

WALKS-A-HEAP

LESSONS STILL APPLY FROM MORE THAN 140-YEAR-OLD FIGHT

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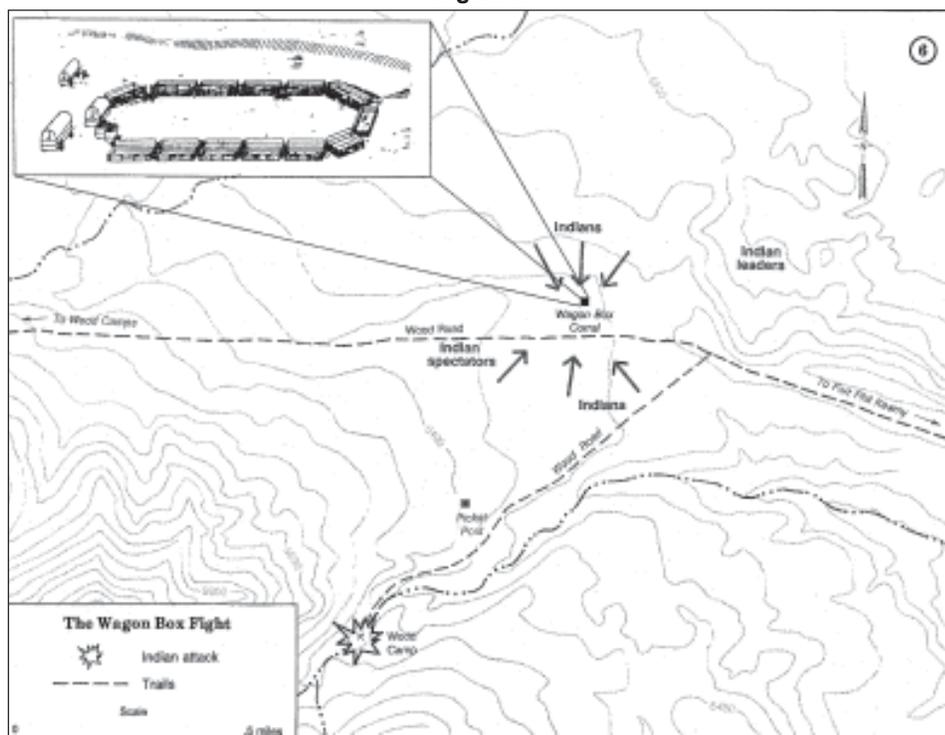
For over seven months he had been patiently waiting for the right moment. His reconnaissance patrols had determined the number of Americans, their daily routine, and they could often smell what was being served in the mess hall on any given day at the forward operating base (FOB). His combat patrols harassed and inflicted casualties on incoming and outgoing convoys that used the main supply route, one which served a string of FOBs. In July a group of less than 100 lightly armed Soldiers and civilian contractors operated and bivouacked outside the fire support range of the FOB. Yet they were still close enough for a quick reaction force (QRF) to sally out to their relief. His objective was the complete destruction of the QRF in a “baited trap ambush,” and if the situation developed the destruction of the FOB. His strategy was to induce the QRF to sacrifice security for speed in order to rescue the combat outpost before it was wiped out. The QRF in their haste would get strung out the length of the relief route. Along this route were several large naturally camouflaged kill zones. They were large enough to conceal hundreds of his men. Strung out in these kill zones, the Soldiers would be fighting in small unsupported teams. They would face attacks from multiple directions. Panic would take hold and unable to function as a cohesive force, they would cease to exist in less than 15 minutes. He figured the combat outpost might last half as long. Once the fighting ended, he could begin his psychological warfare campaign. Any wounded would be tortured to death and all the dead Americans would be displayed. A similar operation seven months before was a total success, and he was sure tomorrow would be no different.

It was the start of a new month — August — so it was the 49 enlisted men and three officers of Charlie Company’s turn to rotate outside the FOB. CPT James Powell, commander of C Company, 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry made an estimate of the situation. He did not like what he saw. Mission requirements had the civilians scattered into three work parties over a mile requiring squad-size elements to be posted with two of them. So that left him in the fourth position — the combat outpost with a reserve force of just 24 infantrymen led by 1LT John Jenness. The good news was A Company, whom they were relieving, and the civilians had not neglected their tactical duties during the previous weeks. They had selected and prepared a fine defensive

perimeter on key terrain that permitted observation of the work sites, most of the road, excellent fields of fire, and was centrally located to the three dispersed work sites. Observation/listening posts (OPs/LPs) were well placed and alert. As long as the infantrymen stayed alert, they had a fighting chance to get to the combat outpost and assume their assigned positions.

