

### **The Cavalry Marches West**

Once the Civil War was over, the Indians represented a small-scale problem for the governors and military men of the already great American nation. A wave of pacifism overtook the country and the President at the time, Andrew Johnson, decreased the size of the regular army. However, the Indian problem kept the frontier closed burning it became necessary to send in reinforcements. The cavalry was the most efficient weapon against the Indians and in spite of the fact that mounted units were expensive, four new regular cavalry regiments were created to reinforce the six existing ones. These ten cavalry regiments were positioned along the Great Plains, patrolling the vast territory and protecting the white man's interests.

### **The Indian Adversary**

In 1865, it is estimated that 270,000 Indians lived in the territories along the western shores of the Mississippi River, which extended from the arid lands of New Mexico, Arizona and Texas to the green prairies of

Montana. The redskins were not a united people, but rather disparate Indian nations following with different cultures. Each nation was divided into tribes and then into villages, small groups with a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle; they were independent and took their own decisions.

The most important Indian nation was the Dakota generally known as the Sioux, a name encompassing tribes such as Brulee, Oglala, Hunkpapa, Sans Arc, Minneconju and a few smaller tribes. Other significant tribes included the Nez Percé, Crow, Cheyenne, Comanche, Arapahoe and Apache. They did not all live in peaceful coexistence; some were mortal enemies, while others upheld traditional alliances. In daily life, at times villages belonging to the same tribe would join forces to form warring parties or to celebrate certain religious rites. More commonly, however, villages were unrelated and wandered independently across the vast territories. Finding a camp of several thousand Indians became the most important military goal...



Wagon trains crossing the prairies along the crags of the Oregon Trail, the well-travelled access route to the land 'promised to the white man'.

*The internment policy of placing Indians on reservations that the U.S. government attempted to impose was not usually carried out in a humane or peaceful manner. The Indian Wars were directed by a military leadership that found it hard to come to terms with the new ways of war as waged by the Indians. The photo shows some of the leaders of these confrontations. From left to right, Generals Phil Sheridan, George Forsyth, Wesley Merrit, George Crook and George Armstrong Custer.*



### **Patrolling the Frontier**

Exercising control over such a complex number of Indian tribes and villages, dispersed throughout such a gigantic territory was practically impossible. When trying to reach a peace agreement, there was no one leader or group of leaders able to represent all the tribes and, even less so, to impose any agreement on them. Hence, during

the Indian Wars, great battles were not a common occurrence, but rather the wars were characterised by hundreds of small, sporadic confrontations. This, then, was the reason why, once the Civil War was over, it took 25 years to subjugate the Native Americans.

The cavalry units were divided into garrisons, called frontier posts or forts, situated strategically along the frontier. Their mission was to guarantee the passage of the settlers and to protect farmers, miners, and railroad and telegraph installations and operators and any other interests of the white man. The most important actions usually took place during search and destroy campaigns against Indian settlements. It was there where the cavalry represented the most significant weapon in the persecution and eventual annihilation of the enemy.

All the army units and their respective forts formed part of a logistic and administrative organisation controlled from Washington D.C. that divided the country's territory into regions called Divisions, in turn broken down into Departments. The Pacific and Missouri Departments were primarily in charge of the Indian Wars.



### *'Visit to Another Tribe'*

*Painting by Edgar Samuel Paxton*

*As well as the usual problems and risks involved with any long, arduous journey, the settlers were always aware of the latent danger of the Indians, though not always in a warlike manner. The army, having to patrol vast expanses of land with scarce resources, was often not on hand to offer the required protection.*

## LIFE ON THE PLAINS

### A Day on the Plains

Life at the frontier was extremely tedious: The monotonous noise of pick, shovel and wheelbarrow that extended day after day throughout the construction or improvements to the deficient forts and other frontier posts. Barrack tasks, such as the tedious guards duties, cleaning the privies and stables, serving in the hospital or kitchen, caring for the horses or cutting firewood, did nothing to help raise the troop's moral.

Occasionally, it was necessary to abandon the fort and carry arms. The most usual mission was to go in search of water or other provisions. Others were destined to set out on routine patrol, escort wagon trains and hunt down hostile Indian war parties. Even on these last occasions, contact with the Redskins was very rare, as the Indians tended to avoid direct confrontation although careful precautions had to be taken to avoid ambushes.

