

## Defending Western Trails: Arms of the Eleventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry, 1862–1865

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The Eleventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry was originally mustered as Companies A, B, C, and D of the Seventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry and was then consolidated with the Sixth Ohio Volunteer Cavalry on December 19, 1861, to form the First Battalion of the Sixth. The regiment was stationed at Fort Laramie in May, 1862. During the following two and one-half years, the Sixth Ohio was involved in some minor Indian skirmishes, but served primarily to guard the Oregon and Overland trails in northern Colorado, western Nebraska, and across the expanse of what would become the state of Wyoming. Throughout this period, the regiment established outposts at a number of telegraph and stage stations. It also built Fort Collins, Colorado, on the Cache la Poudre River and Fort Halleck on the Overland Trail near Elk mountain which is ~125 miles north and west of the present-day city of Laramie. A second battalion of four companies was formed for the regiment in the summer of 1863 and the two were combined to form the redesignated Eleventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry. Companies I, K, and L were organized on June 30, 1864, at Fort Laramie from surplus recruits assigned to the regiment. The entirety of the Eleventh's service was spent entirely between western Nebraska and Salt Lake City, Utah.<sup>1</sup>

The complete history of the regiment is full, rich, and varied—as with any regiment of the Civil War period—but the men did not serve in the manner they expected. In fact, when William O. Collins of Hillsboro, Ohio, volunteered to form a regiment for service against the southern Confederacy; he and the men who answered his call expected to serve in ways which would place them in the thick of battle, defending the Union cause. Cincinnati was alive with patriotic fervor as Collins wrote to Senator John Sherman on October 15, 1861, when informed that he would be able to enlist and command a regiment, Collins said he expected “to aid in Kentucky or fight here as might become necessary.” From the start, the colonel complained about difficulties in obtaining cavalry arms and equipment. His complaints escalated when it was determined that his regiment would be sent to fight Indians and not Confederates. The purpose of this present paper is to describe the arming of the Eleventh Ohio and how this relates to the manner in which protecting the Oregon and Overland Trails was really just a sideshow amidst campaigns, battles, and logistics in the East and South.



By March of 1862 the regiment, designated the Sixth Ohio Volunteer Cavalry, had been mustered and was encamped at Camp Dennison and Benton Barracks near Cincinnati. The men were slowly being issued uniforms and were receiving both mounted and dismounted drill and instruction about caring for their horses. Assembled aboard the steamboat *Sam Gaty*, they disembarked for Fort Leavenworth. Here, with their newly issued Colt model 1851 .36-caliber Navy revolvers and Enfield muskets, they engaged in target practice. Because they had been fired upon by snipers along the river they felt motivated, but skeptical that they would ever get a shot at a Confederate soldier. Gathered at Camp Murray, they performed daily drills. They practiced loading and firing the Colt revolvers in four separate platoons while squads comprised of five men were allowed to hunt, each carrying just five rounds for their Enfields. Finally they marched north into Nebraska and west to their new headquarters at Fort Laramie in what is now east-central Wyoming. They were now known as the Rocky Mountain Detachment for defense of the Overland Mail Route. By July the companies were scattered, with small detachments garrisoning telegraph and stage stations almost as far as Salt Lake City. There was still a heavy westward migration and traffic on the trails going both east and west was noticeable.

There was more fear of Indian attack than its actuality. Marauding bands of Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians made a sport of running horses away from the stations and as early as July 1, 1862, orders were issued for a detachment to pursue Indians who had cut down the telegraph line. The Ohio troops were ordered to repair the line and to provide escort for telegraph employees. The cavalrymen were issued



**Figure 1. Colonel William O. Collins, commanding, Eleventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry. Courtesy of Denver Public Library, Western History Department.**

20 musket rounds each and 12 Navy revolver rounds. Ammunition was in limited supply and the cumbersome muskets were far from ideal for cavalry use. Colonel Collins already faced an almost insurmountable supply problem. First, he was a long way from major supply depots. Second, his needs were of a much lower priority than those of troops engaged in battles to the east. This was in spite of the importance placed on keeping east-west transportation and communication lines open to serve national needs.

Finally, after 15 months of duty with the old and cumbersome Enfields the men of the regiment voted to purchase their own arms. Two hundred new Wesson breech-loading .44-caliber carbines were acquired from Benjamin Kittridge of Cincinnati for \$23.12 each, with the government agreeing to purchase the needed ammunition from the Kittridge firm. The purchase was authorized on June 15, 1863, by George B. Wright, Quartermaster General for Ohio with an endorsement from James W. Ripley, Brigadier General and Chief of Ordnance. Colonel Collins found the Wesson carbines to be satisfactory and requested that the government supply 150 additional arms for the second

battalion being formed in Cincinnati, to bring the regiment to full strength. He also requested the issuance of the latest pattern Colt Army revolvers in .44-caliber to replace Navy models.<sup>2</sup>

At this time, as Collins was enlisting the additional companies to fill out the regiment (which would now be redesignated the Eleventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry) he finally had a crack at Confederates. The second battalion joined an expedition in pursuit of General John Hunt Morgan, following his fruitless "Ohio Raid" in July of 1863. After this diversion, the troops finally moved west toward Fort Laramie and encamped near Fort Leavenworth by the end of August. With news of William Clarke Quantrill's raid on Lawrence they were drawn into pursuit of the Confederate guerrillas. Their involvement was brief at best and by September 20th they arrived at Fort Kearny, Nebraska.<sup>3</sup>

Colonel Collins was busy prior to the pursuit of Morgan's raiders. He was armed with personal letters from political and military contacts to the ordnance officer at Camp Dennison. As a result, the Ohio recruits were issued 370 Spencer rifles and 350 Remington .44-caliber army revolvers which, according to the regimental ordnance report for July 28th, were distributed to other troops but were finally returned after the pursuit of Morgan, for the trip west. During the Quantrill action 12 Spencers and 15 Remington revolvers were taken by deserters. In studying records of the time it is easy to presume that the shoulder weapons in question were actually Spencer carbines. Ordnance documents make it clear that even though the Ohio regiment was cavalry, the weapons were indeed rifles. They were issued complete with bayonets and slings. Serial numbers survive for all weapons issued to the Ohio troops including the Spencers, Wessons, Colts and Remingtons with none over four digits.<sup>4</sup>

The men learned to favor the Spencers in confrontations with Indian raiders. In one account an Eleventh Ohio trooper was described as being surrounded by Indians. "He unloaded his spencer at them in such a style that they didnt [sic] feel like coming nearer than two hundred yards." Indeed, the Ohio farm boys loved the Spencers. One wrote home enthusiastically: "perhaps I never told you what kind of arms we had. They are an entirely new and different pattern from any arm yet introduced into the United States service. Tis called the Spencer Repeating Rifle. Metallic [sic] cartridges are used for loading it, seven cartridges are fired from it one after another with great rapidity, and it is loaded with seven more much quicker than the old peices [sic] are with one. It is my intention to bring one of them home with me."<sup>5</sup>

On October 19, 1863, orders were issued at Fort Laramie for the organization of an artillery battery for the regiment. Commanded by 2d Lieutenants J. L. Humfreville and Caspar W. Collins (son of Col. William O. Collins) the

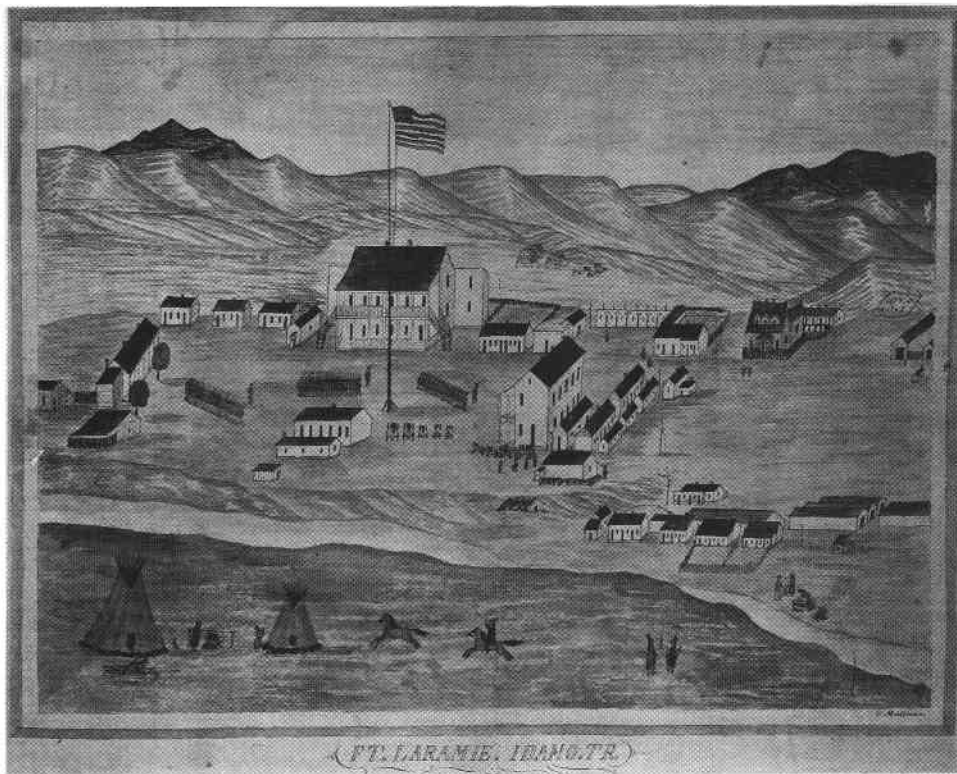


Figure 2. Fort Laramie, Dakota Territory, as painted by bugler Charles Moellman, circa 1864. Notice both Napoleon cannons and 12-lb Mountain Howitzers on the parade ground. Eleventh Ohio Cavalry parade with fixed bayonets on their Spencer rifles. There were no infantry troops stationed at Laramie at this time. Courtesy of American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie.



Figure 3. Belt plate worn by Dr. John Finrock, regimental surgeon, Eleventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry. Courtesy of American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie.

battery would further be staffed with two noncommissioned officers and forty-five privates from Companies B, E, G, D, A, and C. Ordnance Sergeant L. Snyder was detailed as instructor. The battery was given separate quarters and would “constitute a distinct company organization,” the horses to be kept separate from the rest of the regiment. Cavalry and saber drill (on foot) would take place from 9 to 10 A.M. and artillery drill would take place from 11 A.M. to 2:30 P.M. daily except Saturday and Sunday. The battery was equipped with two 12-pound mountain howitzers on prairie carriages, each with a caisson and

all related equipment. Until mustered out, the battery moved and saw service at Platte Bridge Station, Deer Creek Station, LaBonta Station, and Fort Laramie. It was brought into action against Indians at Mud Springs and Rush Creek in February of 1865.

Ordnance returns for the Eleventh Ohio for the last quarter of 1863 show that the men were armed with the Spencer rifles, Remington revolvers, Wesson carbines and light cavalry sabers. Also available were the original Enfields, a few Navy Colts, two Greene carbines and one Hall carbine. The later two are unexplained and may have been in stores at Fort Laramie. The numbers and proportions for the types of arms issued remained generally the same in 1864, as indicated in ordnance returns. Special Order number 9, issued at Fort Laramie on March 18, 1864, cautioned the men carrying Wesson carbines in Companies A, B, C, and D, that they could not sell or exchange the weapons without the permission of company commanders. The order allowed that any company as a whole that wanted to exchange the Wessons for the old Enfields could do so. Finally on November 24, 1864, with Special Order number 56, all of the men were allowed to sell the Wessons. For a brief time, the small, delicate and underpowered .44 Wessons played a role in protecting the Oregon and Overland Trails. The men did not favor them and sought to exchange them for the better Spencers, like those carried by the second battalion. Also, large portions of the



Figure 4. Sergeant John B. Furay, circa 1862, armed with his 1851 Colt Navy revolver and light cavalry saber.  
Courtesy of American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie.

.44-caliber ammunition were found to be defective, thus supporting the idea of disposing of the carbines.

Returns for June, 1864, indicate other changes in the arms issued. From the Ninth Kansas Cavalry a number of Merrill carbines, caliber .56, were taken on and issued to Lt. J. Lee Humfreville's Ohio troops, who also received 1860 Colt Army revolvers. Humfreville found such arms to be ideal. In delivering dispatches between posts he recalled, "I had an escort of nine picked cavalymen, and our mounts and equipments were of the best. Each was heavily armed, having two six-shooting Colt's revolvers in the holsters of our belts, a breech-loading carbine slung over our shoulders, and sixty rounds of ammunition."<sup>6</sup>

As the War in the east drew to a close, the fear and reality of Indian hostilities increased. As a result, additional cavalry regiments from Iowa and Kansas were sent west to help garrison Fort Laramie and the posts originally established by the Eleventh Ohio. With this influx, it is clear from ordnance reports that an even greater variety of arms was being issued to the scattered Ohio troops. In February, 1865, new recruits for the Eleventh Ohio were temporarily issued Springfield rifles. In April a shortage of ammunition for both

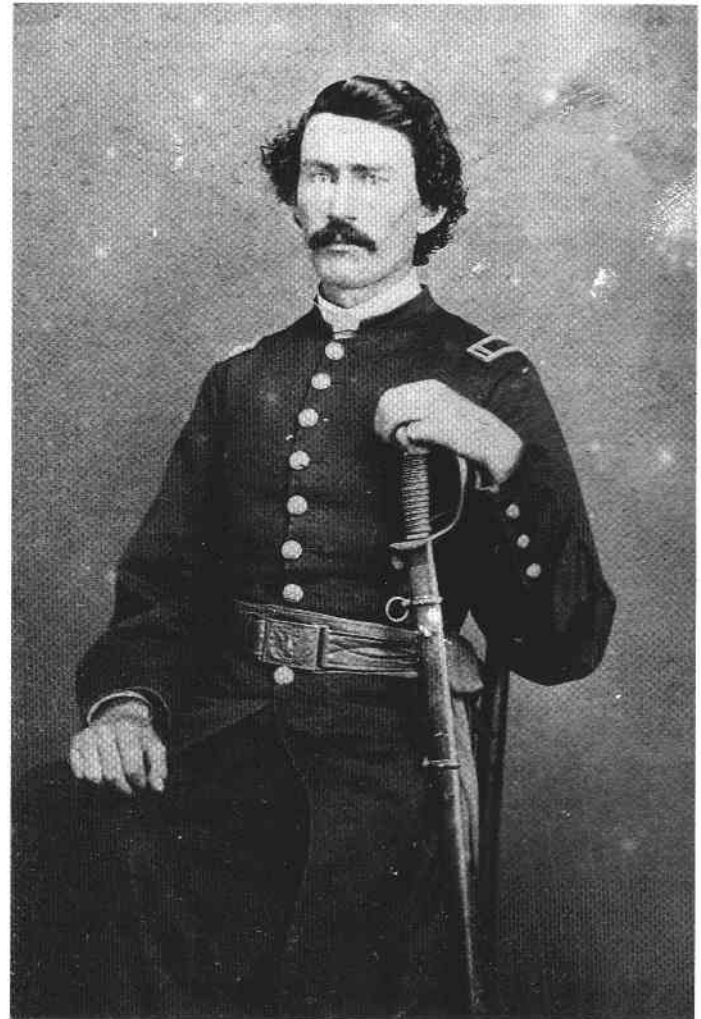


Figure 5. A moustache and a new uniform make a marked change in the appearance of John B. Furay after his promotion to Lieutenant in the Eleventh Ohio, 1864.  
Courtesy of American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie.

the Kansas and Ohio cavalry led to a call for increased supplies for Smith, Merrill, Sharps and Gallager carbines! In October, 2d Lt. Thomas Morrow was courtmartialled for disobeying orders, cowardice, and for being drunk on duty. He was charged with failure to pursue Indians even though his men were armed with Spencer rifles and Joslyn carbines. Archeological evidence at some of the posts garrisoned by the Eleventh Ohio confirms these references and reports. Examples of ammunition for all these weapons has been found across the expanse of what became the state of Wyoming.<sup>7</sup> Despite the diversity of equipment, the men felt they were well-armed. Hervey Young wrote home on April 11, 1865, that "we are better armed than any other regiment in the frontier service; we hoped the latter might be the case, for we havent as yet burnt enough gun-powder to give all hands a good smell."<sup>8</sup>

