They thought their war was over. In the autumn of 1864, at the end of the long campaign to repel the Confederate invasion of Missouri under General Sterling Price, John Benton Hart and his comrades in the Eleventh Kansas Cavalry had done what they signed up to do in 1862: protect Kansas and help to preserve a Union in peril. But even as they made their way back from Arkansas toward their headquarters in Paola, Kansas, events on the frontier were setting them up to fight another kind of war, which would cost the unit more casualties than all of its Civil War engagements combined.

On November 29, 1864, at Sand Creek in Colorado Territory, a detachment of militia under General John Chivington attacked a quiet encampment of Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians: people who, unlike some of their more combative peers, had asked for peace and accepted a promise of federal protection. The Sand Creek Massacre did what had seemed impossible. It brought mutually suspicious tribal groups into alliance against the encroaching whites and unleashed a full-scale Indian war.
The authorities saw what was coming and began moving forces west. On January 4, 1864, the Eleventh Kansas, badly underequipped for such a march, began its trek across the frigid plains. With it, in Company I, was private soldier John Benton Hart, known to all as “Johnny,” whose memoir of the Price campaign was excerpted in the fall 2014 issue of Kansas History. Hart also left an account of the climactic days of this new conflict. It is reproduced in full below.

The aged Hart dictated these memoirs in 1918 and 1919 at his home in Eckert, Colorado, apparently at the urging of his son Harry. The portion treating the events of 1865 was preserved in two typewritten fragments (with some handwritten additions): a brief one titled “Meeting an Indian Half Way” and a longer segment titled “Battle of Ganard’s Bridge.” The latter document casts new light on the Battle of Platte Bridge on July 26, the celebrated engagement in which Caspar Collins, namesake of Casper, Wyoming, was killed. Johnny’s story joins a short list of eyewitness accounts of the core of this action, taking its place alongside the diary of Sergeant Isaac B. Pennock; the reminiscences of Private Frederick Erhardt; and the letters of George Bent, who fought on the Indian side. Bent was the son of trader William Bent and of Owl Woman, the daughter of a Cheyenne chief. Of all these narrators, Johnny provided the most detail.

On April 18, the Eleventh Kansas set up its headquarters at the strategic point on the Oregon Trail called “Platte Bridge” or “Ganard’s Bridge” after its builder, Louis Guinard. After the 1865 events, it would become Fort Caspar, then the town of Casper, Wyoming. Johnny described the place in “Battle”:

4. The manuscripts are in the collection of John Hart, the narrator’s great-grandson, in San Rafael, California.
6. Isaac Pennock also wrote “Ganard.”
All there was at Ganard’s Bridge in 1865 were Ganard’s double cabin close to the bridge, two squaw-men’s tepas, the Telegraph Company’s little fort (the Post) with a small stockade; and a small cabin close to the telegraph building.

Ganard was an old-timer, a French Canadian, an Indian trader and used to the wild frontier. He and his oldest son it was that built the bridge across the North Platte River. This bridge was twenty-six spans of thirty-six feet to the span; the timbers of which it was built were hewed out in the mountains [the Laramie Mountains] twelve miles south of where it was built across the river. This bridge must have cost Ganard at least eight thousand dollars completed. He charged $2.50 for one wagon and one team to cross the bridge, other teams in proportion.

There was another bridge about twelve miles further down the river which was built by Reshaw [John Baptiste Richard], a French Canadian too; but all freighters and emigrants were forced to pull through sand requiring two days of the hardest kind of work to make the bridge, and as there was no sand going by way of Ganard’s bridge, he had all the trade in the toll bridge business at the time.7

In the late spring of 1865, Cheyenne, Sioux, and Arapaho leaders, encamped in the Powder River country north of the Platte, settled on a plan of campaign. After wearing the federal garrisons down with incessant minor raids, they would mass their forces at a chosen spot and permanently sever the Oregon Trail.8 The first incident recorded by Johnny, in “Meeting an Indian Half Way,” is not datable but seems to belong to the harassment phase of the war.

