

REPORT
OF
THE SECRETARY OF WAR,
COMMUNICATING,

In compliance with a resolution of the Senate of the 18th instant, a copy of the report of Lieut. Col. Cooke of the part taken by his command in the action at Bluewater, Nebraska Territory, with the Sioux Indians, September 3, 1855.

FEBRUARY 20, 1857.—Read, ordered to lie on the table, and be printed.

WAR DEPARTMENT, *Washington, February 20, 1857.*

SIR: In compliance with the resolution of the Senate of the 18th instant, I have the honor to communicate to the Senate "a copy of Lieutenant Colonel Cooke's report of the part taken by his command in the action at Bluewater, Nebraska Territory, with the Sioux Indians, September 3, 1855."

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

JEFF'N DAVIS,
Secretary of War.

Hon. J. M. MASON,
President pro tem. of the Senate.

HEADQUARTERS SECOND DRAGOONS,
Camp on Bluewater, September 5, 1855.

MAJOR: In obedience to instructions, I have the honor to make the following report of the share taken by the mounted force under my command in the engagement on the 3d instant, which resulted in the so signal chastisement and defeat of the Bois Brulé band of the Sioux nation.

Pursuant to the plan of the general, to surprise the enemy at daylight that morning in their village, which was five miles distant among the sand hills on the north side of the Platte river, attacking him in front by infantry, when by a circuitous night march the cavalry should have attained a concealed position in his rear, I marched agreeably to his orders at 3 o'clock in the morning.

Leaving the camp standing, I immediately crossed the river with my command—a field return of which is herewith furnished—and after a rapid march, in attempting a position about the dawn of day, discovered that there were other villages, which extended three miles

above the principal one, along the Bluewater; fortunately our cautious approach was not discovered, and withdrawing, I succeeded, under the excellent guidance of Tesson, (Honoré,) after a march of ten or twelve miles in all, in getting a very favorable position, soon after sunrise, behind a slight ridge and the bank of a dry affluent of the Bluewater, half a mile above the upper village. Here I immediately dismounted the irregular cavalry, Captain Howe's company G, 4th artillery, and Captain Heth's company E, 10th infantry, armed with rifles, and lined the ridge and the bank with them—lying down and covering with the rifles the open valley, the probable route of the enemy should he retreat. Here I lay above two hours undiscovered, waiting the signal for action, which was to be the fire of the infantry; them I could at no time see, but had an interesting view of the motions of the enemy, whose look-outs on the far higher opposite bluffs of the little valley failed to penetrate the obscurity of the ambush, where a hundred eyes watched their motions.

I observed the enemy saddle, pack up, and gather in great force, chiefly from below, on and under a rugged bluff, some two hundred feet high, diagonally across the valley, three-fourths of a mile below me; finally we were discovered, but I still waited the signal commanded, or some attempt of *escape* by the enemy. The enemy had then a small detachment halfway between me and the main body, and I was very much pleased with the daring of two young naked warriors, who rode much nearer and dared us to the fight. I could have destroyed them at a word, but it was destined that this most difficult and delicate of military operations which the general had conceived, that of a distantly combined night march and surprise, should eminently succeed, by a faithful adherence to instructions.

The enemy were now crowning the bluff beyond the stream—below, rocky and even vertical near its top, but above an open rolling plain—to which, and the rear of the enemy, there fortunately led a far smoother slope, in a direct line crossing the fine bold creek with very difficult banks. At that moment a volley was heard, and, with exceeding alacrity and celerity, my force was all in the saddle, and we galloped in a column of fours across the valley for the bluff on the enemy's rear. So soon as the little river was crossed, however, perceiving that the Indians had all reached the top of the precipice, I sent, by Adjutant Wright, an order to Captain Heth to take the nearer and level direction down the valley, and assume a position to close that avenue of the enemy's anticipated retreat—the one by which they had ascended the bluff; and in consideration of the weakness of his remnant of a company—thirty mounted infantry (riflemen) recruits—I at the same time gave him ten of those of Lieutenant Robertson's company "E," 2d dragoons, who were armed with rifles; this company being at the rear, and having been designated as the reserve.

Arrived on the bluff, and closing at the same moment to an open column of companies, I found the enemy in force before me, but on the verge of the indented cliff, and seemingly under fire of the infantry, who were not in view, I halted at long gun-shot on the closest ground practicable for a charge of cavalry, which gave a good position for Captain Steele and his company, which led, and instantly dis-

mounted and sent Howe's company; the next, armed with rifles and revolvers, into action; and I immediately sent Robertson's company to position four hundred paces to the right and front; thus covering *every avenue* of retreat to the enemy, (three or four of whom did, however, ride off over that ground before it was possible for Robertson's company to reach and cover it.)

