Buffalo Hunters: The Wagon Box Fight (August 2, 1867)
Bob Fincham

John Carter, formerly a soldier serving in a Texas regiment during the recent War Between the States and James Washington, a former Master Sergeant in the 13th Colored Regiment during the same war, were both up before sunrise. They had been awake very late the night before, celebrating the sale of their wagons to the United States Army, and now had to deal with extreme hangovers.

“I ain’t never had such a headache. I don’t even remember much about how I got it,” Carter said to Washington.

“I’m not surprised. You drank everything in sight. I even made the bartender hide the kerosene for the lamps.”

“Too bad Jim wasn’t celebrating with us.”

“He was in a big hurry to move on to the Montana Territory with Samantha.”

“Samantha Ballard and Baptist Jim make an interesting pair. In a way, they are both manhunters.”

Washington stirred their campfire into activity and said, “Jim does it for the bounty. He wants to build that new church.”

“Samantha hunts for revenge,” Carter interjected.

“They both remove troublemakers from circulation.”

“I hope they find what they are looking for in Montana.”

“There’s no more gold left in the territory, but there is a man. Once they take care of him, Oregon will be their next stop.”

“Is there a bounty on him?” Carter asked.

“It’s personal. They both will have to work with the money Jim has saved plus what they got for their wagons from the army.”

“They spent some of that money on army horses and a mule load of supplies.”

“I’m sure they’ll make out alright. Especially since those things were part of the deal for their wagons,” Washington said, as he took a slab of bacon out of a saddlebag. “Let’s have some breakfast before we deliver our wagons to the woodcutters’ camp.”

“First we’ll pick out the two saddlehorses the army owes us and collect banknotes for the cash they owe us. I can’t believe the amount they gave us for those wagons.”

“They must need them for hauling logs to the fort.”

“We’ll be able to buy a new wagon with a strong mule team as soon as we get back to Independence. We’ll also get first-class equipment for the winter buffalo hunt. Even then, we’ll only spend part of what the army paid us.”

As the bacon started sizzling in a cast iron fry pan, the conversation came to an end. Washington fried some beans in the bacon grease, and Carter threw a handful of crushed coffee beans into some boiling water. Twenty minutes later, they were on their way into the fort to collect payment and pick up the army wagons.

A half-hour later, the sun was peeking over the top of the fort wall as Carter and Washington joined with an infantry detachment and headed out of Fort Phil Kearny on their way
to a woodcutters’ camp six miles from the fort. They planned to spend a little time with the woodcutters before journeying south to Fort Laramie.

Since the camp was at the tree line, they would do some deer hunting before leaving. The Sioux had been quiet for several months, and any Indian activity around the camp should be minimal. They each had a healthy army horse and figured to test them on the hunt.

Washington had picked a chestnut, and Carter had selected a buckskin. Both were mares and in excellent condition. It was surprising to find such suitable mounts at an infantry post. There was a small cavalry detachment that had suffered some casualties. Replacements had not arrived, and there were extra horses in the herd.

They reached the main camp before noon. It was about a mile from the woodcutters’ camp. There were twenty-eight soldiers stationed here and another thirteen who escorted wagons to and from the fort. The men were forming a chow line as they arrived.

“That food smells mighty good,” Carter shouted as he steered his wagon past the cook tent.

“You and your friend are welcome to join us,” the cook replied, wiping his hands on a greasy apron.

“Don’t mind if we do,” Washington said, following Carter’s wagon past the cook tent. The commanding officer, Captain Powell, was standing at a gap in a circle of wagon boxes and motioning to them. The escort led them into the opening and stood at attention.

“You two teamsters can go have some chow while the men remove the boxes from your wagons.”

Carter and Washington didn’t need a second invitation. They headed to the cook tent while the captain put the soldiers to work, removing the wagon boxes.

A half-hour later, the escort joined them, and everyone sat in small groups around the cook tent, eating their bacon and hardtack cooked in grease.

Washington was sitting near three young soldiers who were wolfing down their food. He was savoring his second helping as he watched the three men. When they finished, Washington took out a plug of tobacco and offered some to them. Each man took a piece, thanked him, and started chewing.

“Interesting camp you fellas got here,” Washington said. “I never heard of using wagon boxes to make a small fort.”