The truly adventurous lifestyle was experienced when on campaign. Large distances were travelled across unknown lands and never-ending plains. At night, when the weather was good, uninterrupted sleep was possible and during inclement weather, refuges were sought and the famous conical 'Sibley' tents were erected.

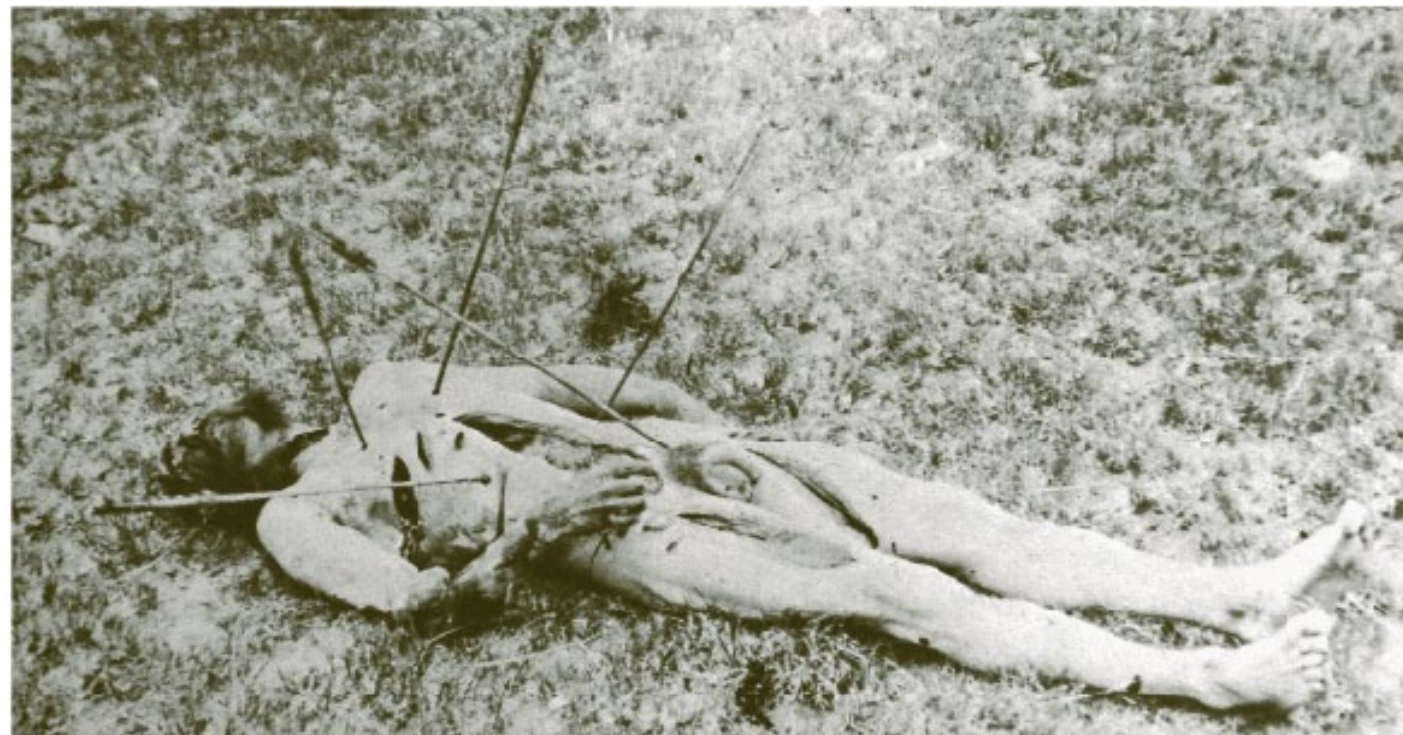
### Training

The lack of economic resources, due to the penny pinching of the government, meant that the necessary firing exercises

and weapons training, tactics and manoeuvres and horse riding were inadequate. The lack of ammunition meant that, for many troopers, a fight with Indians was their first combat experience without knowing how to adjust the sights of their carbine. From 1872 onwards, an official minimum of 40 cartridges was placed at the disposal of each trooper for firing practice although, in reality, the scarcity of ammunition in many garrisons was such that the allowance could not be fulfilled. Only units with renowned leaders, such as Custer's 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment and Mackenzie's 4th were able to instruct their soldiers in the use of arms, even managing to form a company of elite marksmen.