It is several hours before beginning morning nautical twilight on 2 August 1867. “He” is Red Cloud, an Oglala Chief and for now task force commander of the Tetons (Lower Bands) of the Dakotas (Sioux). The Tetons are comprised of the bands of Oglalas (Wanderers), Brules’ (Burnt-Thighs), San Arcs (No Bows), Hunkpapas (They who camp by Themselves), and Minneconjous (Those who Plant by the Water), according to Richard I. Dodge in his 1877 book *The Plains of the Great West and Their Inhabitants*. Cheyenne (Cut-wrist) and Northern Cheyenne tribes have also allied with Red Cloud. His operation is in the movement phase. Each band is being guided to their selected positions. A leader’s recon over several days determined the best sites to conceal the war parties along the route the QRF is most likely to take in the relief effort. Although the combat outpost is always alert, Red Cloud’s large force could easily have taken it in the night. The astute Red Cloud wants a fight in the daylight so the lookouts in a watchtower on a hill and those in the FOB blockhouse five miles away can see

Figure 1



Atlas of the Sioux Wars, Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College

and hear the attack on the combat outpost. The lookouts then can sound the alarm and dispatch the QRF from the FOB — Fort Phil Kearny (15 miles south of present-day Sheridan, Wy.).

The outpost's mission was to cut down trees to provide lumber and fuel especially for the upcoming winter. The 40-plus civilian contractors were lumberjacks, teamsters, and mule skinnners. Each morning after stand-to and breakfast, one group of teamsters in a wood train hauling logs and cordwood loaded the previous day heads back to the FOB with 2LT Francis McCarthy's escort detail of 12 Soldiers. A second group of lumberjacks and 13 Soldiers in an empty wagon train departs for the woods to cut down trees (this is called a pinery). This pinery was by a creek about a mile from CPT Powell's combat outpost. Several hundred yards from the pinery 300-plus mules were being rotated off the wagon teams. They were kept in a grazing, watering, and resting herd by the third party of mule skinnners with no Soldiers. The fourth and final group was in a defensive perimeter (the combat outpost) made up of 14 wagon boxes removed from their carriage and wheels and placed on their bed in an oval perimeter end-to-end with seven on each side. (A wagon box is similar to the bed of a large pickup truck just slightly longer. Its side walls are about four feet high, and the lumber used to construct the box is generally two inches thick). A small gap between wagon boxes was left to permit a man to slip through but block horses, mules, or cattle. At each end of the oval was a wagon box left on its wheels with bows and canvas (a covered wagon). Here, a month's worth of food, supplies, spare clothing, extra weapons, and ammo were stored. Some of the extra barrels and sacks were placed in the gaps between the wagon boxes. Outside this perimeter were tents which quartered the soldiers, civilians, and served as a mess.

At the same time Red Cloud's braves are moving into position, a civilian teamster R.J. Smyth and his buddy ride out the gate of Fort Phil Kearny to hunt deer. Shortly after sunrise they spot smoke signals in some distance hills and immediately decide to start back to the fort. They hadn't gone far before they discover the Tetons are between them and the fort, according to Cyrus Townsend Brady in his book *Indian Fights and*



Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

Red Cloud

Fighters. They don't realize they have discovered the assault element for the fort's QRF.

Eighteen-year-old PVT Samuel S. Gibson is part of the 13-Soldier escort for the lumberjacks at the pinery. Once there he is put in charge of a three-man OP/LP. As he completes a sunshade for what he knows will be a hot August day, PVT Garrett yells, "Indians!"