Lt. Col. William O. Collins was approaching the end of his western service and on February 17, 1865, the First Battalion, Eleventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry (Companies A, B, C, and D) was ordered relieved from duty and instructed to prepare to move to



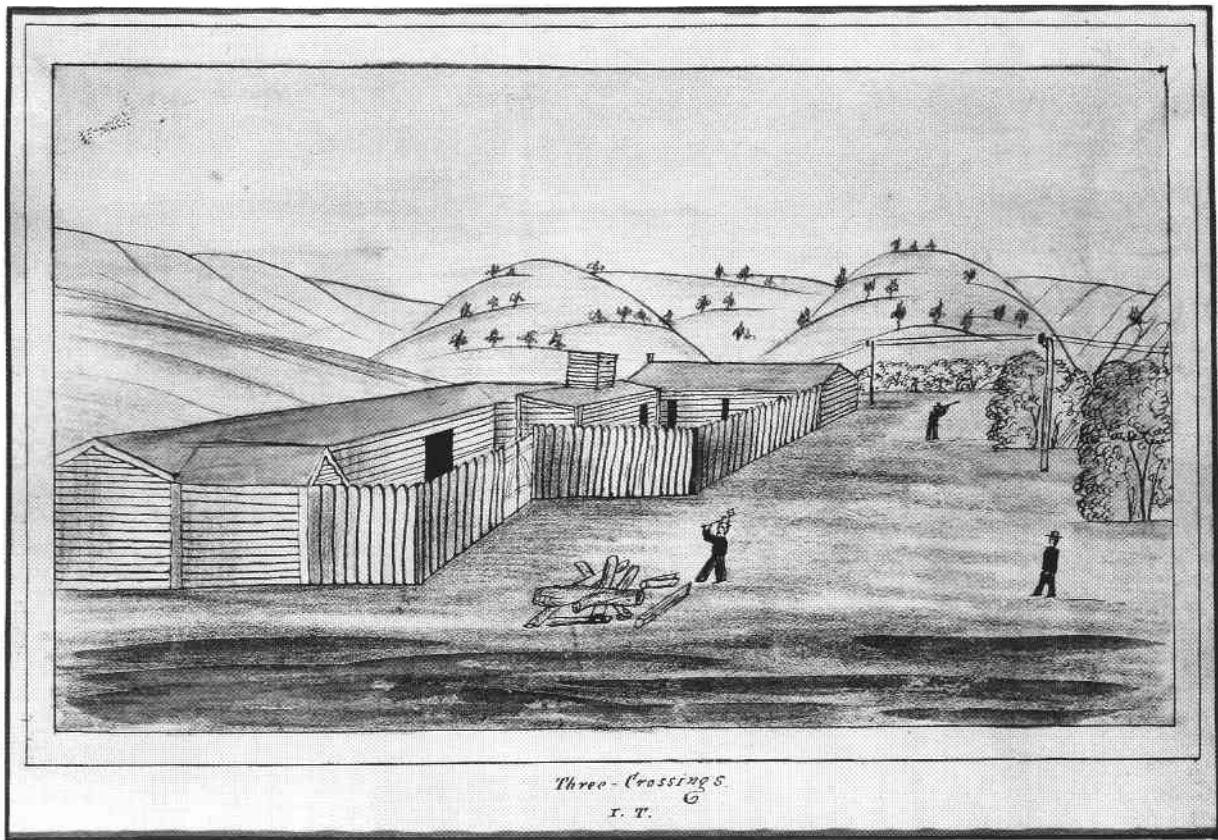
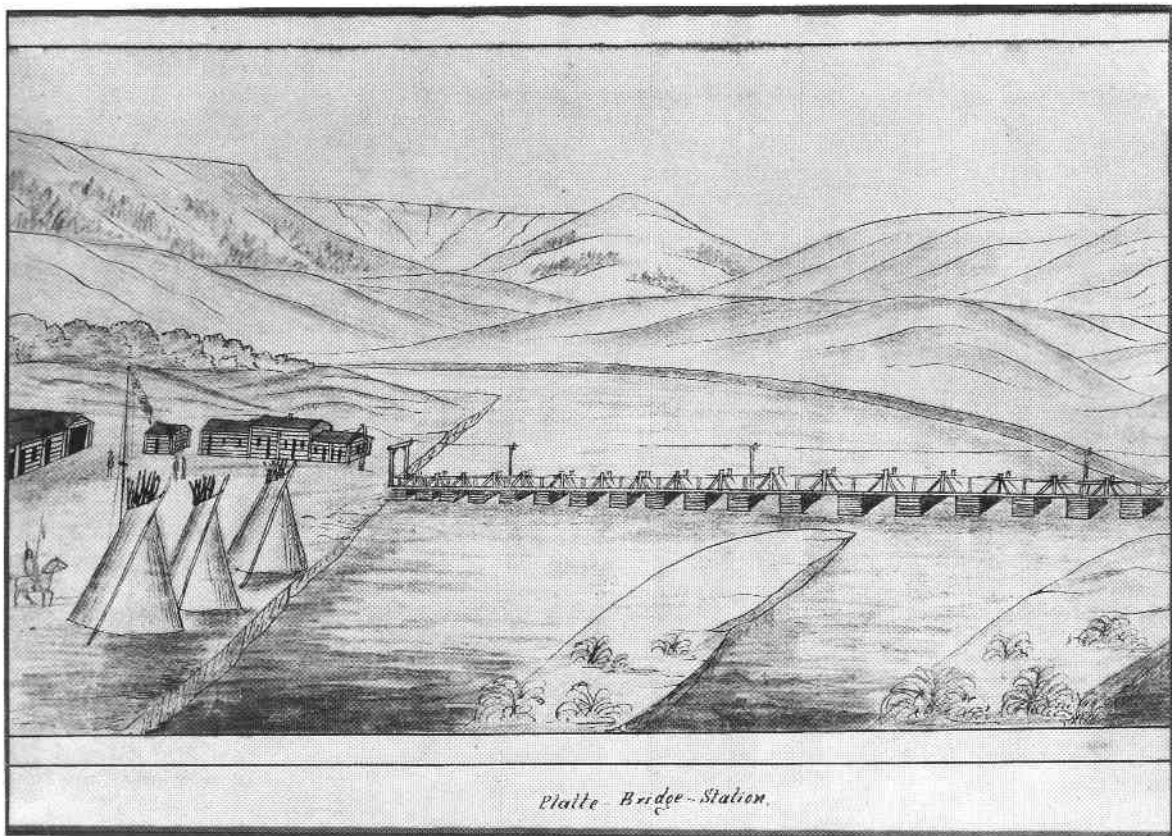