Private Riley was working on getting chew to the right consistency but was still able to comment, “They are a corral for the animals and a place to keep supplies. They make it hard for any Indians to steal from us.”

One of the other men, Private Bevans, said, “They ain’t much of a fort. A man has to lay on his belly for protection, and even then, a bullet could go right through the wooden wall.”

“Well then, let’s hope it is always a corral or that the Sioux don’t have any rifles, just bows and arrows,” Washington said.

Carter had joined the group while they were talking. As he sat down, he said, “Why not keep the boxes on the wagons? Don’t the woodcutters need them?”

“They use the wagons to carry logs back to the fort. The boxes get in the way,” Riley answered.
“The tobacco juice tastes pretty good after nothin’ but bacon and hardtack for the past month,” Bevans said.

Washington started to say something, but Carter responded first, “Sounds like you fellas could use some fresh meat. Don’t anyone around here hunt at all?”

“Whenever a small group of men goes off into the woods, they don’t always come back,” Riley said. Then he went on to say, “Large groups are safer but scare off any game.”

Nodding his head, Bevans added, “Ever since the Fetterman massacre, the Sioux been causin’ lots of trouble. They steal livestock and attack lone wagons and small patrols. A lot of people been killed and scalped around here.”

Riley spat out some tobacco juice and said, “The Sioux must be planning’ somethin’ big. They been quiet around here for some time now. They ain’t attacked the wagons or any patrols, but still, them Sioux be watchin’ us. The woodcutters must stay especially alert. Sometimes an arrow comes flyin’ out of the trees near where they be workin’.”

“We’ll be taking our wagon frames to the woodcutters’ camp in a little while. If things aren’t too bad, a little exploration might be in order,” Washington said.

Private Bevans said, “Some fresh venison would surely be appreciated. If you fellas do go explorin’, be careful.”

“We’ll be careful,” Carter said as he and Washington stood and walked away to find their wagons.

“At least they left a seat on the wagon. Sitting on the rail would be mighty uncomfortable,” Washington said as he stared at his stripped-down wagon.

The woodcutters’ camp was an additional mile from the fort near the edge of the forest. They would be there in a brief time. An escort of fourteen soldiers accompanied them on the road. Those men would then escort loaded wagons to the fort, returning a day later.

The woodcutters’ camp was a busy place. Men were cutting trees while others were removing the limbs and turning them into logs. Then another group of men loaded those logs onto stripped-down wagons. A third group of men maintained a separate camp. They guarded and cared for a nearby mule herd.

After turning their wagons over to the woodcutters, Washington and Carter stood next to their saddle horses while waiting for a sergeant to sign a receipt.

When he gave Carter the receipt, he said, “I hear you are planning on scouting around and maybe doing some hunting.”

Carter folded the receipt and put it into his shirt pocket. Then he said, “It looks like good deer country around here, and we could all use some fresh meat.”

“Be alert. The Sioux have been quiet for a while, but I have been seeing some Indian signs around the camp for the past week or so. Usually, when they come so close, someone gets killed and scalped. Since that ain’t been happenin’ lately. I think they are up to somethin’.”

“We figure on scouting around ‘til dark and make sure we don’t have any unwanted company before we do any hunting,” Washington said.

“Good luck, and we’ll be watchin’ for you sometime tomorrow morning,” the sergeant said as Washington and Carter mounted and rode into the forest.

As they entered the pine forest, a pair of unfriendly eyes watched their progress. A lone Sioux scout had been observing the camp. He was curious about the two men, one of whom had
very dark skin. He decided to follow them and take their scalps to show Red Cloud when he reported the day’s activities to the chief. These whites were so easy to ambush and kill once they entered the forest.

Washington and Carter knew about the lone Indian. They had glimpsed at least one scout watching the camp when they first arrived. They would either catch him or chase him away before dark. Then they could do some hunting without any interference first thing in the morning.

After riding a short distance into the forest, Carter said to Washington, “We got someone following us. Let’s split up and see who he follows. The one left alone can circle behind and trap him between us.”

Carter then moved off at an angle to the game trail they were following. He rode for a short while before dismounting and securing his horse off the faint trail he was following. Then he doubled back a short distance and determined the scout followed Washington.

