

Chapter Five

Return to the Field

The Sternbergs were finally reunited in St. Louis, and from there they took the train to Ellsworth. From existing pictures, it does not appear that Sternberg was a large man, and his illness had reduced him to less than 100 pounds. Mrs. Sternberg was shocked by his pale, drawn, and frail appearance, and the healing sores that had complicated his recovery, and she commented later that had they not met by appointment she would never have recognized him. Reverend Sternberg and his wife left no record of their eldest son's visit or of their reaction to his physical state, but the Smoky Hill Dairy had all of the essentials to return the meat to their son's nutritionally depleted frame. In the five years since Sternberg had left Kansas, his father had demonstrated a keen head not only as a dairyman, but also as a cattle rancher. Still disenchanted with Lutheran evangelicalism, the elder Sternberg became a Presbyterian and organized the First Presbyterian Church of Ellsworth in 1873.¹

In the first week of November, Sternberg reported to the Assistant Surgeon General of the Army, Colonel Charles Crane, in Washington. Crane was glad to see he was recovering, but told him he was "in no condition to go on duty."² He suggested a recuperative tour of southern Europe and offered him six months of leave. Sternberg graciously accepted. Interestingly enough, his health was not so frail as to preclude him from presenting his report on the recent yellow fever epidemic at the American Public Health Association meeting in Baltimore during the second week in November. Sternberg did not lose the opportunity to state publicly his beliefs concerning the etiology of the disease: "We are...reduced to the necessity of supposing that the yellow fever germs were sowed broadcast, by the wind...or that they were floated ashore by infected articles thrown over from [the von Moltke], or that the disease originated at Barrancas de novo, independent of the Von Moltke or any other source of infection. This latter supposition has always been a favorite way of accounting for the origin of epidemics, both with the populace and with a certain

proportion of the medical profession. It is a supposition that does away with the necessity for laborious investigation and careful consideration of the facts. But the more carefully the facts are observed, and the more thoroughly they are sifted, the more improbable the supposition appears. That epidemics result simply from "a visitation of Providence," may satisfy the ignorant. That they result from certain unknown atmospheric or telluric influences, sounds more scientific, but is no more satisfactory. But a solution of the problem is gradually unfolding itself to our view, which explains and comprehends all the observed facts relating to the origin and spread of epidemics of non-contagious diseases. This is the theory of living disease germs, capable, under favorable circumstances, of self-multiplication independently of the human body."³

In a comfortable stateroom aboard the *S. S. City of Chester*, the Sternbergs sailed from New York City on November 27. In London they lodged on the Strand and did some sightseeing for three days before going to France. Their Atlantic crossing was uneventful, but the comparatively short crossing of the English Channel was a stormy and fatiguing trial. After four days in Paris, the Sternbergs were ready to resume their journey to Nice. Their accommodations in the Hotel des Anglais were excellent, and the warm, sunny climate of the southern France was great for his health. On Christmas Eve, the Sternbergs received a long-awaited telegram that added to the cheer of the season. Sternberg's promotion to Major and Surgeon had arrived at last.⁴

In January Sternberg was eager to see Italy and be on the move again. