

# ***Cavalry Boots***

**by Elmore Leonard, 1925-2013**

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ON THE MORNING of May the tenth, 1870, four troops of cavalry, out of Fort Bowie and at full strength, met a hundred-odd Mimbreno Apaches under Chee about a mile east of what used to be Helena. Cavalry met Apache on open, flat terrain—which happened seldom enough—and they cut the Indians to ribbons. Only Chee and a handful of his warriors escaped.

On the official record the engagement is listed as the Battle of Dos Cabezas. But strictly speaking the title is misleading, for the twin peaks of Dos Cabezas were only a landmark to the south. The engagement broke the back of an Apache uprising, but that is not the important point. The Reservation at San Carlos is mute testimony that all uprisings did fail.

No, the importance of the Dos Cabezas action is in how it happened to come about; and the record is not complete on that score—though there is a statement in the record meant to explain how cavalry was able to meet guerrilla Apache away from his mountain stronghold. And there is mention of the unnatural glow in the night sky that attracted both cavalry and Apache. But still, the record is incomplete.

Stoneman himself, Brigadier General, Department of Arizona, was at Bowie at the time. That is why much of the credit for the engagement's success is given to him. However, the next week at Camp Grant, Stoneman made awards connected with the action. The Third United States Dragoons received a unit citation. A Lieutenant R. A. Gander was cited for bravery; it being consolation for a shattered left leg. One other award was made. And therein lies the strange story of the Dos Cabezas affair. This is how it happened.

ALWAYS, IT IS preceded by quiet.

The silence creeps over the gray gloom that is the desert at night and even the natural night sounds are not there. Off, far off, against the blackness of a mountainside there appears the orange-red smear of a bonfire. From a distance it is a flickering point of light, cold and alone. And then—

THE APACHES ARE UP!

It is a scream down the length of the barracks adobe.

Through the window, Kujava sees the thin slash of red in the blackness to the east and he pulls his boots on mechanically, grimly.

Then he is First Sergeant Kujava, swinging through the barracks with a booming voice and a leather gauntlet slashing at sleeping feet.

Kujava knows men. He asks them if they want to be late to die and he does it with a roar of a laugh so they cannot refuse. With the recruits, it is effective. They leap up and yell and laugh with an eagerness that means they are new to frontier station.

And it shows they do not know the Apache.

Others remain motionless, but with eyes open, seeing the desert and the dust-covered mesquite and the alkali and the screaming whiteness of the sun all combined in a shimmering, oppressing haze that sears the eyeballs of a white man until a knot tightens around his forehead. That, and salt sweat and the gagging nitrogen smell of the animals beneath them. Stillness, and never an Apache in sight. These are the ones who have been in as long as Kujava.

On Bud Nagle, the dawn rousing had a bewildering effect. He sat bolt upright on his cot and saw the first sergeant running down the narrow aisle, but what the sergeant was calling made no sense to him. He frowned and rubbed his eyes at the commotion, then fell back slowly on his cot and remained motionless. But he did not see the desert.

There was a cobblestone street with store fronts and restaurants, and it was east of the Mississippi.

By the end of his first month Bud Nagle had known he was not a cavalryman. He knew he was not a soldier of any kind, but after seven months, it was too late to do anything about it, and even the office door in Milwaukee that bore the legend L. V. Nagle, Attorney, could not prevail against it. Enlistments do not dissolve, even if the recruit realizes he is out of place; and especially were they not dissolving that spring of 1870 when Apacheria, from the Dragoons to the San Andres, was vibrating with the beat of hundreds of war drums. The Apaches were up and Cochise would not be stopped.

Now he saw the street again. The shouting, laughing people and the ordinarily shy girls who giggled and threw their arms around the returning soldiers and kissed them right on the street. Right on Wisconsin Avenue. He remembered the deep-blue uniforms and the glistening boots and the one-eyed angle of the kepis, and he could hardly wait.

The uniforms disappeared from the cobblestone street. They had been gone for almost five years, but never from the mind of Bud Nagle.

Smiling girls and glistening boots.

By the time he found out how long issue boots kept a shine, it was too late. He was in Apache country.

Now he opened his eyes and looked full into the awe-inspiring face of the first sergeant. Deep-brown hollow cheeks and full cavalry mustache.

„Get off that bunk ‘fore I kick your comfort-lovin‘ butt across the parade!“ And he was off down the aisle.

It was always the same. Kujava pulled him from his cot, drilled him until his legs shook with weakness. The corporal swore and gave him extra duty, full pack, four hours on the parade. He was always the handiest when their ire was up and he never learned to keep his mouth shut.

