James Washington had served in the 13th United States Colored Troops during the recent Civil War, so he was comfortable sitting at a table in a saloon filled with United States soldiers. John Carter, his partner and best friend, had served in the Confederate Army as a volunteer in a Texas regiment. He was a bit uncomfortable being around the men in blue but did not show it. He and Washington were sharing a bottle of whiskey and talking about their recent adventure, with some men trying to sell rifles to the Sioux.

They had just delivered three wagon loads of freight to Fort Laramie and were told to wait for a couple of days. There was a vital shipment of supplies destined for Fort Phil Kearny on the Bozeman Trail three hundred miles north of Fort Laramie. That fort was in the heart of Sioux and Cheyenne country.

The bottle of whiskey was half empty by the time Baptist Jim came through the swinging doors and entered the saloon. He stood inside the doors looking for Washington and Carter. Jim was the third man of their small freight company. Less than five feet tall and dressed like the preacher he was with black pants, coat, and hat, all worn with a white shirt, he was also a bounty hunter and planned to work hauling freight until autumn. Then he would be focusing on collecting bounties so he could build a church wherever God led him.

When he spotted his two friends, he nodded his head and started toward them. At the same time, a drunken soldier reeled into him, almost knocking him to the floor. The man was over six feet tall and broad as an ox. He looked down at Jim and said, “Stay outta my way, you little gnat or next time I’ll step on you and squash you like a bug.”

He took Jim’s hat off his head and placed it in the air on a fist. Laughingly, he said, “My fist is as big as this little man’s head. Maybe he is a small child dressed as a man. Let’s see.”

Several of the men at the long bar were laughing as the soldier slammed the hat down onto Jim’s head and reached for his coat. The laughing stopped when Jim kicked the man in the testicles and kneed him in the jaw when he doubled over. He lay flat on the floor as Jim straightened his hat and stepped over his prone body. Two of the man’s friends started toward Jim when one of them noticed he carried a Bible.

“You a preacher?” one of them asked.

“That is correct, and all of you are sinners who need to fix your bad behavior,” Jim replied.

“Aren’t preachers supposed to turn the other cheek?” another man asked as he pointed to the now moaning man on the floor.

“I ain’t one of those kinds of preachers,” Jim said. Then he went on to say, “Anyone else care to ‘dance’?”

Two of the men helped the recovering soldier off the floor and leaned him against the bar. Jim tossed a coin onto the bar and said, “Give him something to soothe the pain. I tried not to hurt him too badly.”

The bartender sat a glass of whiskey in front of him. The soldier took a deep breath and stood straight as he downed it in a quick gulp. Then he slammed the glass down and said, “Where is that little man? I got a score to settle with him.”
One of the others, a man almost as big as him, said, “You better calm down, Curt. He’s a preacher, and he did buy you that drink.”

“Where is he?” Curt asked.

“He’s at that table with them other two,” his friend answered while pointing across the room at Washington and Carter.

Curt walked over to stand by their table. Three of his friends stood directly behind him.

Looking down at Jim, Curt said, “You fight dirty.”

Jim stayed sitting and looked up at him as he said, “I fight to win. Besides, you mussed my hair.”

Curt gave him a hard look before he reached out with his right hand. It was open, not clenched. He said, “I deserved what I got. I’d rather have you on my side than against me.”

Jim took the offered hand and shook it. “Anybody gives you trouble around here, just tell them that Curt Schmidt will not like it,” he said as they released hands and he went back to the bar.

“For a man of peace, you do stir up trouble from time to time,” Washington said.

“I thought we was goin’ to have some fun bustin’ a few Yankee heads. I’m almost disappointed,” Carter said.

Most of the soldiers left the saloon just as an officer entered. He had been sent by the Colonel to arrange the supply shipment to Fort Phil Kearny. The terms included hazard pay and made the contract too lucrative to reject.

The next morning, they arrived at the fort’s warehouse shortly after sunrise. They watched a group of soldiers loading their wagons. One wagon had crates of .50 caliber ammunition for the new breech-loading, model 1866 Springfield rifles that were recently issued to the soldiers manning the Bozeman Trail Forts. A second wagon held barrels of gunpowder and shells for artillery pieces at the forts. The third wagon carried more Springfield rifles, and several crates of Colt army revolvers with ammunition.

After the loads were tarped, a soldier sat by each driver, and ten others on horseback spaced themselves among the wagons. A lieutenant and a sergeant completed the military column.

As the men loaded the wagons, Washington, Carter, and Jim stood together talking.

Carter said, “We got a valuable cargo for Fort Phil Kearny. I hope the Sioux don’t know about it.”

“If you look around, you can see all kinds of peaceful Indians in and around the fort. They know what we are carryin’,” Jim said.

“I see some soldiers waiting among the wagons. They must be the escort the Colonel promised,” Washington said.

“Your friend, that Curt fellow, is one of them,” Carter said to Jim.

“I hope he is faster with his gun than he was with his hands,” Jim said.

“I suspect he’ll be okay in a fight if’n he ain’t drunk,” Carter said.

Washington said, “The loads are bein’ tarped, so it’s time to mount up. I don’t like leavin’ Nightshade behind, but the Colonel assured us that they would take care of our horses until we come back.”
“Bein’ we got a bunch of Yankees ridin’ with us, we’ll focus on drivin’ the wagons. We shouldn’t be needin’ our saddle horses. Besides, any brave would love to have that black stallion of yours, and we don’t need that kind of attention,” Carter said to Washington.

It was midmorning when the small column of two wagons, eleven troopers, one officer, and three drivers left Fort Laramie on a three-hundred-mile trek to Fort Phil Kearny. It was mid-July, and they expected to arrive at their destination before the end of the month.

A lone Sioux scout, Lazy Bear, watched the wagons leave Fort Laramie. He was sure these were the same men who had traveled with the ones who tried to sell them the bad repeating rifles. These wagons also had guns, and the Sioux needed them to fight the long knives. Before the wagons were out of sight, Lazy Bear slowly walked from the fort to a copse of trees where he had hidden his pony. Mounting, he rode off to the east where Gray Dog waited with fifty warriors.

Gray Dog and his men were angry. They expected to have Henry repeating rifles to use against the long knives. Instead, they had lances, bows and arrows, and a few old muzzle-loading guns. Red Cloud wanted rifles for planned attacks against the forts on the Bozeman Trail. They could not go back to him empty-handed, or they would lose face. The rifles at the fort were not repeating rifles, but they would work for killing white-eyes.

Lazy Bear reached Gray Dog’s encampment around noon. Ten minutes later, the war party was on its way to intercept the shipment. They would take the weapons and kill everyone transporting them. There would be plenty of opportunities for an ambush once the wagons left the Oregon Trail and followed the Bozeman Trail.

On the third day out of Fort Laramie, the column reached the fork where the Bozeman Trail branched off the Oregon Trail and continued toward the northwest. The condition of the trail indicated that most of the traffic continued west. Most of the Bozeman traffic was military since the Montana goldfields were about played out, and the route was unsafe for immigrants.

As they traveled north, the cavalry escort maintained a high level of alertness. A heavy guard watched the camp at night, and a pair of troopers scouted ahead during the day. Washington, Carter, and Baptist Jim usually camped a short distance from the soldiers, although they often shared food with them. One night they were halfway between the Bozeman Cutoff and Fort Reno when Washington decided it was time for some fresh meat.

Eating some beans with bacon, he told the others, “Tomorrow, I’m gonna speak to the Lieutenant about borrowing one of their horses to go hunting. I saw some antelope sign and want to get one for supper. One of the troopers can drive my wagon for a while.”

“I don’t think you’ll get much of an argument. I’m sure these Yankees would like fresh meat as much as us,” Carter said as he swallowed the last of his beans and bacon.

