BUFFALO HUNTERS: The Dog Soldier (July 1866)

By Bob Fincham

John Carter and I had been searching the eastern Nebraska Territory for buffalo without a break for more than a month. Our luck was terrible, and it was time for a change. Carter was preparing breakfast while I was sitting on Nightshade, my black stallion, a short distance away from camp. I was on top of a knoll scanning the horizon and thinking about our next move.

This Nebraska Territory seems to go on forever and there ain’t much sign of life. I find it hard to believe that Carter spent last year all alone hunting buffalo on this same prairie. But then again, that Carter is something else. He was a Pony Express rider before the war, fought for the Confederacy during the war, and hunted buffalo to feed Yankee soldiers after the war. Meanwhile, I was a slave before the war, a Union soldier during the war, and now trying to be a buffalo hunter after the war. We make quite a team.

I was just about to shift a bit farther to the east when Carter called me for breakfast. As I rode back into camp, Carter gave me a plate of beans and bacon. As I sat down to eat, he said, “This part of the territory be hunted out. The buffalo have gone elsewhere or been kilt off. I think we must go farther west and north a bit to find some. Somewhere above Fort Kearney. We can sell the meat and hides at the fort.”

“All we have seen so far is a few prairie chickens and a rabbit or two. If’n we go farther west, we may find buffalo, but we will probably find Cheyenne as well.” I replied.

“We’ll just have to keep our eyes peeled and your Henry handy,” Carter said, pointing at my rifle in its sheath.

We hadn’t seen any Indians since we left Independence. The lack of game meant that their hunting parties would be active in other parts of the territory. Our problem was that we had to go where the game was as well.

We broke camp and set out in a northwesterly direction. I rode beside the wagon for a spell and Carter told me what to expect.

“If’n we get too far north of Kearney we might run into some Sioux. They be mighty fussy about lettin’ any whites into their territory. Especially west of the Black Hills where a Lakota Chief named Red Cloud has been makin’ trouble along the Bozeman Trail. I be hopin’ the Sioux and Cheyenne be so busy there that they ain’t botherin’ much with the area above Kearney.”

“I thought the Cheyenne and Sioux were fightin’ with each other,” I said.

“That was before the army got them all stirred up in Wyoming Territory. Now they be helpin’ each other more than they be fightin’.”

I had gotten into the habit of riding with Carter for the early part of the morning before scouting on ahead and preventing any surprises from coming our way. I had been following this routine ever since we left Independence and saw no reason to change anything.

After a week on our new route, we were about two days north of Fort Kearney, and I was scouting a short distance ahead of the wagon when I spotted a group of circling vultures in the distance. I rode back to Carter and said, “Looks like we got somethin’ goin’ on up ahead. I’ll go check it out.”
“Could be any number of things,” Carter replied. “I’ll follow along with the wagon.”

Without any further comments, I kicked Nightshade in the ribs and headed in the direction of the circling vultures. I figured it was just a dead animal, but it could also be an indication of danger in the area. We were in Indian territory and if they killed someone, they just let him lay where he died, usually in pieces.

When I saw what was attracting their attention, I was surprised. I expected to find buffalo carcasses but instead found four men who appeared to be dead. There wasn’t any activity in the area, so I rode to where they lay.

The four men were Indians. Based upon what Carter had told me, I thought they were probably Sioux. But one of them was different from the others. He had a long, braided rope or sash tied around his waist that led to a brightly painted arrow at its other end. The shaft was pushed into the ground to serve as a stake. He also had a headdress made up of large black feathers. A black and white pinto horse with brown facial markings stood next to him.

When Carter arrived, he told me that the man attached to the stake was a Cheyenne Dog Soldier, and the others were indeed Sioux warriors. I had ridden a circuit of the battle site and determined that there was no sign of anyone else having been in the area. The three Sioux had fought with the Dog Soldier, who had killed them before being killed himself.

As I was dismounting, Carter knelt to examine the Dog Soldier and gave me a surprised look.

“This one is still alive,” he said.

Upon closer examination, he continued, “He’s got two arrows in him. One arrow is in his shoulder, and the other is in his side. He’s also got several tomahawk wounds. One is especially nasty here on the side of his head.”