I was stationed at Ganard’s Bridge on the North Platte River. The grass was poor, a sort of alkali grass, so we

7. It may have been Louis Guinard’s brother who helped build the bridge, while his nephew, Louis Philip, clerked for him. See McDermott, Frontier Crossroads, 23; and Tom Rea, Devil’s Gate: Owning the Land, Owning the Story (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 71–72.

moved up to the foot of the mountains, went in camp on a small creek bottom, which was about twenty-five yards wide and near twenty-five feet deep. We built a fort on each bluff out of boulders. West of this creek was fine bluestem grazing ground and [this] extended down two miles and about one half mile wide sloping up from the creek. We grazed our horses two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon, and on this new grass our horses were doing fine.

I was put on picket on the west side of the grazing ground about three hundred yards from the herd, where I could see all around. I was posted on a high ridge, this gave my horse a chance to eat. In about thirty minutes I thought I saw a wolf pass over a low place and in half a minute another and right along like that. I seen that they were horses, and about a foot of his back was exposed when passing through this low place. I walked to my horses, mounted, gave my hat a wave and started for the herd thoroughly scared. Away the herd ran for camp. Every horse in the herd knew what it meant as well as the herder, as we trained them by always firing a shot and waving our hats when we wanted the herd to go to camp. We wasn’t a minute too soon in our run toward camp.

The Indians appeared all around about one hundred a minute. When I got half way to camp, I slowed down to walk and stopped, about one thousand yards from our fort. I seen the Indians couldn’t cut me off. A lone Indian rode up to within five hundred yards of me and hallowed to me to come out! come out! I asked him to come over. He gave me a lot of abuse and I fired back the same. Finally the Indian brave dared me to come half way, calling me a coward and a squaw.

John Roderick, my herding partner, was still mounted and was [in] the old boulder fort, like myself waiting for the company to saddle up and come out, and I knew he heard this challenge. I wasn’t anxious to battle this Indian, as I thought he was well armed and a half breed, and I did not see any fun in it. But this Indian kept it up, daring me. I thought that if I couldn’t fight one Indian to a finish, I was no good, so I yelled to him, all right I’ll meet you half way. Then we both started in a walk towards each other. About four [hundred] yards ahead there was a sag just deep enough to hide me and sixty yards wide, across this sag I started in a run, anything is fair in love and war. As I climbed cautiously the opposite bank of this sag, I saw my challenger and a dozen more behind him coming under the whip. I saw the trap at a glance, whirled and put spur to my horse for camp. But where these extra Indians came from, where the place was level, is a puzzle to me today.

On coming out of this sag, I saw a squad of cavalry coming at full speed, as John Roderick told Lieutenant Drew10 that I had gone out to meet an Indian on the war path, half way. I held up a little, as I wanted to scrap that Indian who had tricked me. I didn’t care if he was coming, though I would slow up and dismount and get him standing on the ground. You cannot shoot off-hand from a horse that has been running with accuracy. But that dozen Indians coming further behind would be onto me before Lieutenant Drew and his boys would be up. I watched behind and ahead. Finally [I] thought it safe to stop and fight that lone Indian, as he had shot several arrows at me, and my reinforcements would be up as soon as his would. I shot my carbine and then emptied my revolver at him. I got his horse, it laid down in about two hundred yards, but never knew whether the Indian was hit or not.

I never heard the last of going out to meet an Indian half way, all my pals took great pains to remind me about that every time we made a thrust at the Indians. John Holding was wounded.11 We moved back to Ganard’s Bridge that evening.

This minor affair exemplified a tactic the Indians used incessantly and often with success: use a small force, in this case a single warrior, to lure soldiers out of safety and into ambush.

On July 25, unknown to the garrison (but suspected by Guinard), several thousand Indians had converged north of the river. About a hundred of these showed themselves that day, hoping to draw out a sortie. On this occasion the stratagem did not work. The chiefs sent a respected warrior, High Backed Wolf, to bring in the advance party. Instead, the frustrated decoys decided to take some action on their own—and persuaded the messenger to go with them.12 Johnny’s account of what ensued was titled “First Day: Cattle Raid.”

One morning Ganard came to me stating that the Indians were coming and asking me to help him drive his cattle up close to our camp. We were camped close to Ganard’s Bridge and so were in a good position to fight away the warlike Indians. Our company was camped at


11. John W. Holding in the “Roster and Descriptive Roll.”

this bridge to aid in keeping the telegraph line open, as
the Indians kept taking it down.

