Jedediah Strong: The Payroll (April 1874)

I sat comfortably upon my horse while staring at smoke rising in the distance. I was a civilian scout for the 7th Cavalry under Custer. I thought my army days ended after the war. When my wife and children died of cholera, I came west and eventually ended up here.

I often wondered what the hell I was doing here in the middle of nowhere scouting for the 7th Cavalry and not looking for gold in California. I knew Custer was a glory hound and I don’t like a man looking for such a thing. Too many people get hurt and killed when they take wild chances to be a hero.

If that wasn’t bad enough, I haven’t been paid for over six months. When the army finally got around to sending a paymaster out here, he disappeared somewhere out here in Indian Territory. Other than scattered hunters and prospectors, there were no white people in the territory. So, when I saw the smoke, I figured I had found the paymaster’s wagon. Goddamn Sioux must not have liked him traveling through their territory. I wondered why he had strayed so far from the main route.

James Washington and Bloody Knife and I were scouting for a patrol out of Fort Lincoln. A paymaster’s wagon had stopped at Fort Laramie with an escort of six troopers. The paymaster had been visiting forts in the northwestern territories with overdue pay for the men stationed in them. His route had recently taken him north of the Black Hills through Sioux Territory. An Arikara scout had passed them just three days out from Fort Lincoln. When they did not arrive on time at the fort, Colonel Custer sent us out to find them.

Washington, called Night Buffalo by the Crow due to his dark skin and curly hair, is a friend of mine. He was a sergeant in a Negro regiment during the past war who was adopted by the Crow several years after mustering out. He married into the tribe and had two children. They were all killed by a Sioux war party. He joined the army as a scout and got his revenge on the leader of the war party. Then he decided to stay on as a scout for Custer.

Bloody Knife was the son of a Sioux warrior and an Arikara woman. Custer’s favorite Indian scout, he became a friend to Night Buffalo, and the three of us have had a few adventures together. He especially hates a Sioux chief named Gall who killed his brothers. He never says much and loves his firewater, sometimes getting himself into trouble because of it.

As the two of them came up to my position, I pointed to the horizon and said, “I think we know where the wagon be.”

Bloody Knife stared at the smoke plume and said, “Long way from trail between forts.”


“Let’s check it out,” I said. “Washington, you circle to the west and Bloody Knife, you circle to the east. I’ll ride back to the patrol and lead them in a direct route from the south. If’n you see anything, tell us. Otherwise, we’ll join you there.”

I rode a few miles to the south where I found the patrol at rest. Lieutenant Scott and twelve troopers were waiting for my report. I told him about the smoke and suggested we slowly approach the scene. If there were any hostiles about, Washington or Bloody Knife would warn us before we got too close.

The men mounted their horses, and we proceeded at a slow pace so as not to stir up a lot of dust. If Indians were involved, they might not be aware of the patrol. We would be careful as we headed north to keep it that way.

Watching for any sign of an ambush, I rode slightly ahead of the men. There were few hiding places in this area north of the Black Hills, but the rolling terrain with low hills and scattered gullies did often restrict the view to less than rifle-shot distance.

When we arrived at the source of the smoke, Night Buffalo and Bloody Knife were waiting for us. It was the paymaster’s wagon. The flames had mostly died out, and its remains were just a smoldering
mass of charred wood and iron from the wheels and axles. Bodies lay scattered around the scene, and the mules and horses were gone.

Lieutenant Scott assigned four men to guard duty and met with the three of us. The first thing he said was, “Damned Sioux. They say they are peaceful and then they do this.”

I responded, “Take a closer look, Lieutenant. It weren’t no Sioux that done this.”

“What do you mean. The Sioux scalped the men and stole the horses and mules. The arrows left behind are from the Hunkpapa Sioux.”

Washington had several arrows that he had collected from the site. He showed them to the Lieutenant and said, “These arrows have Sioux markings of red and blue bands, but they are all identical in length. That would mean that the attackers all had the same arm lengths, highly unlikely. Also, any of the men with arrows in them did not bleed from the arrow wound. They all died from bullet wounds.”

Then Bloody Knife spoke up and said, “Bad scalping and scalps buried just over hill. Not Sioux.”

“And also, Indians don’t take white man’s gold or paper money. It is worthless to them.” I said as I kicked the burnt strongbox with a missing lock from behind the wagon’s remains.