Jogging back to where he had left the game trail, he scanned the path for any signs of travelers. Upon examining the tracks present, he found a few moccasin imprints on top of Washington’s hoofprints.

He cautiously moved along the trail until he saw a young Sioux brave standing behind a tree. The Indian focused on Washington, who appeared to be checking one of his horse’s hooves.

Carter silently moved toward the young warrior with his tomahawk at the ready. He was about ten feet away when the brave suddenly turned and quickly shot an arrow at him. It would have hit him in the chest if he hadn’t instinctively twisted his body.

As the Sioux drew his knife from its sheath, Carter hit him on the head with the flat of his tomahawk. The impact knocked him sidewise and spun him around so that he landed on his face. As Washington ran to join them, Carter rolled the Sioux over onto his back. He was dead with his knife sticking out of his chest. He had fallen onto it.

As they stood together looking at the dead man, Carter said, “That was a stroke of bad luck. I’d like to know what the Sioux are up to around here.”

“Maybe we’ll find out tomorrow when we work farther into the mountains looking for deer sign.”

“Possibly. Get your horse, and we’ll move higher up into the mountains away from the woodcutters’ camp. All the activity around here has chased the game away,” Washington said.

Ten minutes later, Carter joined Washington on the trail. The Sioux’s body lay in a shallow grave, and Washington was holding his pony’s leader along with his bow and quiver of arrows.

“No sense in leaving him out where his friends can easily find him,” Washington said, mounting his horse.

They had a cold camp five miles further into the forest. Neither of them slept very well. Everything was unnaturally quiet, and they had seen no deer sign anywhere. Even rabbits and squirrels had disappeared from this part of the forest. It was as if a deadly force was moving across the land, and the animals had fled. Even the crickets were quiet.

Carter was up and about a short time before sunrise. The utter quiet had bothered him all night. Now, something was vibrating the ground. He would not have noticed the slight rumble except for the oppressive silence.
Was on guard duty near the horses and stood when he also sensed the vibration. Carter walked over to him and said, “A lot of unshod horses are approaching.”

He pressed his ear against the ground and said, “We best get moving and stay ahead of them. They are moving fast, and there are a lot of them. They don’t seem worried about making a lot of noise.”

“Must be a big war party heading for the camp,” Washington said.

The two men quickly saddled their horses and started back toward the woodcutters’ camp. They moved fast and tried not to make too much noise while following a broad game trail. The Sioux were not very far behind them, but they were making a lot of commotion and would not hear the two men.

Reaching the edge of the forest took a bit over a half-hour. As they came out into the open, Washington and Carter were about a half-mile from the camp and a mile from the wagon box corral.

Turing toward camp, they saw a swarm of Indians on foot running from the trees toward the mule herd. The teamsters and soldiers guarding the animals opened fire, and the warriors dropped to the ground.

At the same time, a more significant force of Sioux and Cheyenne attacked the main camp. Washington and Carter were too late to warn them. Cut off from being able to help the woodcutters, the two men headed toward the corral. As they did, another group of Indians joined the ones attacking the camp, setting everything on fire. As the tents burned, they all joined the attack on the mule herd.

The civilians and soldiers had scattered and either ran toward the forest or moved toward the fort, while the attackers focused on destroying the camp and driving off the animals.

A small group of defenders was cut off and overrun by the Sioux and Cheyenne. Three soldiers and four civilians were killed and scalped.

Carter and Washington rode into the corral just in time to join a force of twenty-six men as they charged out of the corral to help the others. Up to 500 Indians were attacking the survivors of the camp as they tried to get to Fort Phil Kearny.

Taken by surprise, the mixed force of Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho turned to confront their attackers. In the resulting confusion, the retreating men from the camp managed to scatter into the timber or move freely toward the fort.

Captain Powell saw that his diversion had worked. He hurried his men back into the wagon box corral and now used it as a fort. The Indians were confused for only a short time before they began their onslaught. There were 800 or more angry Indians against two officers, twenty-eight enlisted men, and two civilians inside the fort. During the attack from the corral, two soldiers from the camp had managed to join them.