Four of my company saddled up and rode down
the North Platte about four miles where we found
Ganard’s cattle and started them up towards the
bridge. Ganard’s squaw and her mother mounted
ponies and accompanied us. We just had the cattle under
good way when four Indians showed up some distance
away stripped for battle and painted.

Ganard said, “There may be considerable more of
these Indians showing up pretty soon.” He said that we
had better abandon the cattle and make for the post at the
she sees smoke signals—Indians gathering.”

[I] did not like this abandon idea very well, as we had
come down there for the cattle and wished to be successful
rather than otherwise, so [I] answered Ganard, “No, we
will fight the Indians off, and push the cattle as fast as we
can, Indian or no Indian.”

The four Indians fired at us long distance; this scared
the squaws so they commenced to sling the lariat onto the
rumps of those cattle. So did Ganard, he was excited as
much or more than the squaws.
He then told us there might be a large war party and that we had better see they did not get between us and the Post.

Eleventh Kansas boys from the camp could see us, and kept coming out to us one by one until we had eight in our party of soldiers, but the Indians had increased until there were twelve or more of them. We were keeping the Indians back three or four hundred yards behind the cattle, when we came to a damp place that was covered with water when the Platte overflowed its banks during the very highest water of the year. This place cut the river bottom across from the river to the bluff, and here sand and trash had blown in among the sage and checo shrubby growth, so that after our horses and cattle had scampered across you couldn’t see a horse in some places sixty feet. But joining this there was a low bare place about one hundred yards wide, a fine place to fight Indians across.

We soldiers were firing when we could get a chance and the Indians were doing the same. After this firing had been going on a spell, we concluded to all mount and charge back across this bare place and make a cleanup of the Indians at once. But [we] found on the other side a good bunch of Indians on the fight, far too many now for us to give battle to, so we fell back to our former position and the Indians right in our rear, crowding us a terrific pace.

A Cheyenne chief was pounding Noah Coffman on the back with an old blunt sword which made him yell for help. Pharus Hammond and myself wheeled and fired on this chief. One ball slivered the chief’s right wrist and another ball lodged in his neck. He fell off his pony, then jumped up and ran into a bunch of willows that grew in the middle of the damp lane. After this all the other Indians fell back to their side of the battleground. Then on closer inspection saw that the chief had fallen just at the edge of the bunch of willows and not clear out of sight as we at first supposed and lay there as if through for this world.

Pharus Hammond and I rode down and around the knobs of willow sand domes opposite where the Cheyenne chief lay, then as the surrounding bushes seemed to be free of Indians, rustled up courage and rode to the chief. Then I dismounted and seized hold of the chief’s feet and pulled him out of the willows.

Then [we] turned him over on his back. He lay still. At first [we] thought he was dead or about so, but all at once he jumped up and attacked us like a wild animal and we had to fight for our lives. His right hand being out of commission is probably the thing that saved both our lives, his being mixed up with us in close quarters in a second, and the extra powerful Indian he was; quickness was his principal aid. We had our wits put to a severe test defending ourselves, and both of us were about out of breath, for once entirely surprised and pretty well rattled. He had seized me by the arm and would not let go at the beginning of the trouble, and even as he fell to the ground exhausted, had whirled and tossed until I felt as if my back was about broke. Then as it looked as if one or the other would have to die if he managed to stab us just right

George Morton Walker of Emporia, a second lieutenant in Company C, published his account of the “Eleventh Kansas Cavalry, 1865, and Battle of Platte Bridge” in the Kansas Historical Collections in 1918. He attributed the scalping of High Backed Wolf to Corporal Charles Bates, not to Privates Johnny Hart and Pharus Hammond.

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with his short saber, the chief sank down to the ground dead. We were so crazy mad at the time, did not think out the proper thing to do, so like a couple of fools that should have known better, [we] scalped that Cheyenne chief, and the memory of it makes me feel ashamed to this day.

Several sources agree that the scalping occurred and that the victim was none other than High Backed Wolf. But who killed and scalped him and under what circumstances? Johnny’s account strikingly contradicts other versions of this incident.

