, 1864, 1865, and 1866," *46th Cong. 2d Sess. Senate Misc. Doc. No. 19*, 60, 83; Circular, Fort Kearny, May 8, 1865, RG18, roll 3, NSHS; August Scherneckau, "Soldiering in the Platte Valley, 1865: A Nebraska Cavalryman's Diary," *Nebraska History* 91 (Spring 2010): 34.

¹⁹ Charles A. Thompson to F. A. McDonald, Dec. 2, 1864, *OR*, ser. 1, 41:1, 848-49.

²⁰ Connor to Dodge, Apr. 14, 1865, *ibid.*, 48:2, 101; Connor to Dodge, Apr. 29, 1865, *ibid.*, 246; Connor to Dodge and Dodge to Meigs, May 8, 1865, *ibid.*, 350.

²¹ Scherneckau, "Soldiering in the Platte Valley," 31; Cutler report, May 18, 1865, *OR*, ser. 1, 48:1, 269.

²² McDermott, *Circle of Fire*, 33; S.O. 42, Dept. of the Missouri, Feb. 11, 1865, *OR*, ser. 1, 48:1, 817; Connor to Dodge, June 10, 1865, *ibid.*, 48:2, 849; Dodge to J. A. Potter, May 15, 1865, *ibid.*, 455.

²³ Livingston to AG, Washington, D.C., Nov. 1, 1864, *OR*, ser. 1, 41:1, 830-31; E. F. Hooker and George H. Carlyle in "Testimony as to the Claim of Ben Holladay," 36. There is an interesting World War II parallel to the "fuel" problems experienced by the Plains cavalry. After the Normandy invasion in 1944, the Allied armies outran their supplies in the dash across France. All fuel, ammunition, etc. initially had to come in over the Normandy beaches and be transported to the front by trucks. The famed "Red Ball Express" consumed more than a third of the daily amount of fuel needed by the armies in transporting the rest. What's more, there were not enough trucks available, and many broke down from lack of maintenance and round-the-clock use. Martin Blumenson, "Liberation," Vol. 14 in *World War II* (Alexandria, Va.: Time-Life Books, 1978), 175.

²⁴ J. A. Potter to Dodge, May 15, 1865, *OR*, ser. 1, 48:2, 455; Dodge report, Nov. 1, 1865, *ibid.*, 48:1, 336; Meigs Report, 244-45; Dodge, S.O. 41, Feb. 10, 1865, *OR*, ser. 1, 48:1, 807-8; Dodge to Mitchell, May 21, 1865, *ibid.*, 48:2, 531; George Price to Connor,

May 20, 1865, *ibid.*, 524.

²⁵ Ware, *Indian War of 1864*, 39; Meigs Report, 244; Carlyle, "Testimony as to the Claim of Ben Holladay," 40.

²⁶ Grant to Pope, May 24, 1865, *OR*, ser. 1, 48:2, 582; Pope to Grant, June 12, 1865, *ibid.*, 860; Dodge to Peter Stagg, June 15, 1865, *ibid.*, 874. The Powder River Expedition is thoroughly discussed in McDermott, *Circle of Fire*, and David E. Wagner, *Patrick Connor's War: The 1865 Powder River Expedition* (Norman: Arthur H. Clark Co., 2010).

²⁷ G. O. No. 83, AAG, Washington, D.C., May 8, 1865, *OR*, ser. 1, 46:3, 1112; Dodge to Connor, May 19, 1865, *ibid.*, 48:2, 515; Grant to Pope, June 19, 1865, *ibid.*, 933; Connor to Dodge, June 10, 1865, *ibid.*, 849.

²⁸ McDermott, *Circle of Fire*, 73-74; Connor to Dodge, June 20, 1865, *OR*, ser. 1, 48:2, 951. The so-called "California horses" were described by Henry A. Boller as "half-breed horses . . . invaluable in all services where fleet and hardy animals are needed. Tough and wiry, combining the endurance of the mustang with the size and strength of the American horse, and moreover easily kept, they . . . will run over a ten or fifteen mile route where the same speed would completely use up larger and heavier stock." Henry A. Boller, *Among the Indians: Eight Years in the Far West, 1858-1866*, ed. Milo M. Quaife (Chicago: R. R. Donnelly and Sons, 1959), 414-15.

²⁹ R. Carpenter to AG, Dept. of N. Kansas, June 24, 1865, *OR*, ser. 1, 48:2, 988; Cole to Dodge, June 29, 1865, *ibid.*, 1030; Connor to J. W. Barnes, July 27, 1865, *ibid.*, 48:1, 357; Albert Walter to Thomas Moonlight, Feb. 1, 1865, *ibid.*, 44.

³⁰ Quoted in David E. Wagner, *Patrick Connor's War*, 123; Omaha Scouts morning reports, RG500, NSHS; Nash to Furnas, Sept. 25, 1865, RG 1, SG10, Robert W. Furnas Papers, roll 1, NSHS.

³¹ McDermott, *Circle of Fire*, 132-35.

³² Stanton to Grant and Grant to Stanton, July 28, 1865, *OR*, ser. 1, 48:2, 1127; Meigs to Stanton, Aug. 6, 1865, *ibid.*, 1167; Grant to Stanton, Aug. 12, 1865, *ibid.*, 1178-79; Pope to Dodge, July 31, 1861, *ibid.*, 48:1, 350.

³³ Dodge Report, Nov. 1, 1865, *ibid.*, 48:1, 346; Grant to Pope, July 29, 1865; *ibid.*, 364, and Pope to Dodge, July 31 and Aug. 1, 1865, *ibid.*, 350-51; Pope to Dodge, Aug. 1, 1865, *ibid.*, 48:2, 1154-55; Dodge to Pope, Aug. 2, 1865, *ibid.*, 1156-58; Pope to Dodge, Aug. 7, 1865, *ibid.*, 48:1, 352; Dodge to Pope and Dodge to Price, Aug. 12, 1865, *ibid.*, 353-54; G. O. 20, Aug. 22, 1865, *ibid.*, 48:2, 1201.

³⁴ Dodge to Pope, Aug. 16, 1865, *ibid.*, 48:2, 1187; Pope to Grant, Oct. 24, 1865, and Grant to Pope, Oct. 25, 1865, *ibid.*, 1243-44.

³⁵ Lucille Kane, ed., *Military Life in Dakota: The Journal of Philippe Regis de Trobriand* (St. Paul: Alvord Memorial Commission, 1951), 64; James Willert, comp., *Bourke's Diary, From Journals of 1st Lt. John Gregory Bourke, June 27-Sept. 15, 1876* (LaMirada, Calif.: James Willert, 1986), 44-45; John S. Gray, "The Pack Train on Custer's Last Campaign," *Nebraska History* 57 (Spring 1976): 53-68.

³⁶ Dodge to Pope, *OR*, ser. 1, 48:2, 1158; Meigs Report, 216; Dodge, *The Battle of Atlanta and Other Campaigns, Etc.* (Council Bluffs: Monarch Printing, 1911), 102.