The men had prepared the wagon boxes for trouble — crates, barrels, and sacks of grain-filled the spaces between them. The walls of the boxes had two inch-square holes cut in the sides to serve as firing ports. A soldier could lay in one and fire without exposing himself. A blanket stretched over the top would catch any arrows, and as long as the attackers did not have rifles, the boxes would be handy as the walls of a fort.

Each man filled his hat with several hundred rounds of ammunition and took up a position either in a wagon box or behind the barriers between them. The soldiers had breech-
loading Springfield rifles. Carter and Washington had Henry repeating rifles with about a hundred rounds for each.

The box wagon corral was a scene of organized confusion for less than ten minutes before everyone was in position. Washington and Carter had separated and added their firepower to opposite ends of the corral.

The men had a total of about fifteen minutes to prepare for the first wave of attackers. When they finally charged the corral, they came en masse on horseback, expecting to overrun the position while the soldiers reloaded their muskets. Their tactics had worked for them many times in the past. They would ride in a circle until the defenders fired. Then they would rush in to overwhelm them with arrows and clubs as they worked at reloading their muskets.

They tried that same technique here and were surprised when the soldiers fired at them several times before they could even come near the wagon boxes. Either they had miscounted the number of soldiers, or they had new guns that fired faster than muskets.

Leaving dead warriors scattered about on the field, the mixed force of Indians withdrew out of range and used different tactics to continue their attack on the corral.

Small groups of warriors either ran on foot or crawled close to the corral and fired arrows at the men. Their few rifles were muzzleloaders they had taken from Fetterman’s massacred command a year earlier, and the ammunition for them was scarce. The soldiers were able to keep them from getting close with their superior firepower and an abundance of ammunition.

Carter and Washington were very active. Whenever a group of Indians came close to the corral, one of them moved to help the soldiers in that area with his repeating rifle. The Indians were taking losses and accomplishing little. Their arrows were ineffective against the walls of the wagon boxes, and any they arced into the boxes got stuck in the blankets stretched across the tops.

At one point, a group of Indians got beside one of the boxes, and a warrior shoved a lance into the firing port, barely missing the soldier inside. He called for help. Lieutenant Jenness and Carter were nearby. They jumped out from between two of the boxes and fired into the group of Indians with their pistols, killing or wounding several of them. The rest beat a hasty retreat.

Jenness started to say something to Carter when an arrow struck him in the temple, killing him before he could say a word.

Carter dragged him back inside as a new wave of attackers approached the corral. The soldiers’ gunfire drove them back once again.

After several hours of fighting in this manner, a quiet suddenly descended over the battlefield. It was hot, and many of the soldiers were suffering from the heat and the stress of the fighting. They had been barely surviving as they fought against vastly superior numbers. Their ammunition was starting to run low, and the men were exhausted.

They took this opportunity to look around their little fort and were surprised to see that they had suffered few casualties, especially since arrows extensively decorated everything inside the corral. Each wagon box looked like a giant porcupine, and the ground inside was carpeted with them. It seemed as if a miracle had occurred, and the men were hopeful that the silence meant the Indians had given up and left.
Then a sound of thunder accompanied by a lot of yelling came from the north as a v-shaped mass of warriors came riding full speed from behind a long ridge. They were making a determined charge, and if they reached the corral, the battle was lost.

They came close, but the defenders shot several of the lead warriors off their ponies, and the rest turned aside to circle the wagons before riding back out of range. The rifle fire was too deadly for the tactics of the combined Indian force. Their numbers alone could not overwhelm the defenders. They were spending lives for little gain.

The warriors dismounted and resumed attacking. They continued these attacks throughout much of the afternoon. The soldiers had to start conserving ammunition, and the summer heat was more and more oppressive.

Washington and Carter had used up their ammunition and had to borrow Springfield rifles, significantly reducing their firepower. They had some extra ammo for their pistols but only used them when the Indians came close to the corral.

It was late in the day, and the attackers had drawn back out of sight, giving everyone a brief respite. Several of the soldiers were moving around distributing water to the men in the wagon boxes. Carter worked his way over to Washington and said, “I thought it was all over when they charged us just after noon time.”

“We were lucky we killed some of their leaders. That made the others turn aside. Otherwise, they would have run right over us,” Washington said as a fired a quick shot at a Sioux who had exposed himself just outside the corral.

“I think you might’ve winged that one,” Carter said, pointing to an Indian running away with an arm hanging limply by his side.

“I’m running low on cartridges for this here Spencer and the main supply boxes are empty. The Sioux and their friends are still all around us, thicker than fleas on an old dog,” Washington said.

Carter didn’t appear to be listening. He was staring at a ridge to the north. There had been a large group of Indians on it for much of the battle. Now the hill was crowded with Indians on horseback, and more were appearing from behind the ridge. He responded to Washington’s comment by saying, “And a lot more appear to be getting ready to rush us once again.”

Before Washington could comment, he heard the report of a howitzer and saw an explosion at the base of the ridge. It was as if a giant anthill had been disturbed. Indians scattered in all directions. A second explosion speeded up their movement, and within a few minutes, the area around the corral was empty of attackers.

The men inside the corral were jumping up and down while yelling at the top of their lungs.

A rescue column with a single howitzer had finally arrived from the fort. Major Benjamin Smith led a hundred men prepared for an intense fight with the attacking Indians. The use of the fort’s howitzer upon their arrival chased the Indians away and made any new fighting unnecessary.

When the Major and some of his men entered the corral, they expected to find few survivors. They were pleasantly surprised to discover that only three men were dead and two wounded.
The bulk of the relief column spread out around the corral expecting to gather the bodies left behind by the attackers. Blood and damaged weapons lay everywhere around the corral, but the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho had carried away their dead. The men estimated that close to a hundred of the attackers must have been killed or severely wounded.

Carter and Washington returned their Spencer rifles to Captain Powell as he was talking to Major Smith.

“Are you two returning to the fort?” Powell asked.

“We have to get some cartridges for our Henry rifles before heading back to Fort Laramie. We used what we had helping you fellas,” Washington said.

“We appreciate your assistance,” Major Smith said while handing Washington a slip of paper.

“Take this paper with you back to the fort. The army will supply you with cartridges for your Henry rifles. If they do not have enough, you’ll be able to make up the difference at Fort Laramie.”

Taking the paper, Washington said, “Thank you, Major.”

As Washington tucked it into his shirt pocket, the major said, “Is there any chance you two might consider staying on here for a few months? We could use a couple of good scouts until things settle down a bit.”

“After what just happened here, the Sioux won’t be much trouble for a while. They were driven off and must have lost close to a hundred warriors,” Washington said.

“It was a substantial victory for us. I doubt Red Cloud will be back for a long time,” the major said.

Carter had been quietly standing by. He decided to correct the major. “This battle was more of a draw than a victory for either side. When the howitzer fired, Red Cloud retreated, but he was preparing to charge the corral when it opened fire. He still has a large force and can cause a lot of trouble at any time.”

“Does that mean you two will hire on as civilian scouts until we put an end to this war?”

“I think not,” Carter said. “You all got too much at risk and are too spread out along the Bozeman Trail to defend it all without a lot more men. Besides, the Trail is only used by the army since immigrants stopped traveling it when the Montana gold fields played out.”

“For now, we have to keep the forts defended by fighting Red Cloud until Washington says otherwise.”

“Washington and I wish you luck. We’re gonna work our way back to Independence and purchase what we need to get back to huntin’ buffalo before winter comes. Haulin’ freight was just a summer job, and we ain’t got the time to do any scoutin’ for the army.”

The major shook their hands and said, “I wish you luck and good hunting this winter.”

Captain Powell also shook their hands and thanked them for the valuable assistance.

Carter and Washington spent another half hour saying goodbye to several of the enlisted men before mounting and riding out of the corral.

Figuring the Sioux and their allies would be busy burying their dead and tending their wounded for the next few days, they wanted to get on the road to Fort Laramie. Once they got some supplies and ammunition, they’d be heading south. Not only could they cover some
distance before dark, but they could also avoid any chance that Major Smith might decide to
draft them into the army as temporary scouts.

Ten days after the Wagon Box Fight, Carter and Washington rode into Fort Laramie. They were pleased to leave the Bozeman Trail problems to the army, and get back to hunting buffalo. Freight hauling was a lot more dangerous and not as profitable.

If everything went okay, they’d have their winter shelter completed and be on the prairie with a new wagon before the first snow of the season.