### The Poor Diet

Food was both bad and scarce and Civil War supplies continued to be supplied for many years after the cessation of the conflict. These usually included salt pork, some beef, coffee (un-roasted and un-ground) and some biscuits, so-called 'hardtack', that were hard enough to break a tooth and required softening in liquid. These were used to make a type of highly nutritious broth by mixing them with fat and bacon. Depending on the distance from the fort and level of corruption of the quartermasters, other food such as barrels of potatoes, apples, onions, eggs and butter could also reach the soldiers. However, shortages were usually such that the troopers were forced to supplement their diet through pur-



A gruesome act could take place suddenly, with an unexpected aftermath. The photo shows the body of Sergeant Frederick Wylliams, Company G, 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, exactly as his comrades near Pond Creek Station discovered it, some miles from Fort Wallace, Kansas. Scalping, or pulling out the hair, the amputation of limbs and cutting, were rituals commonly practiced by the Indians on their victims in the belief that, even in the afterlife, a fallen warrior would be not retaliate.

The usual punishment for mild breaches of discipline was confinement, being assigned barrack tasks, among other punishments. In the photo titled 'Moral Session Horse' taken at Fort Brigger, Wyoming, the soldier remained in this position holding the heavy wooden sabre for a given time as punishment for having broken some rule.



chasing or stealing food, cultivating small gardens and hunting. After 1880, tinned food appeared, which facilitated the supply of food and led to an improvement in the diet.

### Discipline

One of the most frequent problems for the officers was the enforcement of discipline. It was not unusual to find indulgent officers that permitted a relaxation of the rules, but when some limits were crossed, punishment could, at times, be excessive. If the offence was not serious, punishment was administered within the unit. Only the most grave cases were judged by a convened court martial.

### Disease

Illnesses caused more deaths than combat itself. The poor food, contaminated water and, in general, the poor living conditions, combined with a lack of medical personnel and the low qualifications of the available medical staff increased the number of sick up to a tenth of each unit. Common illnesses were scurvy, dysentery, cholera and venereal diseases. The lack of adequate hygiene also contributed to the prolongation of these diseases.

The enemy's use of large calibre ammunition produced serious damage and the bullet wounds became easily infected and gangrenous, hence amputation was a common prac-

tice. Arrows were especially difficult and only a surgeon skilled in this type of wound could guarantee recovery. Another common accident was falling from horseback.

### The 'Snowbirds' (1): Deserters

Desertion was rife, varying between 25% and 40% of the active troops annually. One of the reasons motivating this disloyal practice was the fact that the men had other opportunities to earn money during the winter months. Sometimes, desertion took place at crucial moments, such as on campaign against the Indians; hence it is understandable that many officers, like Custer, decided to order deserters to be shot, in order to warn others from doing the same.

(1) Nickname given to the deserters. It alluded to the migratory 'snowbirds' that only stayed in certain places during winter, sheltering from the harsh weather.

A long tiring journey awaited the new cavalry soldier before reaching his assigned unit. He generally began the trip by train to the station nearest his unit as far away as Dakota or Wyoming. From there he continued by whatever means available. This journey itself was a first adventure and he arrived at his post, somewhere on the Great Plains, tired, dirty and very hungry.



## HORSE FURNITURE

During the peak of the war against the Indians in 1876, many of the cavalry regiments' horses were still equipped with saddles and other furniture from the Civil War. This equipment was of poor quality given its hasty manufacture and cost cutbacks, essential in order to quickly produce thousands of saddles, bridles and other accessories. The badly cut and died leather gave them an old and tarnished look. While some leather items quickly deteriorated under the harsh climatic conditions of the Great Plains others, such as the bridles and stirrups had to be maintained in good working order.

The U.S. Cavalry regulation saddle was the popular model created by a captain of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry, George McClellan, in 1855 and it was named after him. The design was based on a Prussian model and remained in use until the First World War with a few modifications. Its wooden frame was very strong and was covered in rawhide. All the saddle pieces were made of black-dyed leather, although it is possible to find models in various hues of brown.

