

John "Portuguese" Phillips

On December 21, 1866, Colonel W. J. Fetterman and eighty of his soldiers were massacred by a large party of Indians. The tragedy, known as Fetterman's Massacre, occurred near Fort Phil Kearney in north-central Wyoming.

On December 22, a combined force of 2,000 Sioux, Cheyenne, Blackfeet, Shoshone and Arapahoe Indians under the leadership of Chief Red Cloud surrounded Fort Phil Kearney with the intention of completely destroying it. Apparently, the only thing holding them back was the weather as there was a howling blizzard blowing down out of the Big Horn Mountains. The temperature was hovering around twenty degrees below zero.

Inside the fort were 119 soldiers with 19 rounds of ammunition each for old, obsolete rifles. There were the usual non-combatants, prisoners, wounded soldiers, a few civilians and a large number of family members. There was no hope that the men inside the fort could hold off an attack. They had made plans to blow the powder magazine if the Indians breeched the fort. It was a huge "save the last bullet for yourself" plan for the whole fort. And it would prevent the Indians from stealing all the ammunition.

The post commander, Colonel Harry B Carrington, asked for a volunteer to ride through Red Cloud's lines to get help. Fort Laramie was 236 miles away and the soldiers knew it was like asking for someone to commit suicide. If the Indians didn't get the messenger, the weather was sure to do it.

John Phillips was born Manuel Felipe Cardoso on April 8, 1832, on the island of Fayal, in the Azores. When he was 18, he left the Azores aboard a whaling vessel bound for California, where the youth intended to pan for gold.

For the next 15 years he followed the gold strikes from California, through Oregon, Idaho and arriving in Montana in 1865. And, being a citizen of Portugal, he picked up the nickname, "Portuguese or Portagee." Early in 1866, he hooked up with a party headed to the Big Horn Mountains to prospect until the first snows of late summer. The group arrived at Fort Phil Kearny on September 14; he was apparently working as a water carrier for a civilian contractor.



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Phillips told the commander, "I will go, provided I can ride Gray Eagle." Gray Eagle was Carrington's prize horse and would have told him no, if the situation was anything less serious. Troopers saddled the horse and hung a bag of grain around the saddle horn. Phillips mounted the horse wearing a huge buffalo robe, gauntlets, a pull down cap and lined boots. The gates were opened for him at nine o'clock on the night of the 22nd, and he rode out into the howling wind and frozen snow. In less than a minute the sound of hoof beats could no longer be heard. He kept Gray Eagle in drifting snow as much as possible to reduce the sound.

Indian scouts were posted all around the fort, with special units placed at all crossings of the Crazy Woman Creek which circled the fort. Fortunately, it was as cold for the Indians as everyone else and they could not possibly be at the height of alertness. Visibility was also greatly reduced and Phillips sneaked through. As the new day dawned and visibility increased, Phillips and Gray Eagle went into dense forest to hide until afternoon when the storm increased and visibility again was way down.

That night he reached Fort Reno where there was only a small token force that could provide no aid. But, it did provide Phillips and Gray Eagle a place to grab something to eat before they headed out into the weather again.

Gray Eagle was still in good shape and was skimming across the snow until they passed through a ravine where they were spotted by some Sioux. The gallant horse managed to outrun them for several miles. A few warriors were still crowding them when their situation was spotted by two riders on a distant hill. The riders joined up with Phillips and the Indians faded away. The trio rode on together until they reached Horseshoe Station. It was Christmas morning.

Horseshoe Station was a frozen, lonely place, about 26 miles away, between Fort Laramie and the Utah border. It was also a telegraph station and another day's ride could be saved by getting a telegram through. The operator had a great deal of difficulty getting through and the lines could be down anywhere. Phillips could not take a chance, so he mounted Gray Eagle one more time.

He reached Fort Laramie Christmas night and a gala party was under way. Troopers had to remove Phillips from the saddle. Gray Eagle was taken to the stable where he died within the hour. The gallant, brave horse had run himself to death.

Phillips, frozen and staggering barely made his way into the hall where he was confronted by officers with questions he probably did not hear. He was just barely able to mutter the words, "Fort Phil Kearney surrounded by 2,000 Indians." He struggled to pull the handwritten note from Colonel Carrington out of his coat pocket before he collapsed in total exhaustion.

A column of soldiers left Fort Laramie within the hour. They reached the besieged fort just as the storm was breaking. Red Cloud was prevented from attacking and the fort was saved.

There are no words to describe Portuguese's ride and Gray Eagle's heart and endurance for three nights and three days. Remarkable, incredible, heroic, incomparable? They seem to fall short, somehow.

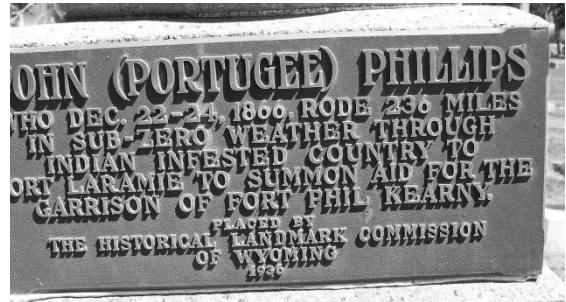
Afterwards, Phillips worked as a mail carrier for the government until Fort Phil Kearny was abandoned. He moved near Laramie, Wyoming and supplied railroad ties to Union Pacific.

On December 16, 1870, in Cheyenne, he married 28 year old Hattie Buck of Crownpoint, Indiana. They established a ranch on Chugwater Creek that served as headquarters for his business of contracting with the army to furnish supplies and transportation to Forts Laramie and Fetterman.

Phillips died in Cheyenne on November 18, 1883, from nephritis and is buried in the Lakeview Cemetery. Hattie died in Los Angeles in 1936 at the age of 94.



Portugee's Tombstone.



Inscription

