



**BUFFALO SOLDIER
CHRISTMAS
STORY**

Bob Rogers
Author of *First Dark*

Christmas Story

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CHRISTMAS STORY**

Buffalo Soldier

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This short story, *Buffalo Soldier Christmas Story* by Bob Rogers, is a work of fiction based on characters from the highly acclaimed novel, [*First Dark: A Buffalo Soldier's Story*](#).

Author's note: Dull Knife, Hiram Young, Colonel Benjamin H. Grierson, Mrs. Alice Grierson, Captain Nicholas M. Nolan, and Sergeant Thomas H. Allsup are historic figures. Colonel Grierson, Captain Nolan, and Sergeant Allsup served in the Tenth United States Regiment of Cavalry before, during, and after 1876.

Second Edition

Christmas Story

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Buffalo Soldier

Also by Bob Rogers

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First Dark: A Buffalo Soldier's Story

Sacrifice at Shiloh Church

The Laced Chameleon

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Lieutenant Flipper's Trial – The Play

Christmas Story

Dedication

In Memory of
Thomas H. Allsup,
First Sergeant,
Company A,
Tenth United States Cavalry.

Buffalo Soldier

Acknowledgements

Salute to my comrades in arms who provided encouragement and counsel over the years, including Colonel Leroy Zimmerman, Artillery, US Army (Retired), and the late John Craig, former US Army sergeant and cofounder of the Baltimore chapter of the Ninth and Tenth (Horse) Cavalry Association.

Though I am much obliged to many, any errors are mine.

Bob Rogers
Charlotte, North Carolina
November 27, 2012

Buffalo Soldier Christmas Story



“**A**lrigh already, I give up! Who the hell is Dull Knife?” Corporal Caleb Jenkins’s frown remained as he waited for an answer from his friends. They were old hands in the Tenth Cavalry’s Company A, which was created by an act of Congress in 1866. Caleb and his comrades in the Tenth’s Company A were the first Negro cavalymen sent in harm’s way.

“Chief Dull Knife is the leader of the Northern Cheyenne. Some o’ his people were among Sitting Bull’s warriors at the Little Big Horn this summer.” Sergeant Isaac Rice rested his hands on the mess table beside the remains of his supper.

Sergeant Tom Allsup pushed his dusty and battered campaign hat farther down the bench from his holstered revolver. He turned to Isaac, “So what else did dis James say ‘bout the massacre of the Cheyenne?”

The three friends sat at a long table for noncommissioned officers at the far end of the Tenth Cavalry’s mess hall at Fort Concho, Texas. Isaac and Tom sat with their backs to a stone wall. Over Caleb’s shoulder, Isaac had a clear view of the Christmas tree at the other end of the large room. The tree stood in a corner between the main entrance and a doorway to the kitchen. Out the window, Isaac saw darkness descending over West Texas as the sky changed from purple to black at first dark that Friday evening.



Isaac reached inside his shirt and withdrew a battered and sweat-stained letter. He unfolded the letter and smoothed it against the table. “Well, let’s see. According to James, the Fourth Cav caught the Cheyenne by complete surprise and attacked early in the morning.” Isaac paused and looked up. “Wait, hold on. Today is December 23. So, it happened a month ago tomorrow–November 24, 1876.” He scanned the letter. “James went on to say they killed anybody and everybody they could find. Some Cheyenne, including Dull Knife, escaped in the confusion. James said the purpose of the mission was to avenge Custer and the Seventh.”

Refolding the letter, Isaac said, “So, this was, pure and simple, all about revenge.”

Christmas Story

Tom cocked his head to one side and asked of no one in particular. “I ‘member hearin’ you fellows say y’all met James in St. Louis. But how did y’all come to be friends with a white Civil War cavalryman?”

Isaac and Caleb exchanged glances and chuckled. Isaac explained, “Yeah, dat same James rode wid our Colonel Grierson on dat famous Union cav’ raid right down through the middle o’ Mississippi.”

With raised eyebrows, Tom said, “You mean ta tell me the ol’ man knows’im, too.”

