

Lieutenant Sheehan Meets Tom Barnes on His March to Fort Ridgley

Lieutenant Sheehan had given little thought at first to his new assignment. Captain Hall's explanation for the move had been rather vague. It seemed that the local Indian agent, a Major Galbraith, thought that there might be some trouble with the Sioux over their annuity payments. Captain Marsh, the post commander at Fort Ridgley, was concerned that he did not have enough men to both garrison the fort and send troops to Galbraith's aide, and so had requested reinforcements from the north. Hall had no idea what kind of trouble was expected, nor did he know exactly what Sheehan's assignment would be once he arrived, as that would be up to Captain Marsh. However, Captain Hall did not seem overly concerned about the situation, so Sheehan assumed that his job would be basically the same as it was at Fort Ripley, and for now he was simply enjoying the freedom of an independent command. Sheehan enjoyed being able to make decisions on his own even if there were few of any importance to make at the moment.

The nearer the detachment came to their destination however, the more Sheehan thought about what might lie ahead. What exactly did he know about the Sioux? He knew that they were enemies of the Chippewa, and that the latter hated them fervently. They had been fighting forever, it seemed. He also recalled that they had a large reservation that ran along the south side of the Minnesota River for over a hundred miles, all the way up to the Dakota Territory. He did not know how many of them there were, or who were their leaders, although he had heard of a chief called Little Crow. Since Sheehan was from the town of Albert Lea, near the Iowa border and just east of Spirit Lake, he had also heard about Inkipaduta, but he was not sure if the man was a chief or just an outlaw. It quickly became apparent to the young lieutenant that his knowledge was woefully deficient. Here he was, responsible for the lives of over 50 men, with no idea what they were about to walk into. It was not a pleasant feeling for a man like Tim Sheehan.

Late that afternoon Sheehan was riding at the head of the column, reproaching himself for his ignorance, when First Sergeant John Hicks, returning from an inspection of the column, appeared beside him and to interrupt his doleful thoughts.

“How is everything, Sergeant?” Sheehan greeted Hicks, and then drew the company to a halt.

“Well, sir, some of the boys are a little foot sore, but otherwise everything seems fine,” Hicks replied to the lieutenant.

Sheehan thought for a moment. “Sergeant Hicks, do you have any idea where we are and how far we have to go?” he asked, with a tone of exasperation.

“Well sir, no, not exactly,” Hicks replied, taken aback. “But according to the map that we looked at last evening we should be just north of Glencoe. I mean as close as I can figure, that is.” Hicks paused. “Sir, with all due respect, you seem a bit out of sorts. Is the lieutenant unhappy with me for some reason?”

“No, of course not, Sergeant Hicks.” Sheehan instantly shook off his mood at this rebuke and delivered one of the big Irish smiles that always seemed to put things right. “I was just thinking about...no never mind. I was just wondering about a campsite for tonight.” In a wheat field to his right Sheehan spied what appeared to be a lone farmer hard at work. “Sergeant, do you see that man over there in the field?”

“Yes, sir,” Hicks answered, stepping around the front of Sheehan’s horse.

“Go see if he will come over for a talk. Maybe he can give us some idea of what lies ahead.”

“Yes, sir. Right away,” Hicks replied, trotting off into the field.

“No need to hurry, Sergeant,” Sheehan called out after him with a chuckle.

“Need to get the kinks out, sir,” Hicks called over his shoulder.

Now see what you’ve done, Sheehan thought. You’ve got the best first sergeant in the regiment thinking that your foul mood is his fault, and all because of your own ignorance.

As Sheehan dismounted, he noticed that the rest of his command was still standing in columns of twos with their rifles on their shoulders, looking at him expectantly. Laughing at his own forgetfulness he finally ordered the men to fall out, which they were only too happy to do. Sheehan held his horse’s reins in one hand, sipping tepid water from a canteen as he watched Sergeant Hicks and the farmer approach the road. Like most frontier farmers the man was whip-chord thin. It was not the kind of life that allowed a man to take on flesh no matter how much he ate. He wore well-worn work clothes, a shirt that at one time must have

been white, and a pair of faded gray trousers held up by threadbare suspenders. A straw hat with a wide tattered brim obscured his face. As he came closer Sheehan could see that despite a thick growth of dark brown chin whisker he was perhaps only 19 or 20 years of age.