Private William Henry Lord later claimed that he and his friend Jim Porter “dispatched” the chief. In Lord’s telling, the soldiers killed the Indian, found him to be wearing a buckskin shirt “laced with the scalps of white women,” and took his own scalp in revenge. The next morning, they tied the trophy to a stick and wove it tauntingly at the warriors across the river.15

William Y. Drew, not an eyewitness, told it like this: “Two of the boys rode into the brush to find the chief, and found him lying apparently dead. One man jumped off his horse and stabbed him about the heart. He did not give the least sign of life. Then he commenced to scalp him. As soon as the knife touched his head the Indian commenced to beg, when another man shot him through the brain.” Drew did not mention any scalp-ornamented shirt, but added that the men had vowed revenge for the earlier mutilation of one of their own.16

George Morton Walker, also at the post, attributed the scalping to Corporal Charles Bates and repeated the scalp shirt story. But historian Robert Huhn Jones names the perpetrator as Mich Lajeunesse, son of Charles Lajeunesse, a trader at the post.17

On balance, it seems to come down to Hammond and Hart or Lord and Porter. But would Johnny have laid false claim to an incident that he, alone of all the tellers, found shameful?

Just then Sergeant Old Ike Pennock17 came with ten more men, and ordered our mob back to the Post. Sergeant Pennock gave us a good dressing down then and there. “Whatever you do from now on, boys,” he said, “do not ever scalp another Indian! Don’t you know a scalped Indian can never enter the Happy Hunting Ground? That everything is lost to him forever, that he has no recourse, he or his friends?”

We hurried back toward the Post, and had ridden about fifty yards, when the Indians came up to their dead and scalped chief. Then we could hear the real savage yell of a band of Indians maddened almost into blindness rage. To see and witness Indians in a rage like this can never be forgotten, and suggests the idea that man is still the most savage animal of the earth.18

At the Post, [we] saw Ganard and the two squaws had driven the cattle into safety, and [we] were feeling good over it. Ganard wanted to see the scalp, said his mother-in-law would tan it, and work it into a fine specimen.

That evening I took the scalp to Ganard’s house. His mother-in-law looked the scalp over for quite a while, said it was a Cheyenne chief’s scalp, and that he was a member of the council, a big man of importance.

She then looked the scalp over a while longer. Then suddenly [she] commenced to chew that scalp, all the while yelling and singing her inherited war song of hate. She jumped around like a colt and kept it up until she fell down on the earth floor of the cabin exhausted, but kept chewing that scalp in a barbarous manner. She was getting even, eking out the hate of her race on one scalp of the Cheyenne.

Mr. Ganard slapped himself and laughed. It was great fun for him, and his squaw kept singing their scalp song in almost regular measured time. Their song of triumph, and especially so, as both these squaws were Rees [Arikarees], who had always been at war with the Cheyenne, so gloried in the death of their enemies. To me this sort of thing was disgusting. [I] had enough of Indians for one day, so [I] turned and walked away, out of tune with myself and all the wide world.

14. “July 26 the Anniversary of Indian Fight in Which 30 Kansans Were Slain,” Kansas City Star, July 26, 1934. This account lacks a byline and is written in the third person, perhaps by Lord’s son Earl.
17. Isaac B. Pennock of Leavenworth. Some older sources give his name as Pennick, but he is Pennock in the “Roster and Descriptive Roll,” as well as in the Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Kansas, 1861–1865, 410.
18. After the fighting on the succeeding day, Drew reported finding a note dropped by a captive of the Indians: “You killed one of the principal chiefs of the Cheyennes yesterday, and they swear they will have a fearful revenge on you for it” (Drew, “The Platte Bridge Fight,” May 18, 1882). However, it seems unlikely that the fate of High Backed Wolf added much intensity to a long-planned attack.
Lieutenant George Walker drew this map of the Platte Bridge battlefield from memory to accompany his published account. Walker reported hearing that Lieutenant Caspar Collins had been “back at the bridge with his men; he then wheeled his horse and rushed back among the Indians.” Walker marked the spot of Collins’s death on this map with a “C.”

At this point Johnny’s memory turned to tensions among the men along the trail and to the celebrated figure of Caspar Collins, namesake of Casper, Wyoming.

