

The Patrol

By
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– *Dakota Territory...1875.....*

The night was a clear blue-gray with stars scattered between fast moving clouds. Overhead, the moon hung in the sky like a great luminous rock, so their camp was alternately dark or bathed in silvery light.

Lieutenant Garrett Lyons took the first watch. Behind him the remnants of his patrol hid amid the ruins of Old Fort Reno. Ahead, past a stand of cottonwood he could see the Powder River, and beyond, a day's ride away, the safety of Fort Fettermann. Between, camped on the river bank sat the Cheyenne.

Cold, night air snaked down the collar of his buffalo coat then coiled around his arms and chest. Lyons shivered. Lord, he hated the cold, especially this cold here in the Dakotas, where the night sky sucked every bit of warmth out of man and beast. He began blowing on his fingers, working any stiffness out of the joints. All the while his ears sifted the familiar night sounds; a gust of wind rustling the grass, bringing with it the smell of a coming storm; an owl's mournful cry followed by a whisper of its leathery wings as it stroked the air.

Then...the snap of a cottonwood branch.

For an instant Lyons stood motionless. He grabbed his rifle as his eyes searched the perimeter of the camp. The flutter of movement was so slight - a faint crackling of pebbles - he almost missed it. Lyons spun around thumbed back the hammer and pointed the barrel ready to take aim at the man in the shadows only to feel the sharp edge of a knife at his throat.

The voice at his ear was barely more than a whisper. "Mon ami. Did I not teach you? Always watch your back."

Lyons took a deep breath, exhaled, then slowly sat down. “Damn it, Otwah. This is no time for jokes.”

Son of a French father and Pottawatomie mother, Edward “Otwah” LeBeau was General’s Stannard’s personal scout and a legend in the 4th Cavalry. It was rumored he could track a swarm of bees in a snow storm. He squatted next to Lyons, forearms resting on his knees, long gray hair hanging loose. Otwah was not smiling.

“Why you here? General, he send you north, for one, two day?”

Lyons looked at his friend like a man with no ready answer. General J. Barton Stannard’s words had ridden with him since he left Fort Fettermann: “A routine patrol, Lieutenant – no more than a day at the most two. Pick up the package waiting for me at Surrey Wells. This is important. Report on any Indian activity. But, keep out of trouble. You should be back in time for our Friday night poker game.” The old man used his Moses-handing-down-the-word voice, staring at him full face with those deep brown eyes flecked with gold. The General stroked his long chestnut beard, sipped at his whiskey, then added as an afterthought: “General Phil Sheridan is holding a Board of Inquiry next week. I need that package. Phil’s in a hanging mood.”

This patrol had never been routine. Not from day one, when a trooper broke his leg, then another got a fever. Lyons lost two additional men as escort back to the Fort. Left with a sergeant and four recruits, he made the best of it. The army was his job, this patrol his assignment. Twelve years in the US Army had taught him when and how to improvise.

“Time I got to Surrey Wells the ferry and the station were a smoldering ruin. Found two survivors, a wounded stage driver and a passenger who escaped the raid because he was using the privy.” Lyons looked at Otwah. “Buried the bodies then led my patrol and survivors on a wide sweep east and south. My men were pretty well spent, needed a rest. I remembered that shallow crossing of the Powder River near old Fort Reno. Figured once I got the patrol here we could

rest the night. Then, with an early start, some hard riding and luck, we could make Fort Fettermann by nightfall.”

Winter does not die easy on the plains. A fine mist, remnant of an earlier storm, had settled over the trail, making visibility spotty, at best. A thin blanket of snow still clung to patches of ground, so any movement of man or beast became slow and treacherous. The patrol camped in the ruins of the abandoned Fort. The horses were picketed close near the remnants of an earthen wall while the men lay hidden amid broken markers in the abandoned cemetery. A good position considering the haste in which it was made.

“Soldiers follow orders. Not whine like coyote. Why you still here?” Otwah said.

“You know damn well why.”

The patrol arrived at dusk and just settled in when Lyons saw the Cheyenne arrive and make camp. He counted no more than three tepees scattered amid the cottonwoods at the river crossing. The rest of the day was spent in nervous exhaustion. The men charcoaled their faces and, with their muddy uniforms, settled into the landscape. They chewed dried meat, drank water from canteens and fed the horses by hand from corn in their saddlebags. All the while, masses of dark clouds formed and reformed in the sky between intermittent showers. It was an uneasy peace.