It is about 0700 hours on 2 August. Seven mounted braves are in single file trotting toward them at an oblique angle. Still no shot has been fired. Estimating their range at 700 yards Gibson sites his target, squeezes the trigger and manages to drop a horse which throws its rider (E.A. Brininstool, *Fighting Indian Warriors*). Gibson orders Garrett to watch for signals from the outpost and he sends PVT Deming over to the pinery to alert the lumberjacks and Soldiers. He can see hundreds of Indians and more seem to be materializing every second. Scattered shots were now ringing out. Simultaneously several hundred dismounted adolescent teen braves were given the task of running off the mule herd. The mule skinnners stood fast and kept the herd in control until 60-plus experienced mounted braves stampeded the herd and the mule skinnners. With the way to the wagon boxes blocked, the mule skinnners made for

the wood train as it headed back to the FOB. PVT Deming returned and reported that the lumberjacks and the other Soldiers in their detail were making for the wood train. PVT Gibson was reluctant to abandon his post. Yet he and his buddies were on foot about a mile from the defensive perimeter of the wagon boxes. The enemy was mounted. They had completed their mission of early warning. They had to leave now. A stray mule skinner leading his pony on foot joined them as they started at a brisk walk toward the wagon boxes. Two would cover fire as two moved. They were being over taken so they started running, but still in bounds. While they could keep the pursers directly behind them at bay, it became obvious that the mounted braves would get ahead of them and cut them off. The reality was they were going to lose the race and their scalps. The mule skinner had the only horse and could mount and make a run for it. He chose to stay on foot with the Soldiers, continue to fight, and share a common fate.

With the first shots CPT Powell and 1LT Jenness readied the defensive perimeter by having the Soldiers put extra rifles, tools, ammo, sacks of flour, and corn, cracker boxes, bundles of clothes, tent and wagon canvas inside the wagon boxes. Seeing the group of mule skinnners hotly pursued as they made a break for the wood train, CPT Powell led part of the reserve force on foot to fire on the braves from behind. His attack is successful because the mounted braves turned to attack his force.

Watching from a nearby hill, Red Cloud has his "commo chief" signal (with a small pocket mirror) the QRF ambush sites NOT to attack the 60-plus mule skinnners, teamsters, lumberjacks, and escorting soldiers of the wood train. They were still pursued by other bands of braves that managed to kill four Soldiers and four civilians. These braves also served as decoys to lead the QRF into the ambush. The remaining 50-plus Soldiers and civilians from the wood train, mule herd, and pinery reached the covering cannons and guns of Fort Phil Kearny after a five-mile running fight. Red Cloud is confident his main ambush force has not been compromised. Seeing the passage of so many back to the fort, Red Cloud thought the QRF would surely think the route was clear and they will race out into the jaws of his ambush.

PVTs Gibson, Deming, Garrett, and the mule skinner are still making an unobserved and unsupported withdrawal. They are moments away from being ridden down when a 21-year-old SGT Max Littman spots the attackers. He was putting a sack of flour in a wagon box when their movement caught his eye. He drops the sack, grabs his rifle and leaps out of the wagon box. He sprints toward the group for about a hundred yards, drops to one knee and begins to deliver a covering fire that drops several braves and horses. His fire rolls back the envelopment. The exhausted OP/LP team and the mule skinner still leading his pony reach the perimeter shortly after CPT Powell and his team returned. Somehow under a hail of bullets and arrows none of CPT Powell's force or the OP/LP team sustained a single casualty. Within minutes the deer hunting party of R.J. Smyth and his buddy enter the perimeter. CPT Powell's force of 29 infantrymen and three civilians are now totally surrounded by thousands!

A perimeter designed to be held by 100 must be held by 32. The original plan was for 1LT Jenness' platoon of 24 to serve as the reserve and on order move to achieve fire superiority in a critical sector or to counterattack a breach. CPT Powell quickly readjusts the available manpower. He assigns 15 men to defend each side of the oval wagon box perimeter and gives them primary, alternate, and supplementary positions. He posts himself at one end of the perimeter in a covered wagon and directs 1LT Jenness to the other end. With his field glasses 1LT Jenness surveys the field and spots what he is sure to be Chief Red Cloud and his "staff" on a distant hill to the east. With colored cloth and mirrors, they are issuing what is in effect a "frago." The LT shouted this information to CPT Powell at the other end of the perimeter. The CPT knew the assault would soon begin. A low rumble was heard coming from the pinery, and then hundreds of mounted braves emerged from the trees. CPT Powell gave the order, "Men here they come! Take your places and shoot to kill!"

Rain-in-the-Face was a young "company grade" chief of the Hunkpapa band. He and his braves were riding in the tribe's assigned position in the attack. He would have preferred to be at one of the big ambush sites waiting for the QRF. But he did as directed thinking the attack wouldn't take long. They were going up against the slow moving and slow firing "Walks-a-Heap" (what the tribes called the Infantry). He wore his war bonnet and just a loin cloth on this hot day. His face, chest, arms, thighs, and pony were painted for war. He knew the Soldiers thought the colors and designs were whimsical decorations, but in fact they follow a definite pattern. Each design and color has a meaning. Along with the headdress, it denotes "rank" or status, combat experience, and especially band or tribe (since each band uses different battle drills). Any brave can identify a different band on the battlefield and the combat experience the group has by the war paint. This is similar to the way we mark units and skills on our uniforms, vehicles, and aircraft.

He and his braves were in the middle ranks of the assault formation, which was picking up speed. The front of the charge was the honor position. (In this position, you don't have to eat dust, you can see the enemy, and no one is in front of you blocking your shot.) He started to see the wagon boxes but still didn't see any Soldiers. Because the oval shape objective presents only a small area to the Tetons, the assault line started to channel in toward

the center forcing Rain-in-the-Face and the Hunkpapas to slow down, pushing them deeper into the formation. The line formation was being compressed into a column. As this occurred the number of Soldiers facing braves started to equal out.

The attackers thought that as soon as the Infantrymen fired their first volley they would then have to stand up to reload. Only chiefs (officers) and a few sub-chiefs (sergeants) would have revolvers and not have to stand up. The others, they thought, would have to expose themselves to reload. At that time, the braves would then return fire, and with their greater numbers they would surely drop most of the Soldiers. The Soldiers fired when the attackers were at 300 yards, but it wasn't much of a volley (just over 17 shots). Then a steady stream of fire came from the wagon boxes, but the braves pressed forward with the assault. They smelled the black powder, the dust, and the blood of men and horses. Those braves and horses hit in the front slowed the momentum of the assault. (It was just like being in a battalion run. When the front slows, the trail companies often compress and come to a complete stop.) From the level of fire being unleashed, it appeared that there must have been hundreds of Soldiers in those wagon boxes. Once the braves were close enough to see through the smoke and dust into the beds of the wagon boxes, they were surprised that they could see almost no Soldiers. The Walks-a-Heap draped canvas from side board to side board for concealment. The braves urged their war ponies forward to jump the wagon boxes, but the horses balked at jumping the four-foot high double wall of the wagon boxes. They slowed right in the middle of the kill zone. At 50 yards, the accuracy and the volume of fire coming from the infantrymen broke the charge. Rain-in-the-Face and the other bands withdrew and tried to recover as many of the fallen as they could.

For all the thoroughness and daring Red Cloud scouts had displayed in the previous months, they had missed one small but important piece of intelligence. On 10 July 1867, a large resupply convoy brought in food, blankets, clothing, tools, and 700 Allin conversion breech-loading, single shot Springfield rifles and a hundred thousand metallic cartridges. With these rifles, instead of having to stand and reload, a Soldier could remain in a covered and concealed prone or kneeling position, fire, and reload in two-to-three seconds. Plus, the metallic cartridges could be handled rougher and offered a more reliable and consistent performance over the old paper cartridges of the muzzle loaders. The paper cartridges had a tendency to degrade over time, exposure to the elements, and sweaty hands.

An undeniable and overlooked component of C Company's survival up to this point was the seamless handover and preparation from A Company, 1-27th Infantry two days before. During their stay, the men of A Company bored firing holes in the outward facing side of the wagon boxes to cover their assigned sectors of fire. A Soldier could lie on the wagon bed site and shoot without exposing himself. Their commander's obstacle plan called for placing the wagon boxes on their beds instead of their side. This covered and concealed the Soldiers' backs from attacks from the opposite side of the perimeter and would block braves on horses from riding into the combat outpost. He also had placed the combat outpost on the northern edge of the plain so he could see the work sites and most of the road. On the northern edge, less than 100 yards away,



U.S. Army Center of Military History

The Wagon Box Fight became part of the U.S. Army in Action Series, which depict American Soldiers from the Revolutionary War through the Korean War. This picture, titled “Good Marksmanship and Guts!,” may still hang in some units’ orderly rooms.

was a shallow erosion ditch, then a gentle acclivity with broken ground. To the east, west, and south was flat, open grassland that extended a half mile or more in these directions (Roy E. Appleman, Chapter 12: The Wagon Box Fight, *Great Western Indian Wars*). Over the previous weeks, the mule herd had grazed or stomped away the prairie grass on this plain removing any possible concealment for crawling and had eliminated the fire hazard. The combat outpost had near perfect observation and fields of fire.

CPT Powell further improved the outpost by having his men line the wagon boxes with sacks of flour and corn, and bundles of canvas and clothing, which helped stop bullets and flying wood splinters. Some canvas was draped over the wagon boxes for concealment and shade. Seven ammo boxes, each holding a thousand rounds, were opened and evenly placed around the perimeter so everyone was close to a resupply point. Each Soldier filled his pockets and hat with as much ammo as he could hold. This was in addition to the 40-round basic load of the cartridge box and belt.

There was one other bit of intel that every Soldier knew and Red Cloud didn't. There would be no “quick” reaction force. The total annihilation of CPT Fetterman's 80-man QRF in December 1866 had resulted in a change of tactics. Against standing orders NOT to pursue across a phase line, CPT Fetterman crossed the line in pursuit of the decoys. The 20 mounted Cav troopers pulled away from the 60 dismounted Infantrymen armed with muzzle-loading rifles. Strung out nearly a half mile in small groups when the ambush was sprung, the Soldiers were overrun in minutes. The QRF would only come after careful assessment of the situation. The realization was the QRF, or more importantly the fort, could be the main objective. With

no more than 400 “for duty” Soldiers available, detaching a force big enough to do the job would expose the fort to attack. CPT Powell and C Company would get no immediate help.

Red Cloud saw the attack being repelled and reassessed his tactics. This resulted in a lull that curious Soldiers used to start poking their heads above cover. 1LT Jenness left his position to check his men. In quick succession four Soldiers were hit from fire coming from the rise to the north. The braves were skilled marksmen and could hit a Soldier who exposed himself. 1LT Jenness and two others were killed, a fourth was hit in the shoulder. The Soldiers quickly learned to move only when necessary, then crawl and be fast. They did just that as they readjusted the perimeter to cover the sectors of the fallen four and to get ammo.

CPT Powell wondered if 28 men were enough to defend his perimeter as the braves would surely come again and seek the weak spot to penetrate. Once inside the perimeter, the sheer number would win the hand-to-hand fight. Somehow he must outgun the braves at the point of attack without creating an exploitable gap. He lost his second in command and wondered if he had overlooked something. He had, but so had Red Cloud. In his preparation, he left the tents (each about the size of a GP small) standing on the south, creating a dead space almost up to the wagon boxes. In the first attack the braves chose not to use the tents to mask the attack because they could not see the objective. Simultaneously, almost everyone on the battlefield thought or said, “The tents!”

Within seconds four Soldiers (one being PVT Gibson) sprinted out of the perimeter and started slipping the ropes off the stakes collapsing all but a distant one. Somehow none of the four were hit,

and they assumed their positions as nearly 700 braves on foot raced toward them.

Red Cloud saw how the line had collapsed into a column and that the horses would not jump the wagon boxes. The field was littered with dead and wounded men and horses becoming an obstacle to a horse charge. Hence this attack would be on foot, plus braves did not take up as much space as a horse so he could get more in the same space. Sheer weight of numbers would sweep the infantry away. Again the braves pressed the assault, rushing past fallen comrades and horses. They will not balk when the critical time came to leap into the wagon boxes.

R.J. Smyth and his partner were skilled scouts and frontiersmen and were teamed up with the famous explorer and mountain man Jim Bridger (who is watching from the fort). They were the final protective line. Smyth was armed with two lever action, seven shot Spencer Carbines and two Colt revolvers. His partner was allotted eight Springfield rifles, and one soldier had the sole purpose of making sure the rifles remained loaded. Just as it looked as though the human wave would reach the wagon boxes and the fire can't get hotter, Smyth quickly and accurately fired each Spencer then the Colts, and the wave of braves melted away.

