

Search for Marsh's Body

In the original version of the novel, Lorenzo Lawrence discovered the body of an officer floating on the river during their escape and dragged it onto shore. He reported its location to Sheehan when he arrived at Fort Ridgley, which led to the following expedition.

Colonel Crooks assigned Company C of the Sixth Regiment to assist Lieutenant Sheehan in his search for Marsh's body, and Sheehan also took along his own Company C of the Fifth. Altogether he had one hundred and seventy-five men for the mission. A rather excessive number, Sheehan thought, but Colonel Sibley had insisted on it.

At approximately 8:00 am, Sergeant John Hicks had Company C of the Fifth assembled in a column of twos on the parade ground near the west sally port. Behind them was a wagon and driver to carry Marsh's body back to the fort should it be found. Lieutenant Sheehan and Lorenzo Lawrence joined them at the parade ground a few minutes after the hour. When he arrived, Lawrence gazed down the rank of soldiers with a puzzled expression and asked Sheehan why they were taking so many men.

"Ha, this is only half of them, Mr. Lawrence."

"Why do we have so many? A few men in canoes would be enough."

"You will have to understand, Mr. Lawrence, that in the Army we follow orders, whether we think they make sense or not."

Lawrence just smiled and shook his head. "A Dakota soldier would never follow foolish orders."

"I suppose that is just one of the many ways that we are different," replied the lieutenant. "'h, here come our mounts." Sheehan waved his hand toward a man leading a pair of horses borrowed from the Renville Rangers. "Sergeant Hicks, would you trot up to the crossroads to see if our escort is assembled and ready to go?"

"Very good sir. I'll be right back."

Company C of the Sixth was assembled in a line of march on the New Ulm Road just south of the barracks square. Mounted on his horse at the head of the column was First Lieutenant Dana White, who, upon seeing Sergeant Hicks waving at him from the crossroad some 300 feet away, turned and hailed his second in command, Second Lieutenant Perry Alexander, who in turn ordered First Sergeant Zebulon Sargent to order

the men to forward march. Even though practically his whole company was to assist in the operation, Captain Hiram Bailey decided to stay behind, sending White and Alexander in his stead. Sheehan was to be in command of the operation, but Bailey outranked him and thought that this might lead to some awkward command situations if he were present. In any case, the mission seemed safe and simple enough, for they would not be going more than a few miles from the fort. And in the meantime Captain Bailey could catch up on some letter writing that he had been neglecting.

When the two companies converged at the crossroads, Sheehan's company took the lead with White's company falling in behind as they headed southwest along the Redwood Ferry road. After a few minutes, Lieutenant White trotted his horse up to the front of the column to greet Lieutenant Sheehan. "Good morning, sir. Lieutenant Dana White reporting for duty as ordered," said White, approaching Sheehan on the left and performing a crisp salute. The two men had not met before, and White was frankly curious about meeting the man who had defended Fort Ridgley from the savage hordes.

Sheehan returned the salute and extended his hand to White. "Good morning, Lieutenant. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

"The pleasure is all mine, sir," White replied, taking Sheehan's hand.

"May I present Mr. Lorenzo Lawrence, Lieutenant? He is a full-blooded Dakota and a very brave man. He is also a very good friend of mine."

White peered around Sheehan to make eye contact with Lawrence, who was riding to Sheehan's right. "Please to meet you, Mr. Lawrence," said White, touching the brim of his cap. Lawrence stared back at White in the expressionless, unnerving way that Dakota men sometimes had and acknowledged the greeting with a slight nod of his head.

"I suppose you're wondering why we needed your whole company to find one body, Lieutenant," said Sheehan, somewhat amused by White's reaction to Lawrence's stoic gaze.

"It had crossed my mind, yes, sir. Oh, and by the way, Captain Bailey sends his compliments and begs your pardon that he is not leading the company in person today."

"Tell the captain when you see him that I appreciate his compliments, but no pardon is necessary. This mission is not exactly the storming of Richmond. I am sure he has found a better use for his time. Actually,

Lieutenant, taking two companies out to find a single body was not my idea, but enough said on that score. What I was thinking was that I would use my men to search for the body while your company covered our backs, so to speak. How does that sound to you?"

"We are at your service, sir. With your permission, I will go back and inform my second in command, Lieutenant Alexander, of your plans."

"Very well, Lieutenant White. Please carry on."

"By your leave, sir."

As White trotted his horse back down the column, he was thinking about his first impression of Lieutenant Sheehan, which he judged to be very favorable. Sheehan was at least ten years his junior but gave one the impression of someone much older and of higher rank. He was in no way intimidating, but at the same time he seemed to instantly command one's respect. And he was right about this being a rather large force for a small job. At least the men will get some exercise, he thought.

Lieutenants Sheehan and White were standing in a cornfield chatting and smoking while they watched about twenty-five men from Company C of the Sixth harvest ears of corn and toss them into the empty wagon. On a trail just above them a twenty-man squad of infantrymen stood guard. Some of the enlisted men had asked if they could take back some of the corn, and neither officer had seen any reason why they should not. They had been searching for Marsh's body for over six hours with no result. Even if they eventually found it, which seemed unlikely at this point, there would still be plenty of room in the wagon for a few bushels of corn.

Lieutenant White was just about ready to suggest that they call off the search when Sergeant Hicks and Lorenzo Lawrence emerged from the timber to the west of the field. Hicks waved at the lieutenants and shook his head.

"Well, I think that just about does it for today, Lieutenant," said Sheehan, consulting his pocket watch, which read a quarter past two. "Why don't you go find Lieutenant Perry and inform him that we are about to head back?"

"Very good, sir," replied White, crushing his cigarette in the dirt under his boot.

"I'll get these men moving," added Sheehan. White nodded in response, saluted, and turned to get his horse, which was tied to a

cottonwood tree next to Sheehan's some two-dozen yards away.

Sheehan finished his smoke and tossed it to the ground as Hicks and Lawrence approached. "No luck, eh men?" he asked, returning Hicks' salute and nodding at Lawrence. Both men shook their heads.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant," said Lawrence. "I know that this is the field where we picked some corn. I left the captain's body perhaps a hundred yards upriver, but it was either washed away, or I am mistaken about where I left it."

"I would have to say that it was washed away," said Sheehan. "I know you could find a needle in a haystack, Mr. Lawrence, because I have seen you do it. Someone will find it downriver, or it may never be found."

"We did find a body, sir," said Hicks. "A woman, and she were pretty cut up."

"Damn! Probably the wife of the man who was farming this land. Well, there are some blankets in the wagon. Get those and wrap the body in them, then bring it up to the trail."

"We already buried her, sir," said Hicks. "The body was in pretty bad shape."

"Of course. Alright then, go get the men and assemble the company up on the trail over there," ordered Sheehan, pointing to the west. "I'll get this group moving."

"Very good, sir," replied Hicks, who trotted off the way he had come.

Sheehan offered Lawrence a cigarette, which he declined. Then, as he was about to fetch his horse, the lieutenant's attention was drawn to shouting from out in the field. A group of soldiers some fifty yards away was crowding around something. It became evident to the lieutenant that some kind of brawl was taking place.

"Stand back you men! What the hell is going on here?" barked Sheehan as he approached the group of about twenty soldiers. He had to grab several men by their shoulders to get their attention. "Stand back! That's an order soldier!" he shouted several times until his presence and rank were acknowledged. Inside the circle three men were on the ground. One, a thin man with a beard, was trying to sit up and held a hand to his chest, while the other was flat on the ground fending off blows from a stocky young man straddling his mid-section. The crowd of watchers now stood silently at attention, but the assailant continued, oblivious to Sheehan's presence and ignoring the pleas of the bearded man to stop. Sheehan had to use the sole of his boot and considerable force to push

the soldier off his victim, after which several of his fellows wisely jumped in to hold him back.

“Were the hell is your sergeant?” demanded Sheehan.

“Right there, sir,” offered one of the men, pointing to the man lying flat on his back.

“Are you alright, Sergeant?” asked Sheehan as the man struggled to get to his feet. His face was bruised and his lip and nose were bloodied.

“I believe so, sir. Clark! You bas—.” he started to say, turning on his assailant, who had gotten to his feet and was now standing at attention.