“Recognized Wolf Robe right off. It’s a small party, no more than ten, twelve, figure to wait them out.” Lyons explained. “Thought they’d break camp by now.”

“The General’s package?” Otwah asked.

Lyons raised an eyebrow and nodded toward the stage passenger.

Otwah took a leather pouch from his deerskin jacket and tossed it on the ground. Lyons turned it over in his hand, eyeing the familiar pattern of beaded triangles. His face looked calm but his stomach twisted into a knot. “Looks like Sioux?”

Otwah pointed toward the river and the camp. “You let your men hide with the dead too

long, and they will soon join them.”

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Trailing Otwah was like chasing a ghost. Lyons held his rifle easy, keeping his tall, lean body close to the ground. Moonlight is deceptive. The banks of the Lower Powder are fringed with towering box elders and cottonwood, along with dense thickets of brush. Lyons tested each step as he moved up the crest of a low ridge. The wind shifted, bringing with it the sound and smell of the Indian camp. Lyons angled his body to get a better view, finally spotting faint wisps of white smoke drifting from one of the tepees. He closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them again, he saw two figures emerge from a tent.

“Oglala.” Lyons spoke in a whisper, his lips barely moving. “Wolf Robe is Cheyenne. Sioux and Cheyenne don’t run together.”

“Await un long temp, Lyons, you wintered fat. The Oglala have a new shaman, not like the others – one with powerful medicine. Now Sitting Bull sends talkers to all tribes. They listen.”

A gust of wind stirred the grass. Lyons felt the skin prickle along the back of his neck. He usually gave official dispatches from the War Department no more than a passing glance. Recent political maneuvering between Congress and the Army left everyone, particularly the troops out west, edgy. The last dispatch contained the usual government excuses for sending less ammunition, fewer men or supplies, as well as a rumor that the Oglala Sioux had a new war chief. That and a powerful shaman were a potent combination.

“How many Sioux?”

Otwah made a sign with his fingers. The two men exchanged quick, wordless glances.

“The rest make camp downstream.” Otwah touched Lyon’s shoulder and pointed at a freshly killed deer hanging nearby. “Wolf Robe and his guests will eat, talk a long time.”

The sky had become dark, with no detail of clouds -- just a solid blackness. The scout sniffed the air. “More rain. Everyone stay inside.” Otwah pointed toward a partially hidden path

near a grassy hollow. In reality, it was no more than a gully that paralleled the Indian camp then curved sharply toward the river. "Listen for three owl hoots. Walk your horses to the river, cross, go north past Sage Mesa. After that, it will be easy, even for you."

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The night was alive with faint whispers of sound. The men from Lyons' patrol sat quietly each following his thoughts. Exhaustion etched deep lines under their eyes. The damp seeped into their clothes. Sergeant Jonas crouched next to a bush, shaking pebbles in his hand like dice, trying to stay calm. It had been only a few minutes, but seemed an eternity since Lieutenant Lyons had disappeared with Otwah. What mattered now was his enlistment. In a week it would be over and the Sergeant had plans. There was gold, plenty of it, all over these hills. This past year he'd heard the stories, seen the ore. Soon these hills will be swarming with prospectors, then settlers. There was no time to waste. Whatever the cost, he was getting back to Fort Fettermann. Jonas moved quietly through the camp. With his Kentucky twang roughened by years of bawling orders, leaned over each man and hissed, "Up, move."

Private Ed McGlynn clutched his stomach. A moan escaped his lips before he could catch it between clenched teeth.

"Your stomach ain't your problem, I am," the Sergeant growled in his ear. "You're the sorriest soldier in this man's army, but you got the best shootin' eye. Whatever happens, you stick close!"

Ed spat on the ground. Yes sir, no, sir—God, he hated the constant orders. Back in Chicago he remembered always being hungry and cold. Seems he hadn't fared any better in the army.

Angus Pritchard, the lone surviving stage passenger, kept adjusting his body, trying to find a comfortable position, daring not to think of what lay ahead. A short, thin man with wire spectacles that balanced precariously on his nose, he didn't feel any safer now, than he had at

Surrey Wells.

When Lieutenant Lyons appeared at the edge of the camp, Pritchard kept his eyes on the officer. He watched intently as Lyons summoned the sergeant with a nod of his head. The two men spoke in quick silent gestures. Pritchard decided he would stay close to Lyons. The man was his talisman-someone to ensure his safe journey to the fort. He felt a faint breeze bringing with it the distant sound of thunder. Then he heard an owl hoot three times. Pritchard shivered as a hand pressed his shoulder and the Sergeant growled in his ear. "Move."