“Yep. Anyway, a bit over a year after the war, we happened upon James and his wife one night on a city street just as a robber hit him over the head wid a piece of a baseball bat . . .”

“Fire! Fire!”

The cry came from the other end of the room. Isaac looked up. The dry Christmas tree was ablaze. A fallen candle lay on the floor next to the burning tree. Tom darted toward the entrance and snatched the bulge off its nail beside the bulletin board. Isaac and Caleb ran for the fire buckets as Tom stepped outside and twice blew the bugle call for “fire!” Men ran from the barracks, from officers’ quarters, and from the stables to join the bucket brigade. Among the men were the Tenth Cavalry’s regimental commander, Colonel Grierson, and Company A’s commander, Captain Nolan.

Soon, the small blaze was extinguished. Though the temperature was thirty-five degrees and dropping, the tired men of the quickly assembled fire brigade wiped sweat as they assessed the ruined toys that rested under the tree. The toys were meant for Fort Concho’s children. Women gathered beside the men. They were laundresses, servants, and wives of the officers.

Angela, the widow of a Ninth Cavalry soldier previously stationed at Fort Concho, was Isaac’s laundress. Angela and Louise, Caleb’s wife, stood next to Isaac holding her six-year-old son’s hand. Little Albert shed silent tears as he surveyed the charred toys. The disheartened group broke up as the cold night wind made most think of a warm fireplace or a pot belly stove.

When Angela and Albert were out of earshot, Louise said to Caleb, “Lil’ Albert’s gone be powerful sad come Christmas Day. He’s been want’n a train since last Christmas.”

With a grave expression, Caleb nodded. “Yeah, we gotta do somethin’.”

Using a spoon, Isaac stirred a half-burned wooden toy train engine amid the ashes. Suddenly, he stood and stretched himself to his full height and said, “Hey, I’ve got an idea.”

Caleb chuckled. “Oh, Lawd. Tom, git ready for incomin’!”

Louise and Tom laughed. Tom shielded his face with his arm. “Yeah, man, when Isaac gits an idea, duck and cover!”

Isaac smiled, but otherwise ignored both. “If I can get the help of a couple o’ artists, a wood-carver, and a pretty fair blacksmith, we might build a merry time for lil’ Albert.”

By candlelight in the smoke-fouled mess hall, Caleb and Louise sketched an engine, a passenger car, and a flatcar. While the mess sergeant and KP crew continued cleaning the room, Isaac took the pencil and outlined the body of each piece. He put his hand on Tom’s shoulder and said, “We ain’t got much time. But can you carve these items?”

Buffalo Soldier

While Tom stared at the paper and scratched his stubble, Isaac asked Caleb and Louise, “You know the wood will be green and damp. So can you draw and paint the engineer and passengers on cardboard?”

Tom dropped his hand. “Great idea. I’ll carve a recessed groove for the cardboard passengers.”

Isaac was excited. “That’s even better than I imagined. I’ll make the wheels, axles, cow catcher, and smokestack. Let’s agree on measurements and get started.”

Fifteen minutes later, Isaac and Tom were at Captain Nolan’s family quarters explaining their need for animals, a wagon, and a volunteer detail. By nine o’clock, the first-quarter Moon was sinking fast toward its midnight rendezvous with the horizon. At half past nine, they set out for the woods located northwest from the post along the Concho River on a trail that they had learned well during their three-year stint at the fort. The detail included Isaac, Tom, Caleb, and two privates. The three friends rode guard on horseback fore and aft of the sturdy green wagon with red wheels built by Hiram Young and Company of Missouri. The privates drove the six mules that pulled the wagon. They left Louise to her drawing and painting at the post.

They found a suitable campsite shortly before moonset and, when not on picket duty, the privates slept in the wagon among their rations and axes. The temperature had dropped to twenty-six degrees. Isaac and Tom created a remuda while Caleb secured the animals with enough rope to allow them to move about and munch the contents of their nosebags. Instead of sleeping, the three friends walked a roving guard, in part, to keep warm, for they did not want to announce their presence by building a night fire.