Figure 6. Three Crossings, one of the telegraph stations on the Oregon Trail protected by troops from the Eleventh Ohio. Drawing is by Charles Moellman, circa 1864. Courtesy of private collector.



Figure 7. Wayman or Chavil St. Clair of Company G, Eleventh Ohio at Three Crossings station circa 1864. This singular photographic evidence shows the subject with his three-banded Spencer rifle attached to the saddle with a leather loop. He is also holding his .44 Remington revolver. Courtesy Wyoming State Archives, Cheyenne.



**Figure 8.** Charles Moellman produced several drawings of Plate Bridge Station in 1864-1865. At this location in 1865, Lieutenant Caspar W. Collins was killed by Sioux Indians. The city of Casper named in his honor was built in the vicinity.  
 Courtesy of private collector.

Omaha for mustering out. On February 20, Colonel Collins relinquished command of the Western Sub District of Nebraska and command of the Eleventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry. The remaining companies, the last volunteer troops from Ohio, were mustered out on July 14, 1866, at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

During its three years of service, the Eleventh Ohio was engaged in 19 separate battles. The primary engagements were against the Sioux at Mud Springs Station on February 6, 1865 and Rush Creek two days later. At this time Colonel Collins informed his superiors that the Indians were moving north into the Powder River country. He predicted that the northern Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho would be compelled to join tribes to the south in hostilities as spring approached. Colonel John Chivington's slaughter of friendly Indians at Sand Creek, Colorado, in 1864 had sparked a predictable response. Collins urged that more troops should be sent to the West, "claiming the posts there are in danger."<sup>9</sup> In his report on the fights at Mud Springs Station and Rush Creek, Collins warned that in the spring and summer of 1865 "the posts on the Platte, especially Deer Creek and Platte Bridge, which are within 100 miles of Powder River, will be in immediate danger. More troops should be sent out here immediately to hold the posts in the sub district, and when spring opens important expeditions should be organized to

penetrate the center of their country." Despite the fact that thousands of troops and masses of supplies were gathered, under the command of Gen. P. Edward Connor, to penetrate the Indian stronghold in the Powder River country of northern Wyoming in 1865, Colonel Collins' warning did not save him from personal grief. On July 26, 1865, his only son, Lt. Caspar W. Collins, was killed when combined Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapaho forces attacked Platte Bridge Station. Years later, the city of Casper, Wyoming was named after him. The two 1851 Colt Navies he carried into battle, stuffed into his boot tops, have never been found.<sup>10</sup>

#### NOTES

1. The best study of this regiment remains Agnes Wright Spring, *Casper Collins: The Life and Exploits of an Indian Fighter of the Sixties* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1927). See also, William E. Unrau, editor, *Tending the Talking Wire: A Buck Soldier's View of Indian Country, 1863-1866* (Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1979). For an overall assessment of the Civil War in the West see, *The Civil War in the American West*, by Alvin M. Josephy, Jr. (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1991). All references to ordnance records for the Eleventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry are from the records preserved by Lieutenant H. E. Averill, Assistant Quartermaster for the regiment, located at the U.S. Cavalry Museum, Fort Riley, Kansas.

2. Colonel William O. Collins to Gen. B. Wright, Columbus, Ohio, June 9, 1863. See, *Civil War Guns*, by William B. Edward, (Harrisburg, The

Stackpole Company, 1962), page 131. Edwards notes that Kittridge sold 150 Wessons to the Army on July 7, 1863, for \$23.00 each.

3. A useful account of the regiment is to be found in: *Tending the Talking Wire, A Buck Soldier's View of Indian Country, 1863-1866*, edited by William E. Unrau, Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1979.

4. Letter sent, Brig. Gen J. D. Cox to Lt. Col. Neff, commanding at Camp Dennison, July 16, 1863.

5. See, Unrau, page 92 and 157.

6. J. Lee Humfreville, *Twenty Years Among Our Savage Indians*, New York, Hunter and Company, 1889, page 614.

7. Record Group 94, A.G.O., regimental order book and correspondence, Eleventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry, special order #121, February 20, 1865; Department of the Platte, volume 93, telegram April 29, 1865, Thomas Moonlight to Capt. George F. Price, April 29, 1865; and W. H. Evans, to Regimental Adjutant, 11th OVC, October 9, 1865.

8. See, Unrau, page 235.

9. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1896, series I, volume 48, part 1, page 92, report of Lt. Col. William O. Collins, February 15, 1865. "The Battles of Mud Springs Station and Rush Creek," by James H. Nottage, *The Prairie Scout*, volume 4, Abilene, The Kansas Corral of the Westerners, Inc., 1981, pp. 97-109.

10. There is an extensive literature related to the death of Caspar Collins. Although not entirely satisfactory, reference should be made to J. W. Vaughn, *The Battle of Platte Bridge*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1963. See also, Donald Berthrong, *The Southern Cheyenne*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1963; George E. Hyde, *Life of George Bent Written from His Letters*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1968; George Bird Grinnell, *The Fighting Cheyennes*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1956; Spring, *Caspar Collins*; and Fred B. Rogers, *Soldiers of the Overland, Being Some Account of the Services of General Patrick Edward Connor and His Volunteers in the Old West*, San Francisco, The Grabhorn Press, 1938.

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National Archives, Record Group 94, Regimental Order Book, 11th Ohio Volunteer Cavalry. Washington, D. C.

Papers of William O. and Caspar W. Collins, Denver Public Library, Denver.

Papers of Franklin Tubbs, American Heritage Research Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie.