

Editor's Note: Hervey Johnson, of Hillsboro, Ohio, was a private in the 11th Ohio Cavalry, stationed in the mid-1860s at a string of small posts along the Sweetwater River from Independence Rock to South Pass, 100 miles to the west. Their main duty was to protect the line of the transcontinental telegraph—"the line," he calls it here. Frequently the line was cut by American Indian tribesmen; often large portions of the line were carried away to make it more difficult to repair.

During his three years in the Army, Johnson wrote about 100 letters home to his sisters and mother in Ohio. The family were Quakers, so he often uses the pronouns "thee" and "thy" instead of "you" and "your." From various sources at the time he heard about the July 25, 1865, battle at Platte Bridge Station. At the time he wrote this letter, Johnson was stationed at a post on the Sweetwater near Independence Rock, about 55 miles west of Platte Bridge, which he generally refers to here as "the Bridge." This letter was written Aug. 6, 1865, 12 days after the battle. (Footnotes are carried over from the version of Johnson's letter appears in Unrau, ed., Tending the Talking Wire; full citation given at the end of the passage.)

Sweet Water [Dakota Territory]

Aug 6th 1865.

Sister Sybil

Thy letter of July 6th [I] received day before yesterday. I wrote two letters yeste[rday], one to Frank and Semira and one to a corresponden[t in] Iowa. I wrote such a long letter the last time I wro[te] that I am afraid I cant find enough to fill up [the] sheet. The mail was brought up from the Bridge by a party that went down to repair the line and get some medicine for some sick men here. The line was cut on the 25th of last month, has not been fixed yet. I dont remember whether I told about it in my other letter or not. Lieutenant Bretney and ten men went down, or started to the Fort to get pay for our company The line was open before they started and we could hear nothing from them after they left. Several of our boys got sick and needed medicine badly and we could get no word to the doctor who was at Deer Creek. The Orderly Sergeant concluded to send twenty men down for medicine. The operator from here went with them taking wire and repair tools, though it was against orders for us to repair line between here and the bridge, our district being from S. W. to South Pass. They left just at dark and next morning about 9 o'clock we supposed they were repairing the line, for somebody was working at it, but it was a mistake. It was the operator from the bridge, he had come out [word missing] to the west end of the break with his instru[ments and] was telling Salt lake of a terrible battle that [had been] fought there.¹

¹ This was the battle of Platte Bridge, July 26, 1865. Even though twenty-eight soldiers were killed, including the young and apparently inexperienced Lieutenant Caspar Collins (see letter of August 29, 1863, n.29), the Indians

There was a man here who could [phrase missing] and gathered that the place had been invested [with abo]ut three thousand indians, that the battle lasted [number missing] days, that twenty seven men were killed among whom [was] Lieutenant Collins, second Lieutenant of our company. [Abou]t five miles of wire was torn down and most of it carried [away]. He soon stopped working and we could hear nothing [mo]re. We supposed the boys that went from here were "taken in" as he didn't say any thing about them.

Day before yesterday morning the sentinel reported that he saw a dust rising from the road about ten miles from here (we can see the road in places for twenty miles.) The dust moved along nearer and nearer as we watched it, till we finally could see men in a body coming. In the course of an hour they got here They were Bretney's party, and the party of twenty that went from here. Bretney and his men got to the Bridge just in time to save themselves, they got there in the night. The line was first cut east of the brige about a mile, a party of Kansas boys went down to fix it, the indians charged them from the brush along the river, one soldier was killed and four indians, one of whom was a noted Cheyenne Chief. the boys scalped him and took his equipments, he had on a buckskin jacket with about seven points of beads on it. He had about a dozen white scalps hung to his own scalp-lock, the boys took every thing from him and hacked him up considerably and left him.²

Collins was killed while leading a charge. He had charged the indians once lost four men killed and seven wounded, and leading the second charge his horse became unmanageable and took him into the midst of the indians. The last that was seen of him alive, he was riding between two indians who had hold of him, and both of whom he killed with his revolver. His body was found stripped and so horribly mutilated as to scarcely be recognized, near his body was a note written in female hand stating that the writer was a prisoner that the war party consisted of Sioux Cheyennes Arrapahoes Comanches and Blackfeet and numbered fifteen hundred. that one of the Cheyenne Chiefs had been killed and that they were going to stay four days and take the post. (They only staid three days, but didnt take it.)