The saddle blanket was placed under the saddle and was made from indigo blue wool. It was

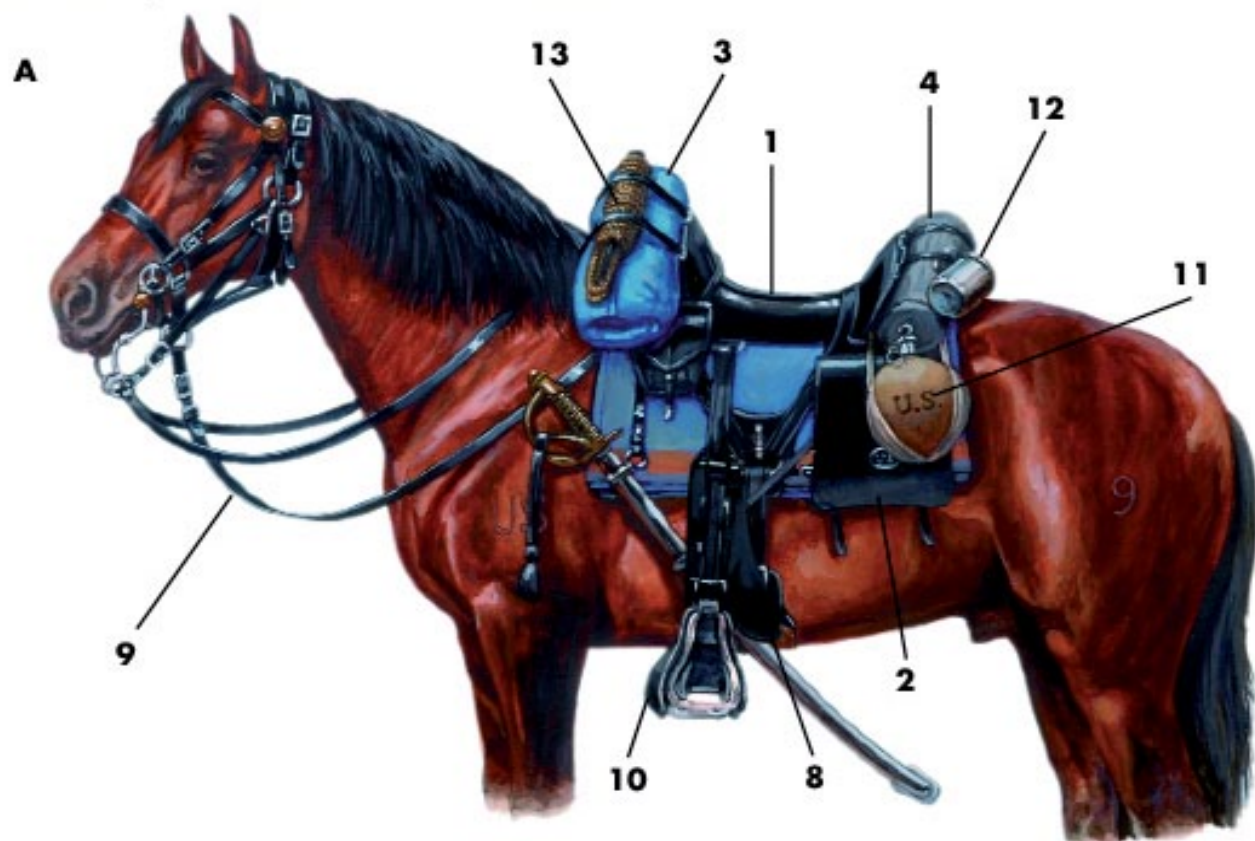
190 cm long (75") by 170 cm wide (67"), but was folded several times until six layers were obtained. It was trimmed with a fringe of 7.62 cm (3"), normally orange and in the centre, appeared the initials 'U.S.'

The saddle was also used to support the rest of the riding equipment. It was most important to avoid overloading the horse. However, on many occasions, especially when campaigns lasted for months and greater quantities of rations, ammunition and forage had to be carried, as well as extra blankets and ponchos, this was unavoidable. On reconnais-