The fact that nothing he did was ever done in a military fashion made it doubly easy for the noncoms, and the contagion of their bullying even spread to the ranks.

He was easy to insult and seemed even to invite it. He was not a soldier among soldiers. He tried to act like a man without looking like one. And he complained. That’s part of Army life: a big part. But he whined when he should have bitched like a man. Soldiers know soldiers. They didn’t know Bud Nagle. After only three weeks at Camp Grant he found himself alone. From habit, he continued a pathetic campaign to join the ranks, but at night, in the darkness of the barracks, when in the quietness he could think, Bud Nagle understood that he hated the Army and the men in it. He hated both to the depths of his soul.

BY MIDAFTERNOON B Troop was almost thirty miles south of Camp Grant. To the southwest were the Dragoons, and to the east, the Chiricahuas, looming hazy but ominous in the distance. Somewhere up in the towering rocks was the stronghold of Cochise. This wide semidesert corridor was the gateway to Sonora. Through it passed the Apache raiders into Mexico. Stoneman’s Department of Arizona was shaking off its winter lethargy by sending patrols to every corner of the frontier.

Lieutenant R. A. Gander, riding at the head of B Troop, waited until the twin peaks of Dos Cabezas faced him from an eleven o’clock angle, less than a mile to the south, then he rested the patrol for an hour before turning east. B Troop was at the south end of its patrol. It would swing eastward for a few miles, then swing again slightly north and bivouac near Fort Bowie at the mouth of Apache Pass. From there, the last leg was the thirty miles back to Grant.

Soon they were in the foothills of the Chiricahuas. The mountains rose high above them to the south, and on all sides now were timbered hills and massive rock formations through which the trail twisted and climbed, seldom in sight ahead for more than a hundred yards.

It was dangerous country to take a patrol through. Gander knew that, but sometimes you had to offer a little bait in the business of fighting Indians. That, and the fact that a young officer tends to become careless after too many months of garrison duty. He becomes eager.

Gander had not seen an Apache in six months.

He rode with the self assurance that he was a natural leader. They don’t give commissions to everyone. He was following patrol instructions to the letter, a

routine laid down by a much higher authority than his own, and Lieutenant Gander had complete faith in his superiors. At the Point that had become as natural to him as walking.

He had sent point riders ahead to safeguard against ambush, with explicit orders to make frequent contact.

No danger of being cut off. It was strict military procedure, always on the alert. It was patrol precaution, outlined and detailed in the Manual. So Gander was confident.

Unfortunately, Chee had not read the Manual. Nor had any of his Mimbreno Apaches.

Chee knew everything he needed to know about Lieutenant Gander and his forty-man patrol. He had known it before the troop was five miles south of Grant. The size of the patrol, their equipment, and their experience. In the endless expanse of Arizona sky there were thin wisps of smoke and sudden flashes of the sun's reflection caught on polished metal. That morning the signals had been many and Chee moved over a hundred warriors from the rancheria high up in the Chiricahuas to the foothills.

He scattered them along both sides of the trail where the irregular road suddenly opened up and sloped into a flat, broad area almost a mile long and three hundred yards wide. He hid his warriors behind rock and scrub brush hours before the patrol reached Dos Cabezas and swung eastward into the foothills. And he laid his ambush with contempt for the soldier who was fool enough to establish a pattern of operation in enemy territory.

Chee made no sign when Gander's point riders came into view from the narrow, sloping trail. His face was unlined and impassive, but in the calmness of his dark face there was an eye-squinting sternness that told of other things. It told of his father, Mangas Coloradas, who had been shot in the back as he lay on the ground tied hand and foot. Trussed up and shot from behind after he had accepted a white flag.

SERGEANT KUJAVA, leading point, sent a rider out to the extremities on both sides of the open space. He rode in silence, his head swiveling from one side to the other, taking in every rock and tree clump, his eyes climbing the steel walls of brush and rock that revolted against the sandy flatness to rise abruptly on both sides and finally stretch into rolling foothills. He paid no attention to Bud Nagle riding at his side. He had stopped lecturing him at Dos Cabezas.

He walked his mount slowly, and every so often he stood up in the stirrups and gazed straight ahead. And in the alert mind of First Sergeant Kujava there was an uneasiness. He didn't like the stillness.

Bud Nagle wiped the palm of his hand across his mouth and then pulled his hat brim closer to his eyes while his tongue felt along the dryness that crusted his lips. He swore feebly against the country and made his mind to go far away where there was greenness and a cool breeze and streetcar tracks.

His dull eyes fell to his uniform shirt that was fading from the saturation of body salt. His head rolled to the side and he looked at boots that could be any color under the crust of white dust.

At the north end of the pocket, where rock and brush squeezed in again to resume its rugged stinginess, the narrowness brought the two outriders in to join the sergeant and Nagle. Ahead, the trail sloped gradually through a rock

pass and then broadened into a timberflanked aisle that stretched into the distance and finally ended in a yellowness that was the plain.

Kujava held the riders up and turned in his saddle to see the patrol just entering the open area.

„Stretch your legs,“ he told them. „They’re too far behind. That’s how you get cut off.“

The two outriders dismounted and led their mounts to the side of the trail where a clump of pines cast a triangle of shade. They sat on the ground and stretched stiff legs out in front of them.

Kujava turned his horse around. He slouched in the saddle, one leg hooked over the saddle horn, and watched the hazy line of blue approaching in the distance. He watched the patrol reach the midpoint of the pocket, and the unnatural silence gnawed at his brain and made the ring seem sharper in his ears. He swung his boot back to the stirrup, uneasy, wanting to be ready, and as he did so he heard the click.

Not wood, like a twig snapping. It was metal grinding against metal, and it was sharp and clear enough to send the flash of honest fear through his body and jerk him to the reaction of a man who knows combat. He yanked rein to drag his mount about sharply and tugged his carbine from its boot in the motion, for a Spencer will make that very click when the breech is opened, and the click is loud if the piece is rusted—rusted and uncared for, like the carbine an Apache would have!

He shouted and swung up the carbine, but the shout was drowned in a crash of gunfire and the motion was lost in the phantasm of a hundred impressions as the basin exploded its ambush and caught B Troop by the throat.

Kujava shouted and fired and shouted, and he saw his outriders sprawled in their triangle of shade. And he saw Bud Nagle still sitting his horse with both hands frozen to the saddle horn, his back a ramrod and his eyes popped open in white circles of fear and disbelief.

„Nagle, ride! Ride!“ Kujava’s arm swung as he screamed at the stiffbodied trooper and struck him across the shoulder.

„Get out of here—ride like hell to Bowie—before they’re on to us!“

Nagle moved and seemed to be suddenly drenched with the excitement so that it washed through him and took with it his nerve and his reason.

And the simplicity of Bud Nagle said, „I don’t know where it is.“

Strange things happen in combat. Kujava’s jaw dropped and he wanted to laugh, even with the firing—because of the firing, but it was only for an instant.

He swung his carbine against the rump of Nagle’s mount, sending it into a jolting start down the narrow trail.

„Ride, dammit! Ride!“

His hands were frozen to the saddle horn, his eyes still wide open, seeing nothing, as his mount broke through the rocky narrowness in a gallop, sliding almost sideways in the loose gravel, careening from one rock wall to the other until hoofs struck firm ground at the bottom and raced on, momentum up, along the timber-lined aisle.

He strained his eyes against the distance as if this would draw the safety of it closer to him; as if he would be shielded from the pressing blackness of the heavy timber by holding his neck rigid to look only straight ahead. In a way it was a comfort, but because of it he didn’t see the four ponies come out of the

timber behind him. Four ponies painted for war and carrying Mimbreno Apaches.

He reached the end of the aisle and swung out onto the open plain, riding into the vastness, unsure of the direction, kicking his mount frantically toward the low horizon. Hoofs pounded packed sand and the sound vibrated against his mind to keep the knot tight inside of him, taking the place of the excitement of combat that was now a faint rattle far behind.

In his fear he was unmindful of time, his eyes straining against the distance. Then, in the haze, the horizon changed.

A dark line interrupted the monotonous tone of the plains, stretching and taking shape. It came closer yard by yard and finally there it was. A town. A real town!

He was a mile or more away when the shot rapped from behind. He turned to see the Apaches less than two hundred yards behind, then kicked hard and angled for the frame structures in the distance.

The Mimbres closed the gap by another two dozen yards before Bud Nagle reached the edge of the town, and as he wheeled to head into the street, a second shot slapped against the wide openness like a barrel stave against concrete, and horse and rider went down.

Bud Nagle was stunned. He sat in the dust shaking his head while the dust and his mind cleared. He wanted to rest, but the rumble of the ponies behind him jerked him stumbling to his feet. He tried to run before he was all the way up and he fell to his hands and knees, crawled, then rose to his feet again and ran a few yards yelling at the top of his voice before he stumbled again, sprawling full length in the thick dust of the road.

The dust filled his open mouth and choked his screams for help, muffling the words to make them incoherent and all the more pitiful.

He screamed and choked and drove his legs so savagely that he fell again as he reached the three steps to a porch, hitting his knees against the steps repeatedly until he climbed to the porch and lunged through the swing-type doors of the building.

He stopped in the gloom of the interior, throwing out his arms to rest against a support post in the middle of the room. His body sagged with relief as he put his head against the post, trying to catch his breath.

A hoarseness came out of his throat forming the words, „Apaches—Apaches! Right outside town!“

The silence answered him. And it was so loud and mocking that the breath caught in his throat.

He lifted his head slowly because he knew what he would see and he didn't want to see it. Finally he straightened his head and looked at the dust that couldn't be less than a dozen years old. It covered every surface of the bare room.

He made his head swing along an arc, taking in the rectangular strip of lighter-colored flooring where the bar had stood, and on toward the front of the room. His body moved and a boot scraped the gritty floor.

His shoulders jerked upward and his whole body tensed in an unnatural rigid position. His gaze sank into a dingy front corner and he kept his eyes on the shadowed line where wall met wall, as if by seeing nothing, nothing would see him. Slowly, neck muscles relaxed and the line of his jaw eased. He turned his eyes to the doorway.

A patch of dirty gray light showed through the opening above the louvered doors. Below, a square of the front porch stood out vividly, framed by the blackness of the doors and the dismal gloom of the inside of the room. The doors hung silently against the evening light, rickety and fragile because of the louvers, forming a thin, flimsy barrier against the outside.

He knew he was alone in a one-block town—alone with four Apaches.

And the desolate, stone-silent town squeezed in through the darkening gloom with a ring to its silence that was overbearing, and it pushed the thin figure back into the shadows.

The uniform hung loose and empty-looking as he backed away, lifting his feet gently, holding his arms close to his sides. His right arm brushed the holster on his hip and he glanced down and up quickly as if afraid to take his eyes from the doorway. But his drawn face relaxed slightly as he fumbled at the holster and drew the long-barreled revolving pistol.

Suddenly he stopped. A sharpness jolted against his spine, and he wheeled, discharging the heavy pistol wildly. He fired four times, running, stumbling toward the stairway along the back wall. The explosions slammed against the empty room, bouncing from wall to wall in an ear-splitting din, and with it was the sharp clattering of broken glass. He raced up the stairs, leaving the barroom alone, bare but for the center post against which he had bumped.

And again the silence.

In the upstairs room he pressed stiff-backed to the wall just inside the door while his chest heaved and his head jerked in spasms from the door to the front windows that were dim gray squares outlining the evening. Slowly he edged along the wall until he reached a corner window and pressed his cheek to the frame.

From the angle he could see almost the entire length of the blocklong town. Adobe and clapboard squatted side by side, gaunt and ugly and with a flimsy coldness that proclaimed their unoccupancy. Ramadas extended from most of the building fronts, rickety and drooping, pushing out into the street to squeeze the dirt road into a rutted narrowness. The ramadas hid most of the lower windows and doorways that lined the street, casting a deeper shadow in the fast-falling gloom.

Then, from somewhere below, there was creak of a board bending on a rusted nail. He froze to the wall and the sound stopped.

It tightened every nerve and muscle in his body; but he moved his legs, his hand shaking with the weight of the revolving pistol. He made his way across the room to the door and looked out to the dim landing, leaning over the railing and listened, but only the ragged cut of his breath interrupted the stillness. He backed from the stairway along the short hall that ended a few feet behind him.

A glass-paned door opened to an outside landing with a decaying stairway falling steeply to the ground. The last of the evening light seeped into the narrowness between the two buildings and lost most of its strength filtering through the grimy panes of the door glass. He glanced over his shoulder through one of the panes seeing only the landing and the rotting board wall of the next building, which was a livery stable.

He approached the blackness of the stairwell again, and as he leaned forward the muffled sound came from below. It was faint, faraway, like leather on wood, but it rasped against his spine like an offchord and he felt his neck hairs bristle.

He stood rigid, working his mouth to scream, but the scream came out a moan, and the moan a sob, and he kept saying, „Please God—please God—please God—“ until he finally turned, slamming into the door, smashing his pistol through the glass panes when the door would not open at once, kicking boots and knees against the door panel.

Then he was out and down the stairs, stopping a moment in the narrow alley to swing his head both ways. An instant later he disappeared through the side door of the next building.

In the upper hall a vague shadow emerged from the blackness of the stairwell to the landing where Bud Nagle had stood. The figure was obscure, but the last of the evening's faint light showed dimly on the head of the Mimbreno war lance.

A MIMBRENO APACHE is not a fanatic. He will not throw his life away. If mortally wounded, the chances are he will put aside precaution to make his last act that of killing a white man. Many white men will do the same. It is not fanaticism; it is complete resignation. Fatalism with fate staring you in the face.

A Mimbreno is a little man, less than five-seven, but he is an oiled leather cord with rock-tight knots all the way down. He wears a calico band to hold back shoulder-length hair, and his moccasins reach the midpoint of his thighs. He wears a cotton breechclout and his upper body is painted vermilion. Paint on dirt.

His God is U-sen, and he is the best natural guerrilla fighter in the world. He is a strategist. He lives to kill—and he plans it every hour he's awake while he drinks tizwin to make sure the kill-urge will not go away.

And don't you forget it: He does not throw his life away.

That is why the three shadows converged on the stable, but without a war cry, without assault. There was not even the hint of noise. The shadows were unreal, blending with the gloom. They moved to the side of the building to join the fourth shadow standing in the narrow alley.

The phantom shapes fused together to become a part of the deeper shadow close to the side of the stable.

In a few minutes the obscure figures reappeared, moving quickly, taking definite shape upon reaching the street, then fading again, passing under the ramadas on the other side. And in the narrow alley there was a flicker of light. A wavering, dancing speck of light. Then, vivid orange against black as the fire gradually climbed the decaying wall of the stable. It was a matter of only a few minutes. The fire scaled the side wall slowly at first; small orange tongues, scattered along the dry surface, finally ate into each other and erupted into a brilliant mass of flame.

For the figure crouched inside the stable there was no choice. He edged out of a stall and moved toward the front of the stable, watching the fire, fascinated, until the flames reached the loft above him and the heat pressed close and smothering.

For a few minutes he forgot about the Apaches, his mind coping with just one thing at a time, and not relating the fire to the Indians. He was completely fascinated, moving toward the front slowly, reluctant to take his eyes from the dancing flames, until the heat licked close and he turned to find himself at the front entrance.



Hiding was out of the question. Swept out by the fire and the panic that strapped his mind and made his heart hammer against his chest.

Panic and no choice.

It made him throw his shoulder against the heavy swing door and force his body through the narrow opening. He hesitated a long second, then ran to the left, hitting the duckboard sidewalk in four strides, then up the steps of the barroom porch. He hesitated again in the deep shadows of the ramada, glanced back toward the stable grinding his teeth together to keep from crying out, then ran across the porch.

At the end of the porch he glanced back again, and that was his mistake.

He turned to break into a run, but the stairs were there and he pitched forward, throwing his arms out in front of him. There was the half-scream and the explosion and that was all. He lay faceup. A thin hole in his chest showed where he had shot himself. And the toes of his issue boots pointed to the red glow that was spreading in the sky.

IT WAS THE same glow that brought Apache and cavalry to meet the next morning on the flat plain east of the town of Helena.

Cause and effect is natural. Cavalry followed the glow in the night sky for an obvious reason. That was why there was a garrison at Fort Bowie. Chee brought his Mimbres through a mistake in judgment. Fire in the sky to the northeast, the direction of Fort Bowie. And Cochise, with over two hundred Chiricahuas, was on the warpath in that general direction. It was easy for Chee to abandon one ambushed troop for a chance to assist in the sack of a whole garrison.

An error in judgment and overeagerness. And when Chee discovered his error it was too late. He was in the open. One of Stoneman's scouts learned this from a Mimbres who survived the battle. The story influenced Stoneman's reasoning. There is no question of that.

That afternoon they found Bud Nagle. His gun empty and his body mutilated. The right hand and foot hacked off. There was only one conclusion to be reached.

At Camp Grant the next week, Stoneman awarded him posthumously the medal that bears Minerva's head. The Medal of Honor.

Regimental pride is a strange thing. A soldier will cling to it because it is important, and he will even let it bias his mind. West of the San Andres there was little else but regimental pride.

Stoneman gave Nagle the Medal of Honor because he had sacrificed his life for his troop. He had fired the town to signal the Bowie garrison, thereby giving his own life. Stoneman even hinted that Nagle signaled with the intention of luring Chee. He did not state it flatly, but moved around it with tactical terms.

That's what regimental pride will do. A hero. His name listed forever on the Roll of Honor of B Troop, Third United States Dragoons.

And many believed it—even knowing Bud Nagle—Yes, that's what regimental pride will do.