19. Henry Lord, “Henry Lord of Dodge City Tells of the Battle of Platte Bridge,” Jones, Guarding the Overland Trails, 265; Mokler, Fort Caspar (Platte Bridge Station), 11. Mokler’s informant was another Louis Guinard, who said he was the bridge-builder’s nephew. However, the June 6 date seems to appear only in John D. McDermott, Frontier Crossroads, 50. According to family member Brenda Tippin, it may derive from court papers relating to compensation after the post’s abandonment and burning by Indians in 1867 (Brenda Tippin, personal communication, January 25, 2015; see also McDermott, Frontier Crossroads, 97).
One company at Ganard’s Bridge were “fillers in,” that is, enlisted men who were filling the places of those who had died of sickness, or in battle with the Indians. And some there were whom we called “galvanized infantry.” They had been Confederate soldiers taken prisoners during the Civil War, and who had been in a prison in Chicago. They had been given the opportunity to enlist and fight Indians in Wyoming and Montana.

But to a man they were our bitter enemies. There were fine fellows among them, considerate and sensible, while others were of the worst type, as is the case with all collections of men from over the country. It was understood at the time that the Southern Confederacy had given them permission to enlist to fight Indians in the North, though I have never had this point verified. There was a good full company of them first at Ganard’s Bridge, but about half of them deserted.

Lieutenant Caspar Collins was their commander, a fine officer and a splendid man all around. [I] was informed at the time he was the youngest officer in the army.

Johnny was confused here. Caspar Collins, the son of Lieutenant Colonel William O. Collins, was not the “galvanized Yankees’” commander. In fact he arrived at the post only on the eve of the battle and by sheer coincidence, on his way back to his own Eleventh Ohio Cavalry company at Sweet Water Station after receiving his lieutenant’s commission at Fort Laramie.

However, this confusion may conceal another story. The main tension among the troops along the Emigrant Trail in Wyoming was not between volunteers and “galvanized” soldiers: it was between the Eleventh Kansas Cavalry and the Eleventh Ohio, who shared trail protection duties. On July 12, for example, when a detachment of Ohio troops under Captain Henry Bretney arrived at Platte Bridge, Bretney and Captain Greer of Johnny’s Company I clashed bitterly about who was in charge. By putting the Ohioan

20. The galvanized Yankees were used up and down the plains, valuably augmenting thin-stretched federal forces on the frontier. See Dee Brown, The Galvanized Yankees (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986); Michelle Tucker Butts, Galvanized Yankees on the Upper Missouri: The Face of Loyalty (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2003).

21. McDermott, Frontier Crossroads, 58; Jones, Guarding the Overland Trails, 267.

22. McDermott, Frontier Crossroads, 55.

Collins in command of the “galvanized” men, Johnny’s memory may have conflated two sets of people he had trouble with.

By the time of the July 26 battles, the command issue had been resolved: Major Martin Anderson, Eleventh Kansas, had arrived to take charge of the wide district, with Greer as post commander under him. (For some reason, Johnny recalled the major’s name as Bowen.)

23. The Eleventh Kansas was headed at this time by Major Preston B. Plumb, who had been sent farther west with five companies and did
On the eve of the battle, the garrison included seventy-four officers and men of Company I, Eleventh Kansas; some fourteen “galvanized infantry”; and a handful of stray men from other units. On the afternoon of the twenty-fifth, ten men of Company K, Eleventh Kansas, arrived from the east with the mail—and Caspar Collins. In the small hours of the twenty-sixth, Captain Bretney arrived from the west with ten Ohioans. The total complement was then 119, though woefully undersupplied with arms, ammunition, and horses.

On July 26—“a terrible day for our command,” in Sergeant Pennock’s words—the Indians got the action they wished for. A column of twenty-some men—reported numbers differ slightly—issued from the fort, crossed the bridge, and rode straight into the carefully set trap. Hart titled his chapter “Second Day.”

The next morning there were about a dozen Indians riding up and down on the mesa across the river opposite our camp, coaxing and daring us out to fight them. They called us cowards and a few pet names they had learned from the white man. It seems we had orders not to fight the Indians unless they attacked us, so our men were content, remaining in camp. But Lieutenant Caspar Collins was impatient, he wanted to test his fighting ability with the Indians that day. . . . He came to our captain, Captain Greer, and asked for a detail to test his fighting ability with the Indians that day. . . . He came to our captain, Captain Greer, and asked for a detail of twenty men to go over the bridge and run those bragging Indians away. Ganard advised Lieutenant Collins and all other men not to go out and fight the Indians. He said by the Indian smokes this was a gathering of tribes.