In the very short time that these dispositions were making, our fire was driving the enemy with much slaughter over the cliffs where they had ascended it. Disappearing at first, they were soon apparently in full retreat across the valley and up the long slope opposite, suffering a plunging fire from my company (of artillery) and the 6th infantry, at from four to eight hundred yards, (through the air.) Heth's company, too weak perhaps to have stemmed the current, would probably have prevented its outbreak, if he had chosen a more fortunate position and in full view of the enemy.

On the instant of the discovery I galloped with Steele's company to the nearest practicable descent, "sounding to horse and advance," besides sending orders to Howe to march and follow, and for Robertson, also, to come to the front. I sent Steele directly across to charge as foragers and pursue the enemy to the death; diverging slightly to Heth's company, which I saw in a new position, at the bank of the stream, dismounted, and firing at long shots on the enemy's rear, I gave similar orders, which were obeyed with much promptness, but unfortunately, at first, through boggy ground. Steele's company had taken some favorable grounds leading by the shortest course towards the foremost of the enemy. I was then looking anxiously for Robertson's company, intending to put it upon the immediate rear of the enemy, and wishing to charge with it, but he had been signally prompt and rapid as to be then among the foremost, to the left of, and masked from my view by Steele's company. I was then isolated with the regimental staff and some orderlies, but looked anxiously for the momentary appearance of Howe's company, without halting, however, except to give time to kill a straggling Indian who, from a hole, annoyed us with his arrows, which only wounded a horse of the 2d mounted sergeant's, but who wonderfully dodged numerous revolver shots. In despair of the arrival of the company, I made some attempt to perform with my small party the important duty I required of it—the support of the long charge and pursuit—and galloped forward about a mile. The general then, with his staff and escort, on a hill-top to my right, sounded the recall; but my companies were *far* beyond its reach, and, finding that I could not effectually support them, I galloped back to the general, and asked him, in my excitement, if *he* had halted Howe's company. I then sent, at his suggestion, the adjutant after it, and he found it about a half mile back, with its left flank towards the (new) front. When it came up, it being too late, I knew, for much good, I *sent* it, in two platoons, to support the pursuit.

The Indians flying in every direction in small parties over a rolling table-land, with their far fresher ponies, could only be destroyed by an indefinite division of companies, throwing the men much from under the eye of any officer, until, finally, from their better knowledge of the ground and tact, the enemy could combine and cut off, or in-

timidate these small parties, even *individuals* (which occurred in Steele's company,) all for the want of visible reserves and supports.

There was much slaughter in the pursuit, which extended from five to eight miles, and in which Heth's company took their gallant share, but with the great disadvantage, amongst others, of being armed with rifles. Very few, if any, of the enemy should have escaped if I could have handled the reserve. Howe's company had done good service, but, embarrassed by the impassable cliff immediately in their front, and, *too much* so, by the care of two of its men mortally wounded, and some women prisoners, their want of practice as a mounted force may go far to account for its unfortunate slowness, or the failure of its captain to obey the order.

Following the reports of the several commanders, the loss of the enemy inflicted by my command was *seventy-four* killed, *five* wounded, forty-three prisoners, (women and children,) fourteen mules and ponies captured; as also the lodges, dried buffalo meat, camp utensils, robes, skins, and a vast variety of other property in the three upper smaller villages.

I will remark that in the pursuit, women, if recognized, were generally passed by my men, but that in *some cases certainly* these women discharged arrows at them; and further, that it was very rare that halt was made, even individually, to capture ponies.

And now I regret to report that the defeat inflicted on the enemy was not without the loss in my command of some gallant men, viz: *twelve*, killed, wounded, and missing; two in Howe's company, one, Sergeant Healy, twice wounded with a lance in company E, 2d dragoons, and nine in company K, 2d dragoons. This last, comparatively great, but, I believe, in this case, indicating the gallant and effective service which I expected of Captain Steele and his company. I have also to report eleven horses killed and wounded, besides two missing.

Of my command, all the mounted infantry and nearly all the dragoons were lately recruited, and unused to service, and the artillery company, but lately mounted, in part, and with a new arm. Under these circumstances they far exceeded my expectations, and in the night march, the surprise, in the action and the pursuit, and in all the fatigues of thirteen hours in the saddle, showed themselves good soldiers, and, with their excellent officers, have won for themselves the gratitude of at least that portion of their countrymen whose lives or property have been exposed to the necessary transit of this great central wilderness.

In concluding, allow me to express my sense of the valuable assistance received from the staff of the 2d dragoons, commissioned and non-commissioned. Lieutenants John Buford and Thomas J. Wright did good service. Adjutant Wright communicated numerous orders to distant points with much intelligence and activity.

With high respect, your obedient servant,

P. ST. GEORGE COOKE,

Lieut. Col. 2d Dragoons, Com'g Mounted Force.

Major O. F. WINSHIP,

Assistant Adjutant General, present.