Overhead, the sky was beginning to burn gray with the coming dawn. A single file of men and horses began a slow, quiet trek along a path that was barely visible by day. Otwah took point. Lyons was last in line behind Pritchard.

"Lieutenant," Pritchard turned and whispered, "When do we reach Fort Fettermann? I have important documents for General Stannard."

Lyons was not answer simply motioned him on. The group continued moving as quietly as possible. As they passed close to Wolf Robe's camp the faint aroma of wood smoke blended with the steady drizzle. He saw an old indian gather sticks and quickly take them inside for the fire. As Lyons walked forward his horse stood tense, its ears thrust forward, staring into the trees on the ridge above them. In the distance, Lyons thought his eye caught a flicker of movement in a stand of cottonwood. Did he hear a faint clinking of metal? Was that a low, muttering of voices snaking through the mist? Lyons raised his body and peered over the edge of the ridge. After watching for a time, he figured he was mistaken and walked on.

Above them, in the cottonwoods, a shadow moved.

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Lt. Col. Elliot Caultrain could barely contain himself. He was concealed along with his patrol in a thick stand of cottonwood overlooking the Indian camp. From the crisply barbered goatee to the cut of his custom-tailored uniform, Caultrain looked every inch a cavalry officer. He

extended his pocket scope full length, and moved it about. All the while, his heart pounded like a piston. Newly arrived from Washington, Lt. Col. Caultrain was about to attack and annihilate his first hostile Indian camp. Visions of glory raced through his head. He barely listened to his second in command.

“Sir, is this wise?” Lt. Frank Gosnell spoke softly. “General Stannard’s orders were to only report any Indian activity.”

He had served alongside Caultrain long enough to know that the colonel was a man of grand gestures and bravado, when it suited him. Gosnell also knew how deceptive this prairie could be. From a distance a man could feel he was seeing everything for miles then miss half the Cheyenne nation hiding in the hollows between the low hills.

“I know General’s orders Frank, but, you know I follow mine.”

Lt. Col. Elliot Caultrain was a man who took advantage of every opportunity. Money had been paid, favors called in, to obtain his appointment to General Custer’s command. When that failed, his hunger for general’s stars became an obsession. This Indian camp was a ready-made opportunity for glory.

“I think we should wait until dawn. Hard to see what’s down there,” Gosnell said.

“I do not intend to bury my career in this god forsaken backwater with General Stannard. Besides, the thought of killing makes me feel alive!” Caultrain retracted the scope. Handing it to Gosnell he took a long deep breath and began considering his options, asking himself endless questions, playing out battle scenarios in his head. The camp was quiet, just a few scattered tepees near the river. Caultrain raised his pearl-handled Colt from his holster and signaled the charge.

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A sudden flash of light followed by a loud noise! At first Lyons thought it was thunder. Almost too late he realized it was a shot. Then he felt the earth rumble beneath his feet. A bugle

sounded high and thin. And Lyons' world fell apart. He pushed Pritchard hard between the shoulder blades with the flat of his hand. The little man plunged face forward onto the ground. Lyons joined him as the wave of cavalry rode over the rim of the gully where they hid. Caultrain's troops were spread out in charge formation, their Springfield's popping and flashing in the dim gray mist of dawn. Shouts and curses echoed off rocks and trees. After what seemed an eternity the last rider passed. Lyons leaped to his feet and a barrage of images assaulted him.

Caultrain and his men rode into camp with a flourish. Hearing the commotion old Wolf Robe rushed out; Caultrain took aim and fired. At that moment the rest of the Indians burst out of the tepees, firing their Winchesters with stunning accuracy. Horses turned, galloped and shook their manes, rearing and pawing the air before tossing their riders and fleeing into the mist. Men's screams wound their way through popping pistols and thudding hooves. One moment the camp was alive with men and horses, and the next only smoke, drifting cautiously as if unsure whether it was safe to depart.

Lyons hadn't felt so helpless since the day he had signed on with the Illinois Militia twelve years ago. His mission was simple - pick up a package and deliver it to the general. Now his patrol was faced with a scenario they were ill prepared for. Up ahead, Lyons saw Sergeant Jonas and his patrol scramble for cover and begin firing while in front of him a nightmare unfolded. Amid the chaos he saw the remnants of Caultrain's men scatter then find makeshift shelter behind some boulders near the river.