There was a small train of four Gov't wagons with an escort of twenty six men on their way to the bridge from here, they had got in five miles of the post the morning after Bretny got in in the

failed to seize this important installation. This letter from Johnson had one corner missing, accounting for a large number of bracketed inserts. See Vaughn, *The Battle of Platte Bridge, passim*.

² Here Johnson is probably referring to High Wolf, a distinguished Northern Cheyenne leader. In this preliminary but significant encounter to the main battle at Platte Bridge, High Wolf was wounded in the stomach by gunshot, played dead after his mount had bolted into a thicket near the Platte River, and then sustained numerous knife wounds about the heart at the hands of Privates Henry Lord and Jim Porter of Company 1, Eleventh OVC. He suffered these wounds with stoic indifference, but when Lord and Porter attempted to scalp him, the Indian leader begged mercy. At this point he was fatally shot through the brain. By "equipments" Johnson makes reference to High Wolf's scalp; as well, he may have been referring to the deceased's scrotum—often a highly prized part of the human anatomy that frontier soldiers used for tobacco pouches. A well-documented account of High Wolf's tragic death is in Vaughn, *The Battle of Platte Bridge*, pp.4, 48-50.

night. They were attacked and all but three killed, the wagons plundered and burnt and the bodies of the men burnt with them after they had been stripped and scalped. Their charred bodies were found and buried after the fight. This fight was the most obstinate and desperate that has occurred on the plains, the indians showed unusual bravery, often charging our men in the face of a storm of bullets, beating them with lances bows and clubs, in many instances fighting hand to hand with revolvers and knives. One indian was seen trying to scalp a soldier on horse back, the boy had discharged his revolver and had no chance to reload, he was riding alongside the indian who had him by the hair with one hand and was trying to scalp him with the other, and would have done it, had it not been for two of Bretneys men (Tommie Sinclair³ was one of them) who rode up and shot the indian. There were only one hundred and fifty soldiers engaged. Only two belonging to our regiment were killed, Collins and a man belonging to Co. "I." who was driving one of the teams. The evening of the third day the indians moved off dividing, the larger party going north, the other going south. William Boardman has written an account of the affair, which will appear in the Highland News about the time you get this.⁴

Night before last an indian came up here and untied a horse from the "corral," the guard shot at him before he had got ten steps away, but he missed the indian and badly wounded the horse. The indian was on foot, had left his pony under the hill, the tracks of several ponies were seen next morning not far off. forty six men leave here this afternoon for the Bridge. I am one of the detail. The line is not repaired yet and no person knows when it will be as there is not wire enough at the stations along to do it. Well I have got my letter nearly finished and when I begun it I thought it would be impossible to find matter enough to fill this sheet but I have done it without saying a word in answer to Sybil's letter for which neglect you must excuse me. I must close up and get ready to start

Write soon

Hervey.

³ Private Tommie Sinclair was a member of Company G, Eleventh OVC. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁴ Boardman's report was delayed until January 25, 1866. Under the heading, "THE DEATH OF LIEUT. CASPAR W. COLLINS, 11TH O.V.C. CAUSED BY THE COWARDICE OR INCOMPETENCY OF THE COMMANDING OFFICER AT THE PLATTE BRIDGE—THE TRUE HISTORY OF THE MATTER—OFFICIAL INQUIRY DEMANDED BY COL. COLLINS," Boardman charged that "... we do not see how a Court of Inquiry can fail to find Major [Martin] Anderson [of the Eleventh Kansas Cavalry] guilty, if not of downright cowardice, at least gross incompetence and shameful neglect of duty, deserving the severest punishment," *Highland Weekly News*, Hillsboro, Ohio, January 25, 1866. No official inquiry was held, probably because it was generally assumed that an attempted rescue of Collins on the part of Anderson and his small force would have been suicidal. Nadeau, *Fort Laramie*, pp. 188-97.

SOURCE:

Johnson, Hervey. Edited by William E. Unrau. *Tending the Talking Wire: A Buck Soldier's View of Indian Country, 1863-1866*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1979, pp. 213-215.