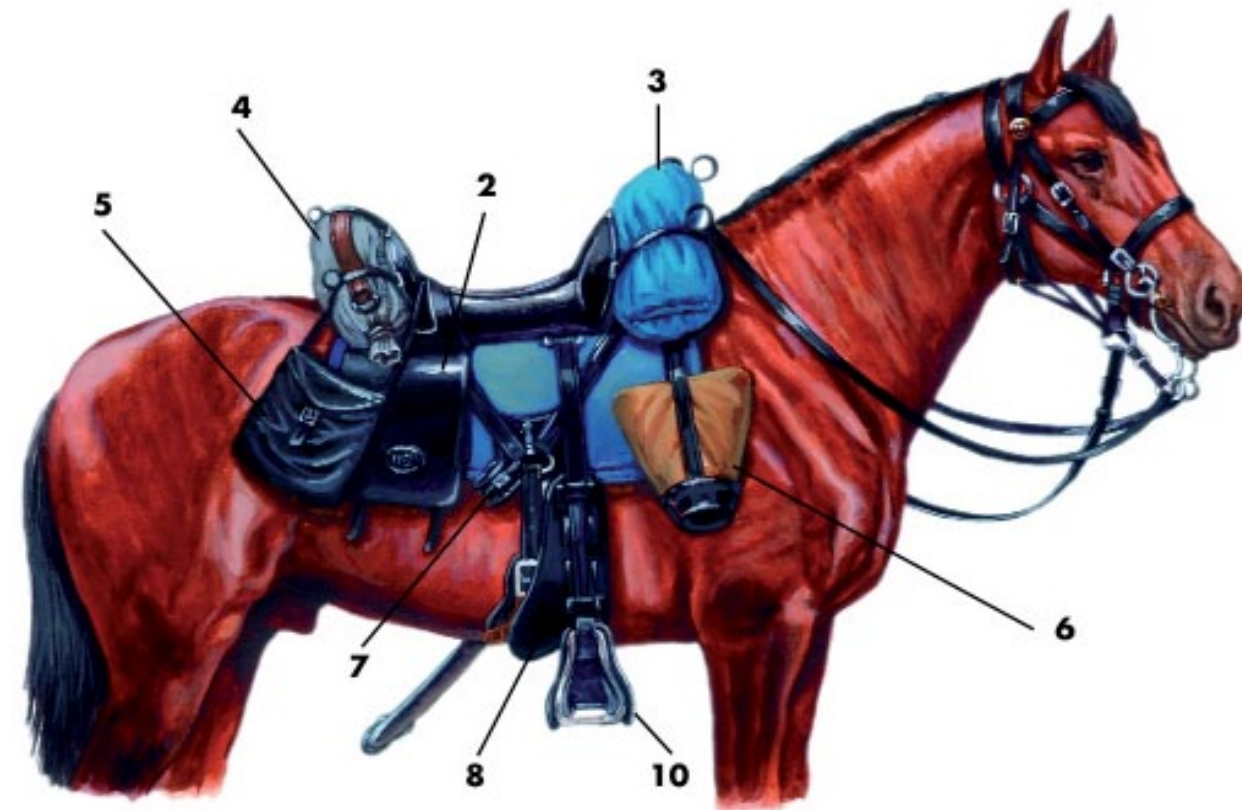
sance or patrol missions or when pursuing the enemy, every unnecessary item was placed in the baggage train. The use of non-regulation articles was also quite common. The officers usually carried different elements including girths made from other materials or a dark blue saddlecloth with a yellow fringe.

### Plates A & B

- 1) 1874 McClellan model saddle
- 2) Two black leather saddlebags hung from each side of the saddle for storing ammunition, rations, etc.
- 3) Blanket roll
- 4) Forage bags carrying horse feed, generally oats.
- 5) Bag/pouch
- 6) Nose bag, which was hung from the horse's head for feeding, made of leather and canvas
- 7) Carbine socket
- 8) Saddle skirts. They were uncomfortable and the rider often discarded them:
- 9) Bridles
- 10) Stirrups. Generally made from walnut or American oak wood, made from a single piece for the troops; the officers' stirrups were made of metal. Some troopers and officers fitted a protective cover at the front.
- 11) Canteen
- 12) Tin mug
- 13) Lariat and picket pin



B



### Plate C

- 1) Binoculars / field glasses and their case.
- 2) Horse riding gauntlets: They were generally white (White Berlin) or buff.
- 3) Spurs. They were usually of steel with a simpler design than the officer's gilt/brass ones shown here.
- 4) 1874 Model canvas and buffalo hide boots, for use in cold temperatures.
- 5) Riding boots, 1872 Model. They were designed without a distinction between left and right feet. Several models were manufactured with slight variations in design and quality, depending on the supplier.
- 6) Lariat and picket pin. As trees were rare on the prairies, the only means of picketing a horse was to use an iron stake in the ground.
- 7) Canteen. Made from metal and covered in canvas or woollen material; some models were stencilled with 'U.S.' on the cover along with the owner's name or other identifying mark.

C

