

## **The Wagon Box Fight Revisited**

By Lee Noyes

History abounds with examples of heroic military stands against overwhelming odds. Our own Association owes its existence to the legacy of “Custer’s Last Stand” on the Little Big Horn River in 1876. In 1879, the British army suffered a comparable defeat by the Zulu in South Africa at the Battle of Isandhlawana.

Yet not all stands end in disaster for those vastly outnumbered. One such successful defense was the August 1867 Wagon Box Fight in Wyoming near Fort Phil Kearny.

On that summer day, Capt. James Powell and 31 soldiers and civilians withstood the assaults of a large Lakota-Cheyenne war party until rescued by a relief force from the fort. Acting as guard for civilian woodcutters, part of Powell’s Company C, 27<sup>th</sup> Infantry, had been stationed prior to the attack in a corral formed by the beds (“boxes”) of Army wagons. The wagon bodies had been removed so that the running gears could be used to haul the cut timber.

The soldiers had been recently armed with breechloading Springfield rifles. Some have argued that these converted Civil War muzzleloaders turned the tide of battle. The unexpected rapid fire of the new weapon could very well have saved Powell’s small command.

The Oglala warrior, Red Cloud, is said to have been the principal Indian leader at the Wagon Box Fight. If so, the soldiers’ successful defense is all the more remarkable. Historians have credited the Lakota chief for the outcome of “Red Cloud’s War” (1866-1868)—the abandonment of the Bozeman Trail to the Montana gold fields and the forts established to guard this shortcut through tribal lands.

This year’s field trip will be to the site of the Wagon Box Fight and, time permitting, Fort Phil Kearny. On this journey, we will be capably guided by Jerry Keenan, author of *The Wagon Box Fight: An Episode of Red Cloud’s War*. The 2000 revision of his book will be available prior to our trip.

*The Dispatch* had the opportunity to speak with Jerry Keenan on the heroic stand of Capt. Powell and his command. A free lance writer retired from the book publishing business, his articles have appeared in *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* and other historical journals. He is the author of several other books, including *Encyclopedia of American Indian Wars*. The Longmont, Colorado resident is finishing a full-length biography of the scout Luther “Yellowstone” Kelly.

Our conversation focused on the outcome of the Wagon Box Fight, which was depicted (or distorted) by Hollywood in the 1951 film *Tomahawk*. Why did Powell’s command survive? Or, why did the Indians fail?

To answer these questions, we must, in Keenan’s words, “focus on the myths and memories that have shaped our perception” of that fight and the Indian wars in general.

He concedes that the Model 1866 Springfield rifle played a significant role in the Wagon Box Fight. "The volume of fire," he notes, "unsettled the Indians." The new weapon was "a complete surprise."

Rapid firepower alone, however, cannot explain the outcome of this engagement. Indian casualties as well as the size of the war party have been exaggerated (even Powell's conservative estimate of 60 killed may be high). The effect of the improved rifle was limited by the skills of the enlisted men that fired it.

The breechloaders had arrived at Fort Phil Kearny less than a month before the fight; and there is no evidence that sufficient time was devoted to target practice with this or any other firearm (a general failure that the U.S. Army did not correct until after the Little Big Horn).

The Fort Phil Kearny garrison was a microcosm of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Regular Army. It was composed of "largely untrained soldiers," their time devoted to building the fort and other manual tasks. Powell's men were, as Keenan emphasizes, simply "laborers in uniform."

The timely appearance of the relief column (and a few well placed artillery shells) may account from a *military* perspective for the survival of Powell's command as much as superior firepower.

Jerry Keenan believes that we must look elsewhere to explain the outcome of the Wagon Box Fight. Warriors of the Plains were unwilling to take losses in battle, especially against a defensive position. "The Indian view of war," he emphasizes, "was so drastically different."

Raiders by temperament, uncoordinated in their attacks, the Indians "consistently failed to take advantage of opportunities." Thus after the failure of the initial assault on the corral failed, the Lakota lost the initiative that day in 1867.

The Native American psychology of warfare negated the Indians' numerical advantage. They certainly had the strength to overwhelm the defenders. In fact, Powell and other defenders did not expect to live through their ordeal.

Fort Phil Kearny was thus never threatened during Red Cloud's War despite the contrary feelings of the besieged garrison after the destruction of Capt. William Fetterman's command in Dec. 1866. The so-called "Fetterman Massacre," in Keenan's opinion, encouraged the separate Indian attacks at the Wagon Box Fight and the Hayfield Fight near Fort C. F. Smith the day before.

Notwithstanding the Army's tactical victories and superior weapons on both occasions, the Lakota accomplished their goal. The 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty closed the Bozeman Trail.

With the closing of the Trail, Fort Phil Kearny and the other posts that "guarded" it were abandoned.

*This article first appeared in the Spring 2002 **Battlefield Dispatch**. CBHMA member Jerry Keenan presented a paper on the Wagon Box Fight at the 2002 Symposium in Hardin.*

*In retrospect, he notes that the new weapons issued to the Fort Phil Kearny garrison may not have been a "complete surprise" to the Lakota-Cheyenne force that attacked Capt. Powell's command.*

*"They had fought against soldiers armed with Spencers and, of course, the two civilians with Fetterman had had Henrys, but most of Carrington's command had been equipped with muzzle loaders, so the Indians had every reason to expect that this was the weapon they would be facing at Wagon Box."*

*Jerry Keenan's most recent book, **The Life of Yellowstone Kelly**, is on our Book List. He may be contacted by email at [jerrykeen@comcast.net](mailto:jerrykeen@comcast.net). Ed.*