“I’ll be up early and have one across the saddle before midmorning,” Washington said.

Leaving the dishes for Carter to clean, Washington went looking for Lieutenant Harris. He found him playing with his food. “Ain’t all that appetizing, eh, Lieutenant,” Washington said as he sat beside him.

“That’s for damn sure. But it is better than the hardtack and bacon grease we had last night,” the lieutenant replied.

“I came to ask about borrowing one of your horses for a few hours tomorrow. I’m sure I can get us an antelope if I go out early in the morning,” Washington said.
Lieutenant Harris stared at Washington for a moment as he mulled the request over in his mind. Then he looked at the meal on his plate and said, “Sergeant Parker is the best shot in the company. Take him along with you. Maybe you can get two antelopes. Take Private Schmidt’s horse. He can drive your wagon until you get back.”

The next morning Washington had just finished an early cup of coffee when Sergeant Parker and Curt Schmidt showed up leading two saddled horses. Curt gave his reins to Washington and said, “Take good care of him, and he’ll do you right. Where’s Carter?”

“He’ll be back in a minute. You can wait by the fire and help yourself to some coffee.” Curt got busy at the fire while Washington and Parker appraised each other. Washington spoke first, “Lieutenant says you’re a good shot. Ever hunt antelope before?”

“I can hit what I aim at, and I did shoot an antelope from time to time before I joined the army.”

“I know you are a sergeant in the army, and I’m a civilian, but one of us has to be in charge,” Washington said.

“This hunt was your idea, so I’ll just tag along and let you set up the targets.”

“You can trade your Springfield carbine for Carter’s Sharps rifle, but just for today. Antelope are skittish, and you need a long-range rifle,” Washington said.

“That’ll make me right on out to a thousand yards. The short barrel and smaller powder load of my carbine keep its range down to a few hundred yards,” Parker said as he mounted his horse.

“Is the army giving you fellas more ammunition for target practice these days? When I was a volunteer during the war, we got ten rounds per month for target practice.”

“That hasn’t changed none. I had practice on an old muzzleloader before the war and had a knack for shootin’,” Parker said.

“Let’s go get some antelope,” Washington said as he mounted and rode out of camp.

Two hours later, they were on a side trail that Washington figured would bring them to a point on the Bozeman Trail ahead of the wagons. Each man carried an antelope across the front of his saddle. They were passing through a rugged area with hills and rocky outcrops when Washington heard a strange bird call. He recognized it right away as coming from a human source. A few minutes later, they arrived at a flat area among some rocks with a trickle of water flowing down through it from higher up. He told Parker to dismount and wait while he explored a little way off their trail.

Leaving his horse, Washington made his way up a rocky hillside just north of the flat area. When he got to the top, he found Laughing Wolf, his Cheyenne blood brother sitting under some scrubby trees with a wide grin on his face.

“It is good to see my brother,” Laughing Wolf said, as he stood, and they clasped each other’s wrist as a form of welcome.

“I think of you often,” Washington said. “I hope all is well.”

“It is good for me, but maybe not so good for you. I am scouting for Gray Dog, a Lakota sub-chief, and his fifty warriors. They are angry over some bad rifles and want the ones you carry. They will attack you tomorrow at sunrise.”

“Why do you tell me this thing? Aren’t the Northern Cheyenne allied with the Lakota Sioux?”
“Sioux want white men gone; then they want Cheyenne gone, so they have all the buffalo. Sioux try to kill me many times. I kill them instead. They no friend to me. I come to warn you. Then I go north with the other Cheyenne to drive long knives away from their forts.”

“I appreciate the warning, my brother,” Washington said.

“If you live tomorrow, take time going to forts along Bozeman Trail. Many Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho make big trouble there.”

“I appreciate your warnings. I made promises about delivering the supplies we carry. We will have to take our chances. This winter, I will be hunting buffalo above Fort Laramie. Maybe I will see you there, and we can spend some time together.”