As the attack receded, fire from the north once again limited movement in the perimeter. Flaming arrows were used, but there was no grass to burn, and the Soldiers put out any that hit the wagons. Some hit and burned manure left by the mules and horses. This smoke burned the throat and increased the thirst already acute from dust and a hot August sun. Many Soldiers had neglected their canteens and did not carry them. PVT Gibson had a full one as he left the OP/LP in the morning and had carried it all the way back to the wagon boxes. He shared it with two other Soldiers in his position. But now as the rifles began to overheat and foul from the black powder cartridges, the water was used to cool and clean the rifles. Those who did not have water blew and fanned the breeches to cool them. Then using shirt tails, they wiped off the carbon.

After the lull, another foot charge came from a different point of the compass. Red Cloud looked for any weak spots, but there were none. The pattern was repeated the rest of the morning. Red Cloud forgot about ambushing the relief force. He wanted to break the "Walks-a-Heap medicine." His Oglala and several other bands had been at the ambush sites all morning unengaged. He recalled them all. His nephew and most likely his future successor led the sixth and final attack that they believed would sweep away the Infantry in the wagon boxes.

Some of the sides of the wagons were nearly shot to splinters. The 7,000 rounds were nearly gone after five full assaults. Some of the rifles were so hot the rounds cooked off in the chamber. The barrels were blistering the Soldiers' finger tips, and with the barrels so hot they couldn't be wielded as clubs. They had no bayonets. For CPT Powell and C Co., this was it. The Infantrymen took hunting knives, axes, and hatchets and stuck them into the side boards or the bed of the wagon to keep them close. When the ammo was gone, it would be hand-to-hand combat.

Red Cloud's tall nephew was at the apex of the massive wedge formation of braves approaching from the west on foot. The Oglalas were right behind him followed by other bands of Tetons and Cheyennes. His large size and full war bonnet made him a target. He was cut down, but the wedge pressed on. The infantrymen of C Co.

continued to mark their targets, but it seemed as though it was having no effect. The braves pressed on. Ammo was critical and the braves were almost to the point where they could have leapt into the wagon boxes and then met their foes face-to-face, hand-to-hand. Rifle bullets passed thru several braves at this close quarter. The wedge of braves finally broke at five feet. Red Cloud then gave the order to recover the wounded and dead and to depart.

From Fort Phil Kearny, the gates then opened and a compact formation moved out. A howitzer did a recon by fire. The red legs knew a bursting shell would stampede Indian ponies. If they were concealed along the route, the shell would flush them. They fired a few shells, waited, and then bounded forward a quarter mile at a time. CPT Powell observed the Tetons massing off in the distance. He heard the booming of the howitzer. Finally C Co. spotted the cavalry screen followed closely by the Infantry, the howitzer, and several wagons. C Co. started cheering. Some started to leave the perimeter, but CPT Powell ordered them all back to the security of the perimeter. Finally, MAJ Benjamin F. Smith and a 100-man QRF arrived at the wagon boxes. It was around 1300 hrs. MAJ Smith hadn't expected to find anyone alive. MAJ Smith and CPT Powell were awed at the numbers of braves off in the distance. They quickly decided to load the two wounded and three dead into the wagons and make for the FOB. After getting a drink and an ammo resupply, C Co. and the QRF walked the five miles to Fort Phil Kearny uncontested.

Measure, countermeasure, change comes quick. In the few weeks prior to the wagon box fight, the leadership, technology and tactics of his adversary had changed. Red Cloud drew off to ponder the changes, fight off challenges to his leadership, and to adapt. The death of his nephew left an opening for another young combat leader — Crazy Horse.

Politics and money had kept the Infantry inadequately armed with muzzle loaders even though large quantities of "repeating rifles," breech loading rifles, and metallic cartridges were in storage from the War Between the States. The loss of CPT Fetterman's team seven months before forced the rearming of the Bozeman Trail forts. This drove a change in the tactics from standing in open firing lines to fighting prone or kneeling from a covered and concealed position. Due to the discipline and the marksmanship skills of the Infantrymen in Charlie Company, the full potential of breech loading rifles was realized. Credit also must go to the capable and cool leadership of CPT Powell, who recognized how technology had changed tactics. He was able to lead his men to quickly and successfully employ both in combat. Victory was also the result of a young PVT Gibson, who did not wait to be ordered to do something. He was well trained on the battle drills, the standard operating procedures, and how to size up the situation and execute a solution without waiting for an order. It was also SGT Littman who saw something his superiors didn't and immediately took corrective action. It was a mule skinner who knew what every Soldier knew, to have any chance they would have to fight as a team.

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