“Lieutenant, this here is Tom Barnes. Mr. Barnes, allow me to present First Lieutenant Sheehan, our commanding officer. Mr. Barnes here says he’s been farming in these parts for two years and knows the country pretty well.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Barnes,” said Sheehan, extending his hand.

“Pleased to meet you, Lieutenant,” the young man replied, matching Sheehan’s firm grip. The man’s probably no more than 160 pounds soaking wet, thought Sheehan, but still he’s no weakling. “The sergeant here tells me you need some information about the country,” Barnes continued. “How can I be of help?”

Sheehan immediately appreciated the young man’s directness. “Well, first we’d like to know the distance to Glencoe, and second, perhaps you could suggest a good place for us to set up camp for the night.”

“Well, sir, the first one is easy. It’s almost exactly 5 miles from where you are right now to Glencoe. As to the second,” Barnes paused to stroke his chin whiskers, “I would say that your best bet would be along Buffalo Creek. It’s just south of town, and this time of year it’ll hold plenty of clear water. Both sides are flat prairie where your horses can graze and you can pitch your tents. Yes, sir, I’d say that’s the best spot that I can think of.”

“Well, that Buffalo Creek sounds perfect, Mr. Barnes. Don’t you agree, Sergeant?” Sheehan asked, eliciting a nod from Hicks. He extended his hand to the farmer. “We’re much obliged to you for the information, sir.”

“Not at all, Lieutenant. I’m glad I could be of service,” said Barnes, returning Sheehan’s friendly smile and firm handshake. As usual, Sheehan had managed to gain the young man’s respect and friendship upon short acquaintance.

As the young farmer turned back to his fields Sheehan called out to him, “By the way, sir, have you heard anything about the Sioux on the Minnesota? Do they come up this way at all?”

Barnes turned back, happy to have a chance to talk the lieutenant some more. “Well, I can’t say I know much about them, sir. I’ve never been

down to the reservation. I've met some breeds, but they don't talk much. Folks say that groups of braves come through here from time to time to go hunting in the Big Woods, or to go north to raid the Chippewas, but like I say, I've never seen 'em. From what I gather a war party could go right by your house in the night and you'd never know it. They keep to themselves and don't have much dealings with white folks. Most of them don't speak English anyway, as I understand it."

"You haven't heard about any trouble then, I take it?"

"No sir, as far as I know they're peaceful enough, when it comes to whites." The men stood in silence for a moment while Sheehan considered this last point. "Anything else I can help you with, Lieutenant?" the farmer finally asked. "I'm sorry I can't help you much when it comes to the Sioux."

"Not at all, Mr. Barnes," answered Sheehan, shaking his head. "You've been quite helpful. One more thing though. Have you ever given any thought to joining Mr. Lincoln's army? We can use young men like you."

"Well, that's real kind of you to say!" replied the young man, smiling from ear to ear. "To tell the truth I have given it some thought, but my brother John E. and I have to get this crop in before I do anything else. But who knows, maybe in the fall I just might."

"Well, we would be happy to have you I'm sure, Mr. Barnes. But I won't keep you any longer from your work. Thank you again." The two shook hands for a third time and the farmer turned and walked back into his field.

"Think he will, Lieutenant?" Hicks asked as they watched Barnes walk away.

"Will? Oh, join up?" replied Sheehan, his thoughts elsewhere. "Yes, Sergeant, I think we can count on it." He looked back down the road to where his men were sitting along the edge of the wheat field, smoking and talking in small groups. "Let's get 'em moving, Sergeant Hicks. We still have a ways to go."