Captain Greer told Lieutenant Collins he would have to get an order from Major Bowen [Anderson]. Then Lieutenant Casper Collins went to see Major Bowen [Anderson], found that Major Bowen [Anderson] could not give an order of that kind under the existing orders from headquarters. But [he] advised if Captain Greer would allow him, Collins, to call for volunteers and could get the men to volunteer he wouldn’t say anything. Everything was agreeable after that, for Lieutenant Caspar Collins came and called for volunteers from the Eleventh Kansas. Twenty men and myself volunteered to go out with Lieutenant Collins at once. Soon we were ready.

It is here that Johnny’s memories cut most strikingly across other accounts. He did not know, or had in the intervening years forgotten, that the sortie was mounted to bring in a military wagon train coming east from Sweet Water Station. He also apparently erred in stating that the group consisted of volunteers. Confusion surrounded the decision to place Caspar Collins in charge of Kansans unknown to him. Apparently the Eleventh Kansas officers, to a man, had found reasons to excuse themselves. But did Collins actually put himself forward, as Johnny said, or go dutifully and with a sense of doom, as elsewhere reported? Both might be true. John D. McDermott suggests that Collins initially volunteered on the assumption that he would be given a much larger party. Johnny went on to provide a poignant sidelight to the Collins story.

But Lieutenant Collins was determined to ride a very large grey horse that belonged to our company. He was a splendid horse but would whirl around in the ranks breaking the line. The rider could pull his bits against his neck, it made no difference. If the notion struck this horse at this time, away he would bolt where he pleased, providing he became the least excited. We warned the Lieutenant about the fault of this horse, but our efforts availed us nothing.

I was in the first set of Fours. Across the bridge we marched and out on the mesa following that teasing bunch of Indians back about one half mile where we halted as wished to ascertain the whereabouts of the yelling that sounded overhead, to the sides and everywhere else. In a moment, [I] saw we were in a trap, for two hundred warriors had rushed in behind us cutting our retreat back to the Post out of the question, and another band of Indians came out of the river bottom above the Post and so were between us and the bridge which spanned across the river.

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27. Vaughn, The Battle of Platte Bridge, 33–34; Mokler, Fort Caspar (Platte Bridge Station), 27–29. One officer who knew Collins in 1864 described him as “a young man entirely devoid of fear and with an ambition to have military success and renown” [Eugene F. Ware, The Indian War of 1864: Being a Fragment of the Early History of Kansas (Topeka, Kans.: Crane & Co., 1911), Chapter 21, available online at http://www. kancoll.org/books/ware/].
29. Johnny was the only source to say that Collins chose the horse for its appearance. George Morton Walker claimed to have given Collins this mount, considering it “the best one of those used by the non-commissioned staff” (Walker, “Eleventh Kansas Cavalry,” 336).
Lieutenant Collins looked back behind us, saw both sides of the rear closing in, saw that mob of Indians coming and yelling their curdling war song. He caught his breath with a hurried whisp and exclaimed, “None of us will ever get back to the Post. We are lost! We are doomed! I am to blame for this, and I am the fool! Boys, let’s fight a good fight, to the last!”

Every last one of us thought the same as did the Lieutenant. I could see the lips of my comrades closing together tightly and the snapping of eyes suggesting a devout determination to fight out the odds to the last.

A few seconds after this the Indians closed in on us and fired, but mostly with arrows, and when an arrow missed a soldier it hit an Indian. The Indians were so numerous around us, nothing could hit the ground, arrows or bullets. And the terrific din of yelling, commotion, Indians afoot, others mounted, and last, the whirling of ponies and swirling of countless clouds of dust. . . . These Indians were surging around us like an onrushing tide striking against a bluff and rebounding back in a wicked undercurrent across a rocky reef intent in its power of weight and force to snuff out all life.

These Indians were all stripped to the breechclout, their bodies and faces all painted in ugly grotesque shapes and colors, a hideous looking sight, and one that always rattles those not accustomed to it, be they ever so brave and steady.

It wasn’t long until the Indians discovered they were killing more of their own members than of ours with arrows, so they quit and commenced to using spears.

The Lieutenant’s large gray mount bolted almost at the first and the last I saw of him was the big gray going over those Indian ponies as if they were so many feeble sheep.

We bunched our men and started for the bridge determined to make the attempt at all hazards. I did not notice what way or route we selected as [I] expected to soon be among the dead, because we were outnumbered by at least twenty five to one.

Soon [I] discovered that to level my revolver on an Indian was about as good as to shoot him, for he would throw himself on the ground or on the side of his pony and dodge out of sight, and to get him I would have to be quick. This method gave me an opportunity to be ready for another Indian, and saved my ammunition, and at the same time [I] believe [this] is what saved me from being scalped by the Indians that day.

These Indians seemed to drive terror among some of our men so that they lost control of themselves, and did not fight the good fight to the last, very good. I know that George McDonald yelled for me to help him, that he was lanced twice, and fell off his horse, and at that, with a loaded revolver in his scabbard. And McDonald was as brave a man as ever wore a uniform, but he lost control. And Jim Porter the same fate as McDonald, good boy that he was. Both of these boys, many’s the time, had stood right up to the Johnnies without flinching, and could be moved under the hottest kind of fire anywhere.

Our little band was thinning out fast and the Indians were pushing us harder every second, and in a flash we were thirsty, tired and weary, fighting out a hundred years of life in a few minutes.

All at once Tip Hill yelled out, “Oh, somebody help me!” On looking [I] saw that one determined Indian had seized hold of his bridle rein and was pulling his horse out of our bunch. Tip Hill was knocking off spears with his revolver, every which way, making a heroic effort of his life as I dashed up to him. And just at this instant a Cheyenne charged in between Tip Hill and our little band and made a thrust at Tip Hill with a spear, but missed.

30. This is the only report of “last words” from Caspar Collins. However, they seem both artificial and ill-matched to the situation. Perhaps John Benton Hart, or his amanuensis Harry Hart, embellished them.

31. This purple patch may be an interpolation by Harry Hart.

32. This surging mob of Indians were all stripped to the breechclout, their bodies and faces all painted in ugly grotesque shapes and colors, a hideous looking sight, and one that always rattles those not accustomed to it, be they ever so brave and steady.

33. The story of the horse’s bolting is repeated by eyewitnesses Bent (Hyde, Life of George Bent, 218) and Erhardt (“Reminiscences of Ferdinand Erhardt,” 119). Drew reported seeing the Indians dragging the fracuous animal along the bluffs after the battle (Drew, “The Platte Bridge Fight,” May 11, 1882). Grinnell added that that the horse lived on for many years in a Cheyenne village, always giving trouble (Grinnell, The Fighting Cheyennes, 223). Two observers from the post, Stephen H. Fairfield and John C. Friend, told an alternate story: that Collins, still in control of his horse, had almost reached the bridge when he turned back to help a wounded comrade (Fairfield, “The Eleventh Kansas Regiment at Platte Bridge,” 358; John C. Friend, “Account of the Platte Bridge Fight Written by John C. Friend,” William Oliver Collins and Family Papers, folder 18, box 2, WH 73, Western History Collection, Denver Public Library).

34. George W. McDonald of Burlingame is found in the “Roster and Descriptive Roll”; Porter is listed under “Additional Enlistments—Co. I” in Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Kansas, 1861–1865, 212; Drew, “The Platte Bridge Fight,” April 27, 1882; and Hyde, Life of George Bent, 218–19.

35. There is no Tip Hill in the “Roster and Descriptive Roll,” though there is a Henry W. Hills.
something for Tip Hill then and there, so [I] leveled my revolver on his [the Indian’s] hands and shoulder so as to be sure not to make a miss and fired. Instantly that Indian threw up both hands and up went his spear about fifteen feet farther in the air; I rode under it a second before it fell down just missing my horse in the rear. That Cheyenne fell back on his pony, his mouth was open wide enough for me to crowd my doubled-up fist down his throat. . . . Tip Hill managed to get rid of the Indian holding and tugging at the bridle rein of his horse and managed once more [to] regain the thin safety of our little band of men.

All at once I gave a yell as [I] was riding off the mesa and into the bottom some two hundred yards from the bridge, for there were the boys at the Post coming out to help us. In a few seconds after this, I knew I was safe.

Six of our little band arrived at the Post and fifteen were killed out of this twenty-one that volunteered to go out and fight Indians under Lieutenant Casper Collins that day. Tip Hill had three arrows clinging to him, Harley Stoddard three arrows, the Captain’s yellow boy two arrows and a bullet, George May three arrows, a fellow we called Strap badly wounded and I without a scratch, excepting a bruise or two. Most of the boys were killed with spears. I was the only one that came out with

Amos J. Custard of Big Springs, Douglas County, Kansas, served as commissary sergeant in Company H, Eleventh Kansas Cavalry. On July 26, 1865, he led a three-wagon supply train from the west toward Platte Bridge Station that was attacked by Indians near Red Buttes. The battle raged for several hours within field-glass view of the fort, but curiously Private Johnny Hart did not mention it in his recollections. Sergeant Custard was one of twenty-two troopers killed in that desperate noontime battle—half of the fatalities, according the Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Kansas, belonged to Company H.

Then seeing he had missed, whirled his spear down in front and was going to thrust Tip Hill as he rode by him. This Cheyenne was about six feet ahead of me, I must [do]
a whole hide although [I] was hit with a spear and a bow. I felt fine riding across Ganard’s twenty-six-span bridge and couldn’t see how it all happened when by rights [I] should have been among the dead. It was a fairylike feeling that day to be alive.

On arriving in camp I, with others, was detailed to go down the river about a mile and repair the telegraph wire, as the Indians had pulled it down. Out of this party we lost five men. Others were detailed to recover at least some of our dead comrades across the river, so that all in all we lost 26 men that day.37

Though Johnny’s casualty figure for the day was about right (the official tally was twenty-eight), the Collins party in fact accounted for only five of those deaths and the telegraph line foray for only one. The outgunned Indians of course suffered far more.

If the attackers had known the precarious state of the garrison, desperately short of ammunition, they might have carried through with their plan to storm it. Instead, they turned their attention to the party approaching from the west, destroying it within field-glass view of the fort in the Battle of Red Buttes. Johnny should have been back from downriver in time to witness this, but said nothing about it. Though the soldiers feared an even worse sequel, the day’s actions in fact marked the end of the tribes’ attempt to sever the Oregon Trail.

The Indians scalped and terribly mutilated eighteen of our boys. We had an old German soldier in our company who was killed when out as a volunteer.38 He was quite gray, a man of splendid nerve and respected by all. The Indians did not scalp or mutilate his body, but they did fill his body with arrows. I pulled ninety-three arrows out of his body two days afterward when we hauled him into the Post. Lieutenant Caspar Collins was mutilated worse than any of the men, about one half of his body was carried away, his heart was cut into strings and hung on a medicine pole beside what was left of his body.

We threw shells on the mesa with an old howitzer, the shells wouldn’t explode, but they would roll a long way on the mesa. The Indians would run after these shells and when they stopped rolling would stand around them and jabber and make signs. Finally we shot one shell that rolled over the mesa and as usual a bunch of Indians ran after it, and after it became still for probably three minutes it exploded killing three Indians. The Indians ran away from it in all directions just like water does when you throw a rock into a pond and the waves go in every direction. After that the Indians chased no more shells, and would not go near them for some time later.

The Eleventh Kansas Cavalry mustered out at Fort Leavenworth in September 1865. After an interlude in Kansas, John Benton Hart would be drawn back to the West. In 1867 he made his way to the new hot spot in the Indian wars, the Bozeman Trail, where he took highly paid but risky jobs including, he reported, carrying the mail between beleaguered Forts Phil Kearny and C. F. Smith. These adventures make up the largest portion of his memoir. [KH]

37. Major Anderson sent this party out in an attempt to reestablish communications and procure relief. Johnny spent few words on this rather fierce skirmish, described in hyperbolic detail by William H. Lord (“July 26 the Anniversary of Indian Fight in Which 30 Kansans Were Slain,” Kansas City Star, July 26, 1934) and more soberly by Walker. Apparently only Jim Porter died in this encounter (Walker, “Eleventh Kansas Cavalry,” 337–38).
38. Not identifiable.