“How many were involved in the attack?” the Lieutenant asked.

“Bloody Knife followed their trail for a short distance and determined that between eight and ten outlaws ambushed the wagon before the men had a chance to defend themselves. Judging from the size of the bullet holes in several of the escort, some of them must have been marksmen who killed with buffalo guns from a distance. The men never had a chance. Then they tried to blame the attack on the Sioux.”

“How far ahead are they?”

“Judging from the state of the fire, they left here a couple of hours ago. They headed north, probably planning on swingin’ round and headin’ south, maybe down into Kansas or Missouri where they can spend their loot.”

Turning around, Lieutenant Scott said, “Corporal Meier, have a detail bury the dead men, then we will camp here for the night.”

As the Corporal moved to obey, Scott told me, “See if you and your scouts can figure the route those outlaws will take. I prefer getting ahead of them rather than having them waiting on us. We will stay here until you get back.”

The three of us mounted and followed the outlaws’ trail to the north. After a short distance, we came across a spot where the tracks separated into two groups. Night Buffalo followed the smaller group that was moving to the west while Bloody Knife and I followed the larger group toward the north.

We followed the group north for several miles before turning in an easterly direction. They traveled a short distance and set up camp for the night next to a stream. We observed their activities for a short time to make sure they were going to be there for a while. There were eight men, and they appeared to be celebrating. Two were on guard duty while the others were starting a fire and settling in for the night.

As Bloody Knife and I moved back out of sight, I said, “They think they got away and that the army will blame the Sioux. That means they be gettin’ careless. You stay here and watch them while I get the Lieutenant and circle south of them. If Night Buffalo finds you, both of you can watch them and follow when they move out.”

I left and rode back to the patrol. I was sure about the route that the outlaws would follow. I’d have the Lieutenant set up an ambush. We didn’t want to attack the outlaws’ camp with the patrol. The numbers were to close for the soldiers to be sure of a victory. The outlaws were experienced frontiersmen while the troopers were mostly new men who were still learning how to survive on the plains. Any attempt to approach the outlaws during the night for an early morning attack would be a sure disaster.

As I reached our camp, Night Buffalo was joining Bloody Knife near the outlaws’ camp. “You find other men?” Bloody Knife asked as he sat beside him.
“There were two of them. They won’t be joinin’ the others. They had killed the horses and mules from the wagon and had gotten careless,” Night Buffalo answered as he showed him two scalps. “They were buffalo hunters and won’t mind us using their rifles. These guns are slow to fire but shoot as far as you can see.”

He handed Bloody Knife one of the two Sharps Rifles. “They are loaded and here are a few extra rounds. Maybe we can use these tomorrow.”

Bloody Knife nodded and took the rifle and cartridges. He explained the situation, and they settled in for the night.

When the sun appeared in the east, Bloody Knife and Night Buffalo prepared to follow the outlaws when they broke camp. It was then Bloody Knife noticed the two scalps tied to his saddle. As he looked questioningly toward Night Buffalo, he was told, “Custer don’t like his civilian scouts takin’ scalps. But he does like it when you take them. He thinks you are a blood-thirsty warrior like himself.”

Bloody Knife just grunted, and Night Buffalo grinned as they stood by the horses listening for the sounds of the outlaws breaking camp. They did not have long to wait.

“They noisy and careless. Soon they die,” Bloody Knife said.

Night Buffalo just nodded as they mounted their horses and prepared to ride into the abandoned campsite. They gave the outlaws time to clear the area before they examined what was left behind. Night Buffalo noticed a scrawled message on a scrap of paper. It said to meet them at the rendezvous.

“I guess they are expecting the other two t’catch up along the way. That means they won’t be watchin’ for trouble,” Night Buffalo said.

Mounting their horses, the two scouts followed the poorly concealed trail of the outlaws. Bloody knife rode slightly ahead. If seen, the outlaws would think he was an Indian minding his own business.

Before dawn, the cavalry patrol was mounted and moving toward the southeast. I led them to a wooded location along a stream about fifteen miles from the burnt wagon. There was a steep bank along the creek where the horses were out of sight but could be quickly mounted if necessary. Overall, it made for a good ambush site.

The men were scattered among the trees and told to stay quiet without making any fires or smoking while I rode off toward the north.