As he turned to leave, Laughing Wolf said, “I look for you there. If the Great Spirit wills it, we will both be alive.”

When he got back to Sergeant Parker, the sergeant said, “I was startin’ to get worried. You were gone for almost an hour.”

“I met a friend. We must hurry back to the wagons. Trouble is brewin’,” Washington said.

They intercepted the wagons a little time after the noon hour. Washington told everyone what was going to happen the next morning. Lieutenant Harris was skeptical about the whole story, and he said so, “You expect me to believe that you have a blood brother who is a Cheyenne Dog Soldier, and he warned you about an attack on us tomorrow morning. Indians are not foolish enough to attack an armed patrol of United States Cavalry.”

“I’m sure Fetterman felt the same way until his command was wiped out,” Carter said.

Harris gave him a dirty look and was about to say something when Parker spoke up, “He did meet with a Cheyenne, Sir. I followed him part way and saw them powwowing. I wasn’t very close, but I could tell they were friendly.”

“I see,” Harris said. “When were you going to say something about that?”

“Whenever I had a chance, Sir,” he replied.

“So, wherever we camp tonight, we will be attacked by a bunch of bloodthirsty savages in the morning. Maybe we should burn the wagons and ride to Fort Reno without them,” Harris said as he looked at Carter.

“You could do that and live a little longer, but they’d catch up to us sooner or later,” Carter said.

“Do you propose we just ignore the Sioux and pretend nothing is going to happen?” Harris said.

Washington had stood quietly by and decided now was the time to speak up, “We continue with the wagons and stop at the first place that offers good protection. We can use them fort up and have a chance to fight them off. They may be angry, but they also want to get back to Red Cloud for the big fight that’s comin’.”

“They will probably outnumber us,” Harris said.

“That may be,” Washington said, “but the Sioux only have bows and lances against our rifles. They think your men are armed with muskets and won’t be able to get many shots off before they overwhelm us. We’ll surprise them.”

The sun was low on the western horizon when they came to a wide-open section of the trail with a small, broad hill off to the west. It gradually rose to about ten feet above the
surrounding plain. Upon examination, they decided it would be as good a place as any to stand off an attack by the Sioux. There was a slight depression on the top that would shelter the animals.

They parked the wagons in a triangular formation around the top of the slope and unloaded the crates and barrels from them to make barriers between them. The men spread out beneath and between the wagons. Each of the soldiers had a Springfield rifle and a pouch full of .50 caliber ammunition. They had opened an ammunition crate, and each man had a hundred rounds for his gun. If the Indians came too close, each of them also had a pistol with extra ammunition in a smaller pouch.

Washington, Carter, and Jim had Henry repeating rifles and plenty of ammunition. Each of them took a position inside the box of a different wagon, and everyone waited for the morning.

The morning sun illuminated an empty plain around the encampment. Lieutenant Harris walked over to Washington’s wagon and said, “Looks like your Indian friend was lying. I don’t see any Sioux getting ready to attack us.”

Washington didn’t answer him. He just pointed to the north where a distant dust cloud indicated the movement of many large animals. “I think we have visitors coming our way,” he said.

The lieutenant said, “I stand corrected, Mr. Washington.” Then he walked back toward his position in the center of their fortification and shouted to his men, “Do not start shooting until I give the command.”

He knelt with his pistol in his right hand and his sword in the other. There were two troopers by his side. They were a reserve. If a section of their defenses showed signs of failure, they would immediately reinforce that section. They would also execute any Sioux that got inside as well as replace any defender who got wounded or killed.

The Sioux stopped 500 yards away and talked among themselves. They expected to find wagons pulling out after breakfast, not a fort on higher ground. Gray Dog was holding a war lance above his head and waving it around as he shouted at his warriors. There were about fifty of them, all Sioux.