“Think we can keep him from dyin’?” I said.

“I seen worse what made it and better what died. Why do you want to bother with this Injun?”

“There be more Cheyenne than Sioux around these parts. It wouldn’t hurt none to have one owing us a favor.”

“If we get caught by some Sioux, how you gonna explain helpin’ someone who kilt three of their people?”

I ran my fingers through my beard before answering, “I’ll worry about that when it happens. For now, let’s get them arrows out of him and camp here for the night.”

I started a small fire and sat a pot of water on it. I also placed an iron rod in the flame and helped Carter gather some bandages and put an old buffalo robe under the wounded Cheyenne.

Carter had carefully examined the arrow wounds. He took a deep breath and shook his head as he said, “The arrow in his shoulder hit bone and can be pulled out with a little bit of cuttin’. The one in his side will do a lot of damage if I try to pull it out. The arrowhead might even come off and stay inside. Sometimes these war arrows are designed that way.”

I knew I couldn’t be much help, so I didn’t say much about it. I just waited for him to tell me what to do.

He looked at me and said, “Why don’t you get rid of those three Sioux before they start getting’ ripe while I take care of this fella.”
“I’ll drag them off a ways and bury them. Then I’ll stake the mules there to hide the graves.”

As Carter worked on the shoulder wound, I dragged the first two Sioux downwind of our camp. As I took hold of the legs of the third one, Carter called over to me, “Take their scalps before you bury them. If’n this fella wakes up, he will want them.”

I had never taken a scalp before. I had heard about it but I didn’t know how to do it. “I ain’t never done that before,” I said to Carter. “If’n I try, I’ll just make a mess out of it.”

“I’m kinda busy here myself,” he replied as he removed the first arrow and showed it to me before throwing it aside. Then, with his bloody hands, he grabbed the iron rod from the fire and put the red-hot end of it against the bleeding wound. Cauterizing the injury, filled the air with the sweet, pungent smell of burning flesh. The Cheyenne moved slightly but never even groaned a bit.

I started to drag the third Sioux away when Carter explained how to remove a scalp as he put the iron rod back into the fire. “Wrap his hair around your left hand and use your Bowie to cut through the skin around the top of his skull. Then tug hard and fast with your left hand like you was crackin’ a whip. It should come right off with a poppin’ noise.”

“You sound like you done this before.”

“A few times when I was ridin’ for the Pony Express. I’ll tell you about it sometime.”

As he turned back to work on the Cheyenne some more, he added, “Oh. I almost forgot. You might ha’ve to hold a foot against his shoulder when you snap the scalp off, or the body might do all the movin’.”

Leaving him working on the Cheyenne I laid the third Sioux by the other two. Then I stood there thinking about how to go about doing the scalping. I’d have to do it three times, even though I had never done it before. Afterward, I’d have to bury them and hope they don’t have any friends hereabouts. The scalps we’d would hide in the wagon until the Cheyenne either died or went on his way with them.

I figured I would do the Sioux with the longest hair first. That way I could get a better grip for jerking it away from the skull.

Before starting, I reached up and grabbed my own hair, pulling it in different directions. The skin of my scalp seemed to move across the top of my skull as I pulled it back and forth. It was not tightly attached, and by cutting the skin around the top of my head, I could probably scalp myself.

I stood at the head of the first warrior and grabbed his hair. I was able to wrap it around my hand twice, giving me a good grip on it. It was greasy and slippery, so I needed the extra wrappings. I pulled on the hair, raising the upper part of his body off the ground. I saw that the scalp showed some separation from the top of his skull as I pulled.

Easing up a bit on the tug, I let the body regain contact with the ground. Then I took my Bowie from its scabbard and placed its edge on the hairline at the front of the skull. I knew it was razor sharp and would do its job. I just had to be careful not to cut deeply into the bone of the head.

I made an incision around the top of the warrior’s skull, cutting slightly into the bone. After cutting, I pulled on the hair with my left hand, and nothing happened. I wondered what I
had done wrong. There was no blood where I had cut through the skin, so maybe the lack of fresh blood was causing the problem.