About a mile north of the site, I waited. Leaving my horse in a small depression, I sat atop a small hill scanning the horizon for any sign of movement. After an hour, I noticed a wisp of dust farther north. Crouching down, I also saw some movement between my position and the location of the dust. The outlaws must have someone scouting ahead, probably one of the buffalo hunters. Any buffalo hunter who survived on the plains had to be good at avoiding trouble and moving around among the Indians without getting scalped. Such a person would make a good scout.

If our trap was going to work, I had to take out the scout in a way that would not warn the rest of the outlaws. Since there was just the one scout, I had an idea.

Picketing my horse out of sight, I stripped down to my long-john bottoms and left my gear on the ground near the horse. Then I positioned myself face down on the ground out where the scout would pass. I threw a few gold coins onto the ground near where my head would be and waited with a Bowie Knife concealed under my body.

I heard the scout approaching and took very shallow breaths. I looked very much like a man who had been killed and stripped by Indians. My left arm covered my head so the scout would not notice that I still had my scalp. I figured the man would be very greedy and focus on the gold coins. He might even be a little careless because of that greed.

The scout was a burly man with a heavy, black beard and long, greasy black hair. He wore dirty buckskins, and I smelled him before I even heard him approach. Seeing a dead man in his path startled the scout and he quickly raised the Sharps he carried across the front of his saddle. Nothing moved, and he
sensed no danger. Taking his eyes from his surroundings and looking closer at the body, he noticed a flash of gold. That was when he saw the gold coins. He said to himself, “Dumb bastard got hisself kilt by Injuns. They ain’t got no use for gold and left it behind. No sense lettin’ it go to waste.”

He dismounted from his horse and approached me. His eyes focused upon the gold coins, and I was more of an afterthought. With his rifle in his left hand, he reached for one of the coins while leaning very close to me. I could smell his fetid breath as he breathed onto the back of my neck. He grunted in surprise as a Bowie Knife slipped between his ribs to slash his left lung. At first, he just felt the pressure and impact of the knife, and then a searing pain forced a scream from his mouth that just came out as a blood-spewing gurgle from his macerated lung.

The man was tough and rolled away from me as he tried to escape. I was ready for that movement. As he turned, I pulled my knife out of his body. Before he could do anything, I was on him and plunged the knife into his heart.

Going back to my horse, I dressed. Then I threw the dead man across my saddle and mounted his horse. I had taken the coat and hat of the dead man to wear. Then I took a roundabout route to where the patrol was waiting. Since the scout was not following the same trail as the remaining group, they would not notice the two sets of hoofprints.

When I reached the ambush site, I secured my horse with the others. Then I put on the dead man’s hat and coat and rode that man’s horse toward the approaching outlaws. I was close enough in appearance to the dead scout that they should not notice anything amiss until it would be too late. I just had to tolerate the acrid stench of the hat and coat. It’s a wonder his smell hadn’t killed him a long time ago.

I rode north until the outlaws were almost in sight. Then I turned and paced myself so that they would see me when they came into view of the cavalrymen. Hopefully, they would not suspect anything before they got too close to escape. A lot could go wrong, but if nobody screwed up, their overconfidence would be their undoing.

Night Buffalo and Bloody Knife were carefully pacing the outlaws and staying out of sight. They expected a fight before the day was out and prepared for it. However, they were surprised when five young Sioux joined the outlaws along the way. As the two scouts watched from concealment, the outlaws gave the Sioux a packhorse with rifles and ammunition from the killed soldiers. It appeared that in exchange, the Sioux would help them travel through the territory and avoid the army. To the two scouts, it would make it even more likely that the Sioux would take the blame for the attack on the Paymaster.

When the outlaws and Sioux came to the top of a rise that led down to the wooded area where the patrol lay hidden, they stopped, and the Sioux made repeated motions toward the trees. Down by the trees, I waved my Sharps at them to indicate everything was okay. There was some confusion among them, and they signaled for me to come back up to where they were waiting.

I had noticed that some Indians had joined the outlaws and figured that meant trouble. When they signaled for me to join them, I knew we had a problem. Before I decided on my next move, one of the soldiers panicked and fired his rifle at the outlaws. The distance was too great to hope for a hit, and it warned them that they were probably riding into an ambush. They rode back out of sight and crept up to the crest of the rise where they could see the wooded area and determine what was happening.

Two of the outlaws had buffalo guns and took a position where they would be able to shoot anything that moved inside the woods. Meanwhile, they noticed I had disappeared. They probably figured I was circling back to them.

Now everyone just waited for someone to do something. Lieutenant Scott knew the outlaws were out of range and a frontal attack would be a disaster. He passed the word for everyone to stay concealed for now. There would be plenty of shooting to come unless the outlaws skedaddled. Then they would have to chase them down.
The soldiers were inexperienced and knew their ambush had failed. They started to get restless. When one of the troopers slightly exposed himself to get a better view of the action, a .44 caliber bullet ended his life as it destroyed the back of his skull. It blew the man into the stream where he was visible to the outlaws. They saw his army uniform and knew they had to kill these soldiers or be wanted men for robbery and murder.

Since the soldiers had not charged, the outlaws figured it must not be a large detachment, and they might be able to kill them all, especially with the help of the Sioux who had joined them. They decided that as soon as Saxon, the scout, let them know where he was, they would make a move. They didn’t realize that Saxon was dead and I had replaced him.

The Sioux would make a frontal attack to draw the attention of the soldiers while four of the outlaws would circle behind them and use their rifles to pick them off.

The Sioux were not very cooperative about the plan. They just wanted to make off with their new rifles. They wanted to show them off back at their village. After a brief argument, they agreed to charge toward the soldiers and fire the guns to make a lot of noise. They started to remove five of the rifles from the packhouse as the outlaws prepared to move out.

Everyone stopped for a moment when they saw me kneeling beside my horse off to the west. The puff of smoke from my Sharps was a surprise, and before they could react, one of the buffalo hunters flew backward with a hole blown through his torso. At almost the same time, one of the Sioux was spun around by a hit in the shoulder, and the other buffalo hunter took a hit in the leg.

Washington and Bloody Knife had taken long shots right after I fired. The range was extreme, but all three of us had gotten hits. Both long-range marksmen for the outlaws were down, and the others were momentarily confused.

While the outlaws were being distracted, the cavalry patrol came riding out of the woods, charging full speed up the slope from the stream. Everyone scattered into several different directions with the cavalry in hot pursuit. The Sioux headed toward the north, leaving the packhorse behind. The wounded warrior was able to hold his horse’s reins with his one arm while the others guided his pony. The Sioux ponies were faster than the cavalry mounts, and they quickly pulled ahead. The five troopers chasing them were ordered not to get involved in a long chase and soon pulled up. As they turned back, the Sioux yelled at them and disappeared into the distance.

The troopers chasing the five remaining outlaws had better luck. Their horses were fresh compared to those of the outlaws, and they quickly ran them down. The outlaws had gone north and were headed directly toward Washington and Bloody Knife. They noticed the two scouts and attempted to change direction. Washington and Bloody Knife each shot one of the men in the lead. They fell from their horses. As they fell, one of the horses stumbled and got tangled up with the others. The resulting confusion slowed them enough that the soldiers caught up to them and there was a short shootout at close range, killing three outlaws and a trooper. The two other outlaws were wounded and taken prisoner.

The men reassembled near the stream and counted their casualties. They buried two troopers and six dead outlaws. The rest of the outlaws lay killed along the trail, and their bodies were food for the vultures.

Washington, Bloody Knife, and I stood by our horses talking to Lieutenant Scott as we determined our next move.

“Those Sioux are long gone by now and not worth followin’,” I said, while Washington and Bloody Knife just stood impassively waiting for orders.

Lieutenant Scott said, “We have done what we set out to do. We recovered the cash and captured or killed the men responsible for stealing it and murdering the guards and Paymaster.”

He pointed at the two prisoners who had their hands tied behind their backs while sitting on their horses and said, “I think that we will return to Fort Lincoln and hang these two. We have a few hours
before dark and can start back now. Washington, scout ahead and find a campsite for tonight. Strong, you and Bloody Knife make certain we don’t have any surprises along our route.”

Two uneventful days of travel brought us all back to Fort Lincoln. We were paid from the recovered funds. The outlaws were hung after a short military trial. Meanwhile, Washington and Bloody Knife were sent off on a special mission for Colonel Custer, and the fort resumed its routine.