Suddenly, about twenty of the warriors rode directly at the circled wagons. They were younger men who wanted to show their bravery. Gray Dog wanted them to draw the fire of the defenders so he could determine their strength.

At 300 yards, the Lieutenant ordered his men to open fire. Five soldiers opened fire with their carbines, while Washington and Baptist Jim opened fire with their repeating rifles. The others watched their part of the fortification. They caught the Sioux by surprise. They expected to be going against muzzleloading guns and should only have to worry about a few shots before reaching the wagons. When the Sioux wiped out Fetterman’s command six months earlier, his men had been able to fire only a single volley before being overrun.

These soldiers were firing at a rate of almost ten rounds a minute. The hail of bullets caught the Sioux by surprise. They fired just a few arrows before having to turn back, leaving six of their people lying in the dirt.

Before they got back to the main party, Gray Dog kicked his pony into action, and the whole party charged the fortification. Lieutenant Harris and the other two men hurried over to
take up a position between the wagons to help repel the charge. Everyone opened fire at 300 yards, and warriors started falling. As they got closer, they were running up a slight slope, which slowed the impetus of the attack.

A trail of bodies marked the route of the charge. Roughly thirty warriors reached the wagons. Gray Dog jumped into Washington’s wagon with a raised tomahawk. His Henry was empty, so Washington drew his pistol and shot Gray Dog in the chest along with two others who had jumped into his wagon. When their leader went down, a cry went up from the mounted men following him.

Many of the Sioux were pushing against the barriers between the wagons when Gray Dog fell, and they heard the cry. The attackers had run into bad medicine and quickly retreated down the slope, stopping only when they were out of rifle range.

Washington looked around the fort to assess damage and losses. One trooper was dead. An arrow had hit him in the chest. Lieutenant Harris was also gone. A warrior hit him in the neck with a tomahawk during the attack. Two other troopers were lightly wounded.

Sergeant Parker assumed command of the military escort and had the two dead men moved to the center. Then hed had the barriers rebuilt, where they had been torn apart by the Sioux.

“Think they’ll be attacking again?” Parker asked Washington.

“‘There’s less than thirty of them still alive, and they lost their chief. They’ll be thinkin’ their medicine is weak and probably be headin’ north to Red Cloud. I think you and I can parley and hurry them along.”

“What do you want to say?” Parker asked.

“If’n they don’t cause us any more trouble, we’ll leave here without mutilating their dead. We’ll just lay the bodies aside.”

“Do you think they will honor such an agreement?”

“I trust the Sioux more than I trust most white men. White men break promises.”

The war party was active. The men were arguing among themselves. Some were pointing at the wagons while others were pointing north. When they saw the white flag, they all became quiet. One of the men separated himself from the others and sat on his pony between the wagons and the war party. The other warriors sat and watched.

Washington and Parker rode slowly down the slope, stopping close by the lone Indian. Washington had learned sign language and a few words from the Lakota language. He made his proposal to the Indian, a warrior named Bear Claw, who rejoined the party and had a short discussion with two other warriors.

They accepted the proposal, and the war party moved farther away from the battle site. Several of the younger ones were complaining but to no avail. The war party had enough fighting and just wanted to return to the main forces with Chief Red Cloud.

Washington and Parker hurried back to the wagons and told the men to pack up and get ready to move out. The men put the dead trooper and the lieutenant in a wagon. They would bury them along the trail where the Sioux would not find the graves and defile the bodies. In less than an hour, the wagons were moving north on the Bozeman Trail, and the Sioux were gathering their dead.
Bear Claw noticed ten of the younger warriors quietly, leaving the party to follow the wagons. He was upset that they were not honoring his words, but since he was not a chief and they were from a different village, he figured the whites were on their own.

They tied the dead warriors onto ponies, and the party headed across the prairie toward the west. They would travel for several hours before turning north. The party would take care of their dead the next day by placing their bodies where they could see the rising sun and complete their journey to paradise.

Sergeant Parker rode beside Washington’s wagon. “I can’t believe they let us off so easy,” he said.