“Be silent, Sergeant! What is your name?” ordered Sheehan.

“Sergeant Lathrup, sir,” replied the sergeant, then turning to his assailant. “Clark, you son of a bitch, I’ll—.”

“Sergeant Lathrup, if you say one more word without my permission, I will have your stripes! Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir, Lieutenant,” Lathrup replied contritely, still trembling with anger.

“And your name, soldier?” asked Sheehan, turning to the attacker.

“Clark, sir. Private Samuel Clark, sir,” the man replied. He was also still shaking but seemed now to be under control.

Sheehan turned to the other man on the ground, whom he now recognized as Tom Barnes. Barnes tried to get up but made it only to his knees. He was obviously in considerable pain and having trouble catching his breath. “Two of you help Private Barnes to the wagon,” said Sheehan, addressing the spectators. “And the rest of you assemble up on the trail. You two stay right where you are!” After the men left with Barnes, Sheehan addressed the two miscreants. “Now, I want to hear exactly what happened, starting with you, Sergeant Lathrup. Private Clark, you will not open your mouth until the sergeant is finished! Understood?”

“Yes, sir!” the men replied in unison.

“Well, from what you’ve just told me, Lieutenant, I think someone’s about to lose their stripes,” said Captain Hiram Bailey, taking a deep pull on his cigar and pausing a moment to blow a mouth full of smoke up toward the ceiling of his headquarters tent. He was speaking to Lieutenant Sheehan, seated just across from him. Also present and seated beside the captain was Lieutenant White. “How does that sound to you, Lieutenant?” he asked White.

“It would be my pleasure to carry out your orders in that regard, sir, if the captain so chooses,” replied White with a grin.

“No, Lieutenant, that is my duty I am afraid,” said Bailey. “What I cannot understand is what got into Sergeant Lathrup. Those Birch Coulee boys are like heroes to the rest of the men. God Damn it! They are heroes! What would possess him to try and push Private Barnes around? Well, he’s busted down to private in any case, but what I am concerned about is what I should do with Private Clark. What do you think, Lieutenant Sheehan? He did strike a superior officer after all.”

“Sir, it really is not my place to say. I do not know Clark all that well, and I would assume his past conduct would be taken into consideration. What I do know is that he was defending his friend,” replied Sheehan. “Also, I would recommend that Private Barnes see a doctor as soon as possible.”

“Of course, Lieutenant, he will do that this evening. You’ll see to that, Lieutenant White?”

“Yes, sir, I definitely will.”

Back at the cornfield, Sheehan had questioned Clark and Lathrup for perhaps fifteen minutes until he felt he had a pretty good idea of what had happened. He also questioned Barnes and several other soldiers who were present to confirm his impressions. All of their stories corroborated Clark’s version of the events that had led up to the altercation. Apparently, Lathrup had told Barnes the previous day that he had to either report to the hospital or continue on full duty. Barnes had chosen the latter but was still hurting from the wound he had received. While not completely incapacitated, marching out with the company that morning had caused Tom considerable discomfort. They were not carrying full packs, but even the weight of his rifle and cartridge box were too much. Fortunately, when they reached the search area the soldiers of the Sixth were only required to stand on guard. Even so, Sam could tell that Tom was suffering. When the men began picking corn, Clark suggested that Tom lay down for a while, and by that time Tom was feeling so poorly that he did not protest and stretched out on the ground while the others started loading the wagon. Minutes later Lathrup came by and ordered Tom to get to his feet. Clark stepped in to protest and the sergeant lost his temper. He shoved Clark out of the way, yelled at Barnes, calling him lazy, then pushed him hard in the chest. Barnes dropped to the ground unable to catch his breath, and Clark stepped in again. That’s when the

brawl Sheehan witnessed ensued.

Sergeant Lathrup did not deny shoving Barnes, though he claimed he did it because he “thought Private Barnes was going to take a swing at me.” Sheehan doubted his claim. Lathrup had to weigh over 200 pounds and was a good three inches taller than the private, and when Sheehan examined Barnes' bare chest out on the cornfield, he came to doubt Lathrup's statement even more. During his examination, Sergeant Sargent arrived as ordered by Lieutenant White to collect the detail at the cornfield. In a private conversation with Sargent, Sheehan learned that Lathrup had been riding Barnes and Clark ever since they had returned from Birch Coulee.

