

Strout Battles Little Crow's Forces

Captain Richard Strout stood at the Fort Snelling ferry landing watching impatiently as the ferry from St. Paul approached through the churning dark brown water. Behind him on the road that ran alongside the south bank were the men of his company, Company B, Ninth Minnesota Regiment of Volunteer Infantry. Also on the road were five wagons that his company had loaded that morning in anticipation of a march that would take them west to Glencoe, and then northwest to Hutchinson and eventually Forest City. Like the Sixth and Seventh Regiments the men of the Ninth had been granted ten-day furloughs after enlisting, and then recalled when the uprising began. However, many of the men of the Ninth had further to travel than those in the other two regiments and so had not yet reported back to Snelling. As a result, all the companies of the Ninth were shorthanded. Strout had only forty men present out of over ninety listed on the roster, along with five civilian teamsters. Those forty-five men were at the moment lounging about smoking, boiling coffee and chatting as they had been for the past several hours.

Company B's assignment was to patrol the area between Hutchinson and Forest City. This was a rather large task for just forty men. However, they were to join up that day with a company of forty-five irregular militia men from Hutchinson who just happened to be in St. Paul at the time. One of the militia men was supposed to come over that morning and guide them to where the militia was camped on the road to Glencoe. This at least was the plan, but morning had turned into afternoon, and now it was well past four with still no guide.

As the ferry pulled into the landing, Strout noticed the sun breaking through the low hanging clouds and thought that at least they might sleep dry on the first night of their march, if indeed they ever got started. When he had been informed by the commander of the Ninth, Colonel Wilkins, that he would be reinforced by militia, Strout had not been overjoyed by the news. He felt he could count on his own men in a pinch. Most of them were his friends and neighbors and had elected him Captain. He did not have much faith in the reliability of the militia though, and apparently his opinion had been right on the money so far. He was able to take some comfort in the fact that there had been little Indian trouble in the area he was to patrol since the first day of hostilities so perhaps he

would have time to integrate the militia men into his command and at least find out if they knew how to shoot before they met any redskins. For that matter, Strout's own men could use some target practice themselves. Fortunately they had plenty of reserve ammunition.

Presently the ferry docked and passengers began to get off. Some of them were in uniform but most wore civilian clothes and were carrying various types of luggage. Two of the civilians carried rifles but nothing else, and one of those was almost as dark as a Negro. His facial features, however, identified him as a full-blooded Indian, which seemed more than a bit surprising to Strout under the circumstances. Both men approached the captain, and the white man, who appeared to be in his late twenties, extended his hand and asked, "Would you be Captain Stout?"

"That's Strout young man," corrected the Captain.

"Well then, pleased to meet ya, Captain Strout. Name's Edwin Stone," he replied, grinning and shaking the captain's hand in a most unmilitary fashion. "This here Injun calls himself John Otherday. He don't speak any English," Stone explained as Strout shook hands with Otherday. "But the truth is he's kind of a hero of sorts. Saved a whole bunch of whites down on the reservation from the redskins, and brought 'em all the way to Hutchinson."

Strout remembered hearing the story, which had been all over the St. Paul papers. "Well, I'll be damned! So this is the man I've been hearing about?" he said returning the Indian's firm grip and friendly smile.

"Yep, that's why I'm here to guide ya. Spent some time working on the reservation a few years back where I picked up some Indian talk. He wanted to see the fort before he left, so...well, here we are."

"I see," replied Strout. "Well, very good Mr. Stone. We're ready to go as you can see."

"That's fine, Captain. I reckon there's no hurry."

Strout's Company B had met up with the Hutchinson militia just east of Glencoe as planned and immediately made camp. The next morning the newly augmented company set out toward Glencoe. They passed through the little settlement late Monday afternoon and camped that night at Buffalo Creek, near the spot where Sheehan's men had camped on Private Barnes' advice so many weeks before. Tuesday morning Lieutenant Strout was having breakfast when Private Edwin Stone and John Otherday approached him.

“Morning, Captain,” greeted Stone, smiling and touching his forehead, which Strout took to be the militia’s version of a salute.

“Good morning, Private Stone,” replied Strout, getting to his feet and returning Stone’s gesture in the proper military manner, hoping that the young man might learn from observation. He also nodded and smiled in Otherday’s direction. “What can I do for you?” he asked.

“Well, sir, it seems Mr. Otherday here is gonna part company with us this morning. He says, as close as I can figure, that he’s heading to Fort Ridgley to find a feller by the name of She-hane,” said Stone, glancing several times at Otherday, who was looking directly at Strout and smiling slightly.

“Well, I suppose that is his privilege,” Strout replied, scratching his chin. “Tell him he is welcome to stay with us, of course. We could use his scouting skills.”

Stone paused for a moment, looking down at his shoes and rubbing the back of his neck. His grasp of the Dakota language was spotty, and he was trying to think of the right words to convey the lieutenant’s message. Finally, he spoke some words in a halting fashion to Otherday, repeating some words several times, while Strout tried to interpret the Sioux chief’s reaction. Otherday smiled and nodded at first, but then shook his head and spoke briefly to Stone.

“Mr. Otherday says thanks, but no thanks, Captain. Says he needs to be on his way.”

“Very well then.” Strout extended his hand to Otherday, which the chief took in his firm grip, speaking a few words of Dakota.

He says, “Goodbye, and thanks, Captain,” Stone explained.

“I get the meaning, Private,” Strout replied as Otherday turned and walked away to find his horse.