“We ain’t out of the woods yet. Some of that party weren’t too happy and might cause some problems before we get to Fort Reno,” Washington said.

It was near dark when they stopped for the night. While the camp was being set up, a detail of troopers dug graves for the two dead men. The graves were unmarked, and debris was scattered over them to hide the disturbed soil. Baptist Jim said some words over them, and everyone settled in for the night.

Washington, Carter, and Jim sat at their fire. Curt Schmidt came looking for them and sat by Jim. Curt said, “If’n I don’t make it to the fort, would you say some words over me? I ain’t always lived a good life, but I never did wrong to any child or woman. Any of the men I done stuff to deserved it.”

Jim stopped eating his beans and said, “I reckon I can do that for you. God loves a sinner, especially a repentant one.”

“Then God must love me for sure,” Curt said as he got to his feet.

He turned to go when an arrow hit him in the middle of his back, right between his shoulder blades, just missing his spinal cord. He turned toward the source of the bolt and tried to grab the shaft to pull it free. Jim sounded an alarm as Sioux attacked the camp. They were making a lot of noise and firing arrows at anything that moved. The two men guarding the horses were down, brained with tomahawks, and two others besides Curt had been hit with arrows.

Jim reached for his pistol as a Sioux jumped at him. He never reached Jim because Curt grabbed him by the throat and snapped his neck like a piece of kindling. Washington and Carter had rolled out of the firelight and drew their pistols. They started firing into the attackers and knocked two of them off their feet. Most of the rest of the Sioux were fighting hand-to-hand with the soldiers.

When Curt reached for another Sioux, a second arrow hit him in the back next to the first one. It was too much for the big man, and he fell, ignored by the Sioux rushing the camp.

Meanwhile, Jim was wrestling with a warrior much bigger than himself. Carter rushed over to help and killed the Sioux with a knife thrust into his kidney. Jim stood and glanced at Curt as he and Carter rushed to help the soldiers, who were having a hard time of it. Two were down, and five Sioux were ganging up on the four who were left.

Jim and Carter were into them as another soldier fell, severely wounded. Knives, tomahawks, and rifle butts were the weapons of choice. The melee lasted but a minute, and when all was quiet, Carter and Jim stood with two slightly wounded soldiers, one of which was Sergeant Parker. There were two wounded Sioux and one seriously injured soldier lying on the ground with five dead Sioux and three dead soldiers.
Carter hurried back to their campfire to find Washington. He had disappeared during the fighting. When he reached Washington’s wagon, he found him returning from the picket line carrying scalps.

Before he could say anything, Washington said, “I figured they might have more braves trying to make off with our livestock. You had things under control here. Two of them were carrying scalps from the guards and getting ready to steal our horses and mules.”

Carter said, “We killed most of them and have two that are seriously wounded. I think they came from the bunch we fought earlier today.”

Holding up the two scalps, Washington said, “I recognized these two as leading the first charge this morning. I took their scalps, and we’re goin’ to let their bodies lay where they are. I’m also going to scalp the other dead ones. We didn’t do that this morning, and they gave their word that we could leave without trouble. They need to see that breaking their word has a penalty attached to it.”

“What are you gonna do with the scalps?” Carter asked.

“I’ll bury them somewhere along the trail. I ain’t no scalp hunter,” Washington replied.

The next morning the three wagons pulled out with an escort of Sergeant Parker and a private. A third gravely wounded trooper was riding on one of the wagons. Washington had tied the six surviving cavalry horses to the wagons. They would bury the dead where the Sioux would not find them, and Baptist Jim would give a special eulogy over their graves. He would keep his promise to Curt.

The scalped bodies of eight dead Sioux lay where they had fallen while two wounded Sioux sat by their ponies with bandages covering their injuries. As soon as the wagons were out of sight, they mounted and slowly headed west.

Three days later, the freighters arrived at Fort Reno.