At dawn, Isaac and Caleb set out to find a ten-foot eldarica pine with its classic Christmas tree shape. They returned to camp with their replacement tree and had a breakfast of bacon, hardtack, and coffee.

Isaac and Tom mounted to search for small chinquapin oak, about six inches in diameter—the right size to minimize the time needed to carve the toy train.

Suddenly Isaac halted and whispered, “Tom, look. Kiowa at nine o’clock from the river.”

On a ridge above them were four horsemen armed with one rifle and three bows. They led two pack horses. One horse was laden with a deer that had an arrow stuck in its neck.

While Tom pulled out his bugle and blew “Boots and Saddles,” Isaac removed his seven-shot Spencer carbine from its saddle boot and attached the weapon to his leather shoulder sling. At the sound of “Boots and Saddles,” Caleb and the privates rushed out and formed a line, using trees as their cover.

A Kiowa rifleman raised his rifle. At that instant, Isaac commanded, “Charge!” and landed his heels against his horse’s flanks. Cheyenne, his horse, leapt forward. Isaac went right and Tom went left. Both returned the Kiowa’s fire as they charged under the cover of more carbine volleys from Caleb and the privates.

Under intense fire, the Kiowa bowmen changed their minds, turned their mounts, and made a hasty retreat to the west. When the rifleman discovered he was alone, he, too, retired quickly to the west. Isaac topped the ridge and observed the cloud of dust created by the fleeing Kiowa. He turned Cheyenne, and at a canter, rode back to camp.

Christmas Story

East of the river, Tom pointed out the perfect chinquapin oak. Isaac secured Cheyenne and kept his carbine on his sling while he flailed away with his axe. In the meanwhile, Tom and the detail broke camp and brought the wagon up as the small oak crashed to the ground. Isaac stood panting and sweating. Caleb and Tom chopped off the limbs and cut the trunk into pieces ideal for carving.

They arrived at the post just before end of noon mess on Christmas Eve. Eating on the run, they quickly set to work separately in the smithy and the woodwork shop. In his leather apron, Isaac hammered white-hot iron into wheels and axles for the engine and cars. At the time for supper mess, he realized there were still more wheels to make besides the smokestack and cow catcher, plus the candelabra he had worked on since November for Captain Nolan, who planned to give it as a surprise to his wife.

Isaac toiled on without supper. At half past eight, guided by the light of a lantern held by her servant, Mrs. Grierson arrived at the smithy carrying a covered bowl. "Isaac, I heard about the noble effort you and the others are committed to. But you must stop for a few minutes and eat."

Though it was cold outside the blacksmith shop, Isaac pulled out a large blue bandanna and mopped his brow. "Yes'm, Miss Alice. I thank you for bringin' that bowl o' soup. I'll eat it soon's I finish this here piece o' iron."

With his long tongs, Isaac thrust a white-hot iron wheel into a tub of water. There, it made a hissing sound and a cloud of steam.

Mrs. Grierson tried to find Isaac's eyes through the steam. "Promise?"

"Yes'm, I promise."

Half-hour later, Isaac ate the lukewarm antelope and bean soup in several gulps. He thought, *I must soldier on.*

At half past three on Christmas morning, Isaac put on his coat and decided to get a nap on his workbench before the furnace fire went down.

He awoke at five o'clock to the sound of people singing in the smithy accompanied by parts of the Tenth Cavalry band, led by Caleb. Isaac sat up rubbing his eyes, trying to ignore the pain in his joints from sleeping on the hard workbench. The Grierson and Nolan families were there beside several men from Company A and all of the laundresses. They lifted their voices with enthusiasm and sang "Oh, Come All Ye Faithful". Without missing a beat, Caleb followed with a rousing rendition of "For He's a Joy Good Fellow".

At the end of the song, Isaac stood amid applause and a small boy stepped forward, hugging a toy train engine complete with cow catcher and metal wheels. Isaac knelt on one knee to meet the lad. Little Albert said in a shy voice, "Thank you, Mr. Sergeant Isaac. Merry Christmas to ya."



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