“I don't know why, Lieutenant,” the sergeant told Sheehan. “But I would say Lathrup was just plain jealous of the two boys, seeing as how they were getting so much attention and all.”

“Could Barnes have been put on light duty?” Sheehan asked him.

“Yes, sir. There was no reason he couldn't have,” replied Sargent.

When Sheehan informed Lieutenant White of the incident, White was incensed and offered to report it to Captain Bailey, but Sheehan decided that since he had been a witness, he ought to speak to Bailey himself. White insisted that there was no order in their company requiring a man to report to the hospital or go on full duty, which Captain Bailey later confirmed.

Bailey impressed Sheehan as a fair-minded man, and he agreed that losing his stripes was more than a fair punishment for Lathrup. There was still the problem of what to do with Clark, however.

“Alright, here is what we are going to do about Clark,” said Bailey after several more draws on his cigar. “We cannot ignore the fact that he struck Sergeant Lathrup, no matter what we might feel about it personally. He has to go on report, and his punishment will be three nights of guard duty. Does that sound fair, gentlemen?”

“Yes sir,” both men responded.

“Good. Then you will go find Sergeant Lathrup and send him here immediately, Lieutenant White. When I am done with him bring Clark here.”

“Very good, sir,” replied White.

“Sir, I have a request, if you don't mind?” said Sheehan.

“Not at all, Lieutenant,” replied Bailey.

“I would like to have a word with Private Barnes if I may. It is a long

story, but I feel like I am the one who talked him into joining the army, and since I am leaving tomorrow for a few days, I...well, I would just like to see how he is doing.”

“Really? Hmm, I don’t see any reason why you shouldn’t, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you, sir. With your permission, I’ll go do that right now.”

Sheehan found Tom Barnes resting on a blanket in his tent, accompanied by Sam Clark and another private he did not know. Clark and the other man rose to attention when Sheehan entered, and Barnes tried to get up, but Sheehan stopped him with a wave of his hand. “Rest easy, Private,” he said with a smile. “I just came over to see how you were feeling.”

“Much better, sir,” replied Barnes. “Thank you for asking.”

“This is just a social call, men, nothing official. But I would like to speak to Private Barnes alone for a moment,” said Sheehan to the other two men, who both saluted and stepped outside the tent. Sheehan turned back to Barnes. “You know, I was just thinking about the first time we met, Mr. Barnes. Do you recall that day?”

“Yes sir, of course. You were looking for a place to camp.”

“Yes. Well, it is strange, but I had the notion then that you were thinking about joining up, and when I saw you in uniform for the first time, it occurred to me that I might have had something to do with that decision. I am not the least bit sorry for that, mind you, but I feel somewhat responsible for you being here, and ending up at Birch Coulee.”

“Sir, this is not your fault, if that is what you are thinking. I was thinking of joining up long before I met you. Maybe our meeting pushed me along a bit, but I truly believe that this is what the Lord had in mind for me. I’m not sorry I joined up either.”

Sheehan paused for a moment to study the palms of his hands, and then getting down on one knee, he put a hand on Barnes upper arm and said, “You remember when we first met, I told you I thought that you would make a good soldier?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, I think I was right about that, but let me give you a bit of advice. A good soldier takes care of his comrades first, and himself second. From what I hear, you’ve done the first, but you also need to do

the second.”

“I think I understand, sir.”

“I sincerely hope you do, Private. This is going to be a long war. After we whip the Sioux, as I’m sure we will, we still have the rebels to contend with. What I would like to see is both of us live to tell our grandchildren about it.”

“yes, sir. Lord willing, I hope so too.”

“Good. Well then,” said Sheehan getting to his feet, “you go see a doctor today, Private Barnes.”

“I will, sir, and thank you again.”

“I am not sure what for, Private, but...well, you take care of yourself. Consider that an order.”

A search for Marsh’s body was conducted, but the fist fight is fictional. Marsh’s body was never found.