"Remember, General's orders, take your men and deliver his package." Otwah advised.

"Can't leave! You go." Instinctively, Lyons began crawling toward Caultrain and his beleaguered men.

Through the noise and confusion, Otwah with Pritchard following managed to reach the River only to be assaulted with a barrage of gunfire! A bullet creased Otwah's thigh. He managed to haul himself and Pritchard back onto the riverbank. The scout crawled behind a

thick bush and began jerking spent cartridges from the cylinder of his colt, replacing them from his belt. He began returning fire, all the while muttering under his breath about the wisdom of scouting for the U. S. Army.

Sergeant Jonas used the barrel of his rifle to part the brush and saw Caultrain's attack. "There goes a fool. Quite a sight, eh, lad?"

Ed McGlynn popped his head up over the edge of the ridge for a quick look and saw two of Caultrain's men fall mortally wounded. "Yes sir," he said, his face gone white. McGlynn was motionless, listening in silent terror to the screams of wounded horses and men. Squeezing down, he clutched his stomach as bile retreated from his throat. "Holy shit, sir," he whispered, looking toward the sergeant. But Jonas was slumped over, a bullet through his head. McGlynn looked around and suddenly realized that amid all this chaos, he was alone. He pulled his cap down hard on his head, grabbed his rifle and began crawling along the ground toward the horses. Waiting in bread lines in Chicago didn't seem so bad after all.

Shots whistled closer and closer, tearing at his clothes as Lyons crawled toward the group of boulders near the river. He was angry at Caultrain and even angrier at himself. Years of training had made his body act, even though his head had told him that Caultrain was a fool and he should let him dig out of his own mess. He found Caultrain cowering behind a boulder with what was left of his patrol. He was waving his pistol like a madman. "What are you doing here Lyons? This is my command."

A Cheyenne loomed up before them. Lyons turned and fired without lifting his gun above his belt line. "Well Lieutenant Colonel Caultrain, *sir*." Lyons always addressed him with his full, ridiculous title, stressing the last word. "My men are back at that ridge. It's high ground. Move there. We'll cover you." Caultrain wasn't listening. He saw Otwah wade into the river and aimed. Lyons grabbed his arm and twisted it hard as the gun fired. "That's General Stannard's scout."

"An Indian's an Indian," he said and aimed again. Lyons punched him. Caultrain

staggered then caught himself. The muscles in his jaw tightened, a trickle of blood formed at his mouth.

“The rest of the Sioux will attack any minute, *sir*.”

“Sioux? Even I know the Sioux and Cheyenne do not associate,” Lieutenant Gosnell snapped.

“Well, you are giving them good reason to.” Lyons glared at him. “Who tells General Stannard that because of your flashy lieutenant colonel, we may have a Sioux war on our hands? You or me?”

Gosnell opened his mouth to speak but thought better of it.

The sounds of gunfire alerted the remaining Sioux in their camp downstream. Suddenly, the far bank of the Powder River began vomiting a never ending line of Indians, all waving their Winchesters. Panic shattered Caultrain’s mind into disconnected pieces. In one stroke his ability to process information and make decisions disintegrated. He froze. When the soldier next to him fell, his blood and brains spraying over him, the Colonel’s face paled, his hands shook. This was not war in the grand style. Not the pageantry, the glory he had always envisioned. Here were only shafts of early morning light stabbing through trees; Indians he couldn’t see, but who were always firing.

“Best you get back to your men, Lyons. Be careful,” Lt. Gosnell cautioned.

Lyons ran low, crablike over the ground, diving through the thick grass, landing next to the sergeant’s body. Sensing a movement, he looked up into the eyes of a Sioux. For a split second they stared at one another, then Lyons grabbed Jonas’ rifle and jerked it forward. The muzzle struck the Indian below the eye. Another Sioux came up fast with a knife and Lyons hit him with the rifle butt, followed by the barrel.

Terror distorted Pritchard’s cherubic face. He picked himself up off the ground and adjusted his glasses. Surrounded by noise and death, he wondered if there was a god of

cavalry, or just plain folks, who would hear his prayer. Looking from side to side he searched for a sign. He saw Lieutenant Lyons firing, and felt reassured. He picked up a rifle and crawled toward him.

Positioning himself on the ridge, Lyons took a deep breath, willing himself to relax. He tossed the rifle and grabbed his Colt. It felt slippery so he changed hands, wiping his palm on his shirt, then switching back. Working mostly by feel he replaced the cartridges and began squeezing the trigger again and again, moving his arm in a wide arc along the top of the ridge. The revolver throbbed in his grasp; he could feel its kick and see smoke whooshing out of the barrel. Lyons held his Colt steady. Bullets tore at the ground around him, kicking up mud and grass. Suddenly, an Indian came running toward him. Lyons aimed his Colt. The hammer clicked on an empty chamber.

Lyons turned the Colt around, ready to use it as a club. Two more Indians appeared. They suddenly fell, mortally wounded, Garrett looked to his right and saw Private McGlynn on a far ridge firing steadily. "Thank god." Out of the corner of his eye he saw Pritchard crawling toward him holding a rifle. He took the rifle, aimed and managed a few shots before he felt a sharp pain in his shoulder, followed by something hard off the side of his head. The rifle fell from his hand as the ground came spinning up to meet him. Then there was silence.

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Dawn broke through the overcast, turning the sky a gray-pink. The odor of smoke hung in the air. Lyons was wounded and knew it. When he tried lifting his arm, a sharp pain in his shoulder convinced him he was alive. In all his years in the army, the Wilderness Campaign with Grant, out West with Stannard and the Apaches, the thought of death had been an alien one. It was something that happened to other men. But in this instant, as he lay flat, eyes open, fixing his vision on droplets of moisture sparkling on the grass, the cold chill of his own mortality hit him. He was concentrating so hard he failed to notice the cherubic face that crept into the

extreme corner of his range.

“Lieutenant Lyons?” Pritchard whispered. Lyons moved his head. A moan escaped his lips. “We’re in luck, I see soldiers. I’ll get help.” Pritchard began shouting, “Here, over here.”

Then...pistol shots.

Lyons felt the sudden weight of Pritchard’s body as it fell on him. He became aware of movement, voices. There were other shots, other voices. Instinctively, Lyons gave himself a glazed, motionless look. He recognized Caultrain’s voice then Gosnell’s, loud soft, loud soft. “Leave now...Sioux can finish them...I’ll make the report...my battle.” It was like listening to an argument in another room with the door opening and closing. Finally, there was merciful silence.

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Private McGlynn was a mute witness to the scene unfolding before him. He saw it all etched against the gray morning sky. Waves of Indians coming at him, his rifle belching out shell after shell until his hands were numb. Then...quiet. The mist and smoke gave the scene before him an unreal appearance. No Indians - only two officers walking among the wounded and dying. He heard the popping sound of pistol shots.

Unsure at first of what was happening then suddenly aware, McGlynn began running. Bullets whistled by him hitting the ground, closer and closer. His chest heaved from the exertion. Around him was nothing but death. He tried to remember prayers his mother taught him but his mind went blank.

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Lyons took in slow, easy breaths and tried not to panic. Indians were erratic fighters, swarm all over you one minute then just as suddenly, vanish. After what seemed an eternity, he heard a soft whistle and felt the ground vibrate as horses approached.

Otwah wrapped his jacket around him. “You are hurt bad, mon ami.”

Lyons winced as the scout lifted him onto the saddle. “My men?” he gasped.

“Look around you. All dead.”

“Pritchard? Had...important papers for the General.”

“Nothing mon ami, I see nothing.”

Two horses began to move north toward Sage Mesa. The odor of smoke hung in the air. Dawn had colored the sky an orange-yellow. There was only a faint drizzle, the heavy rain would start soon. Lyons saw the bodies of the troopers. “All dead? You sure?”

Otwah grunted.

“Caultrain, Gosnell?”

“No. They run to Fort Fettermann with their story.”

“General Stannard will listen, always has. I'll tell him what happened.” Lyons whispered.

“You never make it. Not 'til I tend those wounds. We go to a cave near Sage Mesa.”

Lyons tried to sit up, explain the importance, but slumped over. Otwah stopped, went over and adjusted the jacket around him. “The General, mon ami, is too busy saving his scalp to worry about yours.” Otwah spoke softly, “The Army will blame someone. Last man in takes the weight. Better to let the Army think you dead.”

“I'm a soldier. Soldiers report. Have to go back.”

If the U.S. Army was Lyons family, then this prairie had become his home. Lyons, who had never looked farther ahead than his next hand of cards, felt compelled to pause for a final glimpse of the scene before him. A sense of loss came over him – a loss of something precious that would never be offered to him again. He should have gone on, never stopped and turned back. Leave Caultrain to sort out his own mess. He would tell himself this over and over. Funny, though, when your head tells you one thing, your life another, your head always loses.

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