Shortly after the chief’s departure, Strout’s company broke camp and headed toward Hutchinson. They arrived at the town around noon and were greeted enthusiastically by the townspeople. The head of the town council was indeed happy to see the arrival of regular troops since there had been rumors for several days that Sioux raiding parties were in the area. After Otherday and the refugees had departed for St. Paul, the citizens decided to build a stockade for protection, which they had completed just the previous day. The councilmen explained to Strout that the women and children would sleep there at night while the men guarded the buildings. They seemed very anxious for the lieutenant’s

approval, and he agreed that it was probably a good plan. The townspeople also seemed to be hoping that he and his men would stay with them and help them defend their homes, but Strout explained that his orders were to patrol the whole area from Hutchinson to Forest City, and that his command would be leaving after they had had a meal. The men of the town council were disappointed but said they understood that orders were orders. And the ladies of Hutchinson laid out a virtual feast for Company B, which the men greatly appreciated.

After their meal, Strout wasted no time in getting his command moving again. He was afraid many of the militiamen might have second thoughts about leaving their homes. However, when they marched out of town, all but ten of the volunteers remained with the company, which did not overly disappoint Strout. He was nonetheless glad when they were finally on the road. His planned route was to follow the Abercrombie Military road west and then take the Pembina-Henderson Trail north, which would take him through the small community of Acton and eventually Forest City.

While the battle of Birch Coulee was raging, two groups of warriors, formally under Little Crow's leadership, had been moving slowly to the northwest. Whenever they encountered a farm or a settler's cabin, they moved in to attack and to see what loot they could find. They even stopped at the farm where Brown Wing and his companions had stolen horses to make their escape weeks before. But the occupants had wisely abandoned that one, like almost all of the homes. Occasionally they found stray livestock or other items of some value, but otherwise they accomplished very little.

About the time that Colonel McPhail was ordering a retreat, a scout from the group now led by White Spider returned with important news. He had discovered Captain Strout's Company B setting up camp just off the Pembina-Henderson trail, a few miles south of Acton. White Spider did not know exactly what they should do, since the scout reported that the soldiers probably outnumbered his warriors two to one, so he went to consult his brother on the matter.

He found Little Crow where he had been for most of the trip, sitting dejectedly in his wagon next to Antoine Campbell. However, White Spider was encouraged as his brother listened to the news with renewed interest. "Should we attack them then you think, Brother?" White Spider

asked.

Little Crow just laughed and said, “I am just a brave. Why ask me?” But before White Spider could say anything in reply, the chief added enthusiastically, “Of course we should attack them! A Dakota warrior does not back away from his enemies. Send a message to Walker Among The Sacred Stones. Ask him, if he is not too busy burning empty farmhouses and is not afraid of the white soldiers, perhaps he would join us in attacking them.”

Delighted that his brother was showing signs of his old self again, and thankful that he himself did not have to make such the decision, White Spider immediately sent a brave to find Walker Among The Sacred Stones to deliver just that message.

As the battle of Birch Coulee was drawing to a close another was in progress, on a smaller scale, many miles to the north. The previous evening, after a march of thirty miles, Captain Richard Strout’s foot-sore men of Company B and their attached citizen soldiers went into camp along a creek a few miles south of Acton. Most of the exhausted soldiers were sound asleep less than half an hour after eating their supper, but Captain Strout had the sense to set out picket posts a good distance from the camp on either side of the creek, which ran west to east. The first soldiers on picket duty were relieved after six hours, and the second group was replaced just before dawn, the time that the Dakota planned to launch their attack.

The Dakota had planned a coordinated assault. A force led by White Spider would attack first from the south, causing the soldiers to retreat north where they would then encounter Walker Among The Stones and his men. The braves waiting in the north were expected to hold their fire, allowing White Spider’s men to drive the soldiers into their tomahawks, but as so often happens in such situations, one brave decided to start the battle on his own. One of Walker Among the Sacred Stones’ men wanted to be the first to kill a soldier, and so he charged a northern picket with his tomahawk. He did indeed kill the first man he encountered, but another soldier shot the brave dead at a range of about five feet. Naturally the shot alerted the other pickets and roused the main body of troops. White Spider’s men had no choice but to charge the camp before they were ready.

Strout called in his northern pickets and organized a defense around

the creek bed and his wagons. In their initial charge, the Dakota in the south made the mistake of bypassing the picket line and were subsequently attacked from those men from behind. Their assault was now completely disorganized and remained so for the rest of the battle. Once it was light enough to see clearly, Captain Strout told his men to collect as much ammunition as they could carry, and leading off with his Company B regulars, he set out to break through White Spider's lines. In fact, the Dakota were few in number in that direction with no organized line of battle to speak of, so Strout's men had little trouble breaking through. The soldiers did suffer casualties in the process, however, especially among the militiamen who lagged behind. But they kept moving, and the northern Dakota force was slow to follow.

The truth was that a good number of Walker Among The Sacred Stones' braves were not overly enthusiastic about making the attack, having been highly insulted by Little Crow's message. When the braves reached the wagons which Strout was forced to leave behind, most stopped to plunder them. Some joined up with White Spider's men, but many did not even bother to continue their pursuit after reaching the creek. Little Crow had joined in the fight but made no attempt to lead it. Perhaps if he had things might have turned out differently, but he did not, and his brother was not up to the task.

Captain Strout continued to push his men on to the south and for a time it was very much a running battle. They were forced to leave three dead behind, two Company B regulars and one militiaman, Edwin Stone. Half a dozen were wounded but kept up with the help of their comrades. The Dakota pursued for a time, but most of them were satisfied with the wagons and horses they had captured and were content to snipe at the soldiers from a long range. Two hours into the battle the Dakota gave up their chase altogether and went into camp near Cedar City, while the soldiers continued on to the south and eventually reached the sanctuary of Hutchinson. All in all, it could have turned out much worse for the soldiers had the Dakota had any strong leadership. Nonetheless, it was a costly skirmish for Captain Strout's command. The Dakota had achieved another victory that day.