Then I remembered that Carter had told me to jerk the hair off the head like I was cracking a whip. Pushing on one shoulder with my foot, I relaxed the tension on the shock and gave it a sudden, hard jerk. It came loose with a moist, sucking sound and a sudden loud plop just before it hit me in the face.

I sputtered and cursed myself for not being more careful. I should’ve known better. Now I had bits of flesh and coagulating blood on me. But the scalp was off, and I held it up in my left hand. I didn’t take the time to admire my handiwork. I had two more to do. They came off a lot easier now that I sort of knew what I was doing. I can’t say I liked scalping, but over the years I have become quite proficient at it.

I buried the three Sioux in a shallow grave and went back to camp to get the mules. When I got there, Carter was rinsing blood from his hands. The Cheyenne was bandaged and laying quietly on the old buffalo hide. His breathing was shallow, and he was not in very good condition, but at least he was still alive.

“That second arrow was a bit of a problem, but I was able to snap the feathers off and push it all the way through. Then I cauterized both wounds that it made and bandaged him up. Now we wait and see what happens,” Carter said as he looked at the scalps I was carrying.

“Let me look at them there scalps and see how good a job you done on them,” Carter said as he reached out for them.

I handed them over, and as he took them, a big smile broke out on his face. “I see you had a problem. Rinse those pieces of Sioux off your face. There be some hot water left in the pot.”

“I got the hang of it after the first one,” I grumbled back at him.

After rinsing off my face, I said, “I’ll go stake the mules out over the graves, and when we leave, we can drive the wagon over them as well. That way if any of their friends come around, it will be difficult for them to find the graves.”

Later, when I returned to camp, Carter had stretched the scalps by attaching them to willow hoops. He was scarping them clean of any bits of flesh. When he saw me watching, he said, “We have to clean them good and let them dry, so they don’t go bad. If the Cheyenne lives, he will want them in good condition when we give them to him.”

The night passed without any problems. There were no smells to attract scavengers, and the wounded man slept, although somewhat fitfully at times.

As soon as the sun brightened the eastern sky, we got ready to move out. Some bacon and greasy hardtack for breakfast sat heavy in our stomachs, but it was nourishing. At least we had some coffee to wash it down. Our patient was still unconscious but breathing. Since he had lived through the night, his chances of survival were improving.

We put extra buffalo robes in the wagon bed and laid him on top of them. He was in for a bumpy ride, but we would be taking it slow as we continued to search for any sign of buffalo. I planned on riding close to the wagon a bit more than usual to keep an eye on him.

As we pulled out of camp, the pinto followed close behind. I had tried to grab him several times during the night without any success. Even now, he avoided my attempts as he followed along.
Summer wasn’t the best time to be hunting buffalo. The hides were in poor condition, and the meat quickly spoiled in the summer heat. It was hardly worth the effort, especially since the herds seemed to have moved out of east Nebraska Territory.

The lack of buffalo also meant a lack of Indian signs. The Sioux and Cheyenne appeared to be more active toward the western parts of the territory. Game was more plentiful and the army was stirring up trouble with the tribes. The discovery of a fight between a lone Cheyenne Dog Soldier and three Sioux warriors was a vexing problem.

I had been thinking about the Cheyenne as I scouted ahead of the wagon. It was about five miles behind me when I saw a dust cloud farther ahead. I decided to check it out before Carter caught up to me. Going as fast as I could without kicking up a lot of dust, I reached a small hill with a few trees scattered about its top. Leaving Nightshade on the slope, I worked my way to the top where I knelt next to one of the trees.

I saw a small herd of buffalo. They were nervous and appeared ready to stampede. When I tried to determine what had them all excited, I saw a group of Indians approaching on horseback. They were downwind from the animals and moving very slowly. There were about ten of them, and they were spreading apart as they approached.

When a large bull on the edge of the herd gave out a loud bellow, the herd froze, and they all looked toward the beast. That was a signal for the Indians to charge the pack. They suddenly kicked their ponies into action, and they swooped into them. The buffaloes had started moving at about the same time and raced away from the approaching Indians.

The Indians were among them before the stampede became a reality, and the killing started. Each of the hunters had a bow and a quiver of arrows. They rode their ponies with an almost reckless abandon while using both hands to fire arrows at the massive beasts.

The ponies appeared to be guided by the legs of the riders and were agile enough to move through the herd without being stomped or gored. Each buffalo weighed many times more than any pony and could easily have killed or injured a pony and its rider. But these ponies and riders knew their business.

I watched as a pony would run beside a buffalo, almost touching it, while nimbly avoiding any attempts by the buffalo to attack it. The rider would shoot an arrow into the back of the buffalo between the hump and the head to sever its spinal cord and knock it down.

The dust soon obscured my view of the hunt but not of the carnage itself as the fleeing herd left a broad trail of dead and injured buffaloes along its route.

Before the hunters returned, women had walked up to the site and started skinning the dead buffalos. When the hunters returned, they killed any injured buffaloes before helping the women process the dead ones.

I figured the herd would not be available to us and that since the hunters hadn’t spotted me, I’d head back to the wagon. The Indians appeared to be Cheyenne, but I couldn’t be sure. Cheyenne or Sioux, I didn’t want them finding us near their buffalo.

I rode slowly back to the wagon. When I saw Carter, I signaled to him to stop. As I came up to the wagon, Carter said, “I seen lots of dust up ahead. Did you stampede a buffalo herd?”

“No, it wasn’t me. A hunting party of what looked to be Cheyenne did it. They killed about twenty buffalo out of a herd of about a hundred or so. The rest of the herd is headed north and will probably run until close to dark before settling down.”
“Maybe we’ll circle and see if we can cut their trail. Then we can follow the buffalo for a while. We ain’t seen no other sign, and eventually, we can catch them,” Carter said.

Since the herd had run off to the north, we also turned north, figuring on turning west after about a day’s travel. That should let us avoid the hunting party, and we will eventually cut across the herd’s trail.

I checked on our patient to make sure he was still alive. He appeared to be sleeping, and his breathing was calm and steady, but he hadn’t had any water for some time. Propping him up on a folded robe, I managed to drip a small amount onto his cracked lips. There was no response. I figured I would try again later.

When we camped, it was about an hour before dark. We considered leaving the Cheyenne in the wagon until he either woke or died. Deciding that it would be warmer by the fire, we lifted him out and laid him close by. After dark, I was dishing out some rabbit stew when I saw him looking at me. He hadn’t moved, except for a slight turning of his head, but I saw the firelight reflected off his eyes.

I motioned toward him with my pan of stew and made like I was putting food into my mouth with my hand. He just stared for a moment and then slightly nodded his head.

Taking that as a yes, I circled around the fire and carefully raised him up by stacking some robes behind him. He was too weak to do anything, or I would not have come so close without holding a knife to his throat.

He refused to let me feed him, but I did have to hold the pan while he used his good arm and hand to eat. He slowly pushed smaller chunks of rabbit into his mouth. Then he sat back and appeared to be fully awake.

As he looked around, I could see him becoming more and more agitated. He was upset but too weak to do anything about it.

I went to the back of the wagon and got his belongings. We had stored them in the wagon. I put everything beside him. I had sat his fancy headdress and long sash with the decorative arrow still attached to its end on a blanket. The three Sioux scalps were next to his tomahawk, scalping knife, quiver, and broken bow on the edge of the blanket.

He calmed considerably and said in perfect English, “Why you help Laughing Wolf?”

In reply, I said, “I ain’t certain why. I just knew it was the right thing to do. We ain’t got no quarrel with the Cheyenne, and we felt that you deserved a chance to live after what you done to those three Sioux. As soon as you be fit, you can take your things and be on your way.”

Laughing Wolf started to say something when the pinto came out of the dark and nuzzled his side. That was the convincer. He leaned back and appeared to be at ease. He closed his eyes and was soon asleep.

After an uneventful night, we shared breakfast with Laughing Wolf and got ready to break camp. When I started to put his things back into the wagon, he stood on wobbly legs and said, “You hunt buffalo. Cheyenne kill buffalo hunters who take skin and leave the meat to rot. If you not leave animal and take it with its skin, Cheyenne no bother you.”

Carter replied, “We be buffalo hunters alright. We are not hide hunters who do that sort of thing. We respect the ways of the Cheyenne and want no anger between us.”

Laughing Wolf leaned hard against the wagon. He was still very weak but also stubborn. “You go now. I stay here.”
I stopped putting his things into the wagon and looked at Carter, who just shrugged.

“You should stay with us another day or two before you try and go off on your own. Them two arrow wounds are healing, but they could still open up again.”

Laughing Wolf just stood away from the wagon and repeated, “You go now. I stay here.”

I had my doubts about just leaving him here on his own. He had his pony and his possessions, but he was also weak from his recent wounds. Then I realized that he was standing straight and tall, hiding any weakness from his injuries. I also noticed that he was my height and considerably leaner than my own body. He would probably be fine if we left him here.

“Alright,” I said, placing things back on the ground. As I stood back up, I saw five Cheyenne approaching. They had headdresses like the one belonging to Laughing Wolf.

They did not appear to be very friendly as they came toward us. I rested my hand on my revolver while they carried bows and war lances in their hands. Carter had moved somewhere behind me and was probably within reach of his rifle. When they were close enough for me to count the feathers in their bonnets, they stopped and just stared.

Laughing Wolf stepped between us and said something in Cheyenne. They smiled and put their bows and lances aside as they dismounted from their ponies. Then they talked among themselves for several minutes while Carter and I moved a short distance away, waiting to see what would happen next.

After he showed the three Sioux scalps to the others, Laughing Wolf turned to us and said, “You bring wagon and come with us. We eat good tonight.”

Laughing Wolf was somehow able to mount his pony after donning his sash and headdress. We then had an escort of six Cheyenne Dog Soldiers as we headed west.

We traveled slowly since Laughing Wolf was careful not to reopen his wounds. After a few hours, we reached the temporary encampment of a Cheyenne hunting party. They were the same ones I had seen hunting buffalo yesterday. One of their scouts had spotted me during the hunt and had followed me back to the wagon. He had seen Laughing Wolf’s pony near the wagon and went back to get others to see what we were doing.

I thought I had been careful not to be seen. Once again, I knew I had a lot to learn about surviving on the prairie.

Everyone was happy to see Laughing Wolf. He was a sub-chief, an important member of the tribe. They were not so glad to see us. The Cheyenne and Sioux disliked buffalo hunters and killed hide hunters on sight. Often in painful ways. Once they heard what we had done, their attitudes moderated a bit, and the Cheyenne accepted us as guests of the tribe.

That night we feasted on buffalo meat. They had killed and butchered many buffalo, and since we were guests, they gave us choice cuts of buffalo tongue and hump meat. Everyone enjoyed stuffing themselves with fresh meat while most of it was being smoked and dried on racks for preservation. It would take several days to process all the meat so the camp would be here for a while.

The Dog Soldiers had the job of patrolling the countryside for any threats to the party. The Cheyenne had recently been cooperating with the Sioux against the army farther to the west. Here there was still some friction between the two nations over hunting rights. There were large buffalo herds in the Dakota Territory, but for some reason, the Sioux were asserting their right to hunt in the Nebraska Territory as well.
That night we heard Laughing Wolf’s story for the first time. He told it after the feast as the men sat around a large fire smoking tobacco from a long pipe.

Laughing Wolf had been caught by himself as he scouted an area several hours east of the hunting party. There were three Sioux who had been either stealing horses or scouting for a bigger party. When they saw they had discovered a Cheyenne Dog Soldier, they immediately challenged him. They would bring great honor to themselves if they killed and scalped such a warrior.

Laughing Wolf dismounted and unwound his sash, pinning it to the ground with a ceremonial arrow. He was tethered to the arrow and would not unpin the sash until he was victorious in the fight. The only options were either complete victory or death. It was the way of the Dog Soldier. His bow was attached to his quiver of arrows, and he held a tomahawk and knife in each hand.

The three Sioux came at him one at a time. The first rushed at him on foot while brandishing a large war club. He intended to brain him with it and quickly end the fight. Before he came within reach, Laughing Wolf threw his knife and buried it in the warrior’s chest. As he fell, his momentum carried him to Laughing Wolf’s feet.

The second warrior rushed him while astride his pony. He threw a lance while moving forward, giving it a lot of speed and force. Laughing Wolf had to move very fast to dodge it. He appeared to lose his balance and almost fell. The Sioux, sensing an opportunity at victory, jumped from his horse and came at Laughing Wolf with his knife. As he raised his blade for a killing blow, Laughing Wolf suddenly shifted his weight and kicked his legs out from under him. As he fell, Laughing Wolf was able to bury his tomahawk in the warrior’s back, severing his spinal cord.

Before he could turn back to defend himself against the third Sioux, an arrow hit him in his shoulder. The third warrior had approached directly behind the second attacker and fired while Laughing Wolf was distracted. As he turned to face his attacker, a second arrow hit him in the left side, causing him to fall to his knees.

Sensing a victory, the third Sioux rode past Laughing Wolf, counting coup by touching him with his bow. Then, turning his pony back toward Laughing Wolf, he dismounted and ran at him with his tomahawk raised for a crushing blow to the skull.

Laughing Wolf had pulled his knife from his first victim and knelt in position with his head hung low, as if waiting for the killing blow. As the Sioux swung his tomahawk down at his skull, Laughing Wolf shifted slightly and suffered a glancing blow. As he lost consciousness, the Sioux had overbalanced himself and fell forward right onto Laughing Wolf’s knife.

The next thing he remembered was waking in the night and seeing a man with black skin and hair like that of a buffalo.

We spent two days with the Cheyenne at their hunting camp. They were fascinated with my dark skin and curly hair. Just like with the Crow we met a few months ago, I was looked on as a man with strong medicine. When Carter mentioned I was given the name of Night Buffalo by two Crow warriors, they just nodded and talked among themselves.

On our third and last night at the camp, Laughing Wolf held a special ceremony. He had decided we should be blood brothers. He used a sharp knife to cut a slit into the palm of his left hand. I did the same to mine and tried not to flinch at the pain. We clasped our hands together, so
the wounds overlapped. We stood that way for what seemed like an eternity, but it was less than a minute.

Carter had warned me that a refusal would be a great insult to Laughing Wolf and the whole tribe. At the same time, an acceptance would acknowledge the bestowing of a great honor upon me.

After the ceremony, one of the women placed a poultice of some sort on the wound and wrapped it in a cloth. The pain slowly ebbed away, and Carter assured me that it would heal quickly but that a scar would remain. I just nodded my head and felt relief that it was over.

The following morning, we prepared to move out to the north while some of the Cheyenne had already broken camp and were moving to the west. Laughing Wolf’s companions had already disappeared in a variety of directions as they scouted ahead of the party and around the rest of the camp. Meanwhile, Laughing Wolf came over to us and placed a hand on my shoulder. He said, “Night Buffalo, my brother, always welcome in the land of the Cheyenne.”

Handing me a beaded belt, he went on to say, “This belt tell all who see it that you are my brother and a friend. Go in peace and never kill buffalo just for their skin.”

“I am honored to be the brother of Laughing Wolf, a great and wise warrior. I shall always respect the ways of the Cheyenne,” I replied.

Laughing Wolf mounted his pony and trotted out of the camp area to the top of a hill less than a mile away. I figured he had to be careful since his wounds needed some more time to heal completely.

Carter had finished hitching the mules to the wagon and said, “Once again your instincts served us well. Saving an injured Cheyenne warrior gave us a free pass through Cheyenne Territory and a friend who is a powerful man in the tribe.”

“I guess that not all good deeds are punished,” I replied.

“Keeping that in mind, let’s find that herd we were trailing a few days ago. It be somewhere to the north, in Sioux country,” Carter said as he cracked his whip above the right ear of the lead mule.

“I wonder if our belt will do us much good if we run into some Sioux?” I said.

“Probably not,” Carter said as the wagon rolled out of our camp.

I did not know whether I would ever see Laughing Wolf again. I did know we would be spending time in Cheyenne Territory in the future and it was a possibility. Either way, I would think of him every time I looked at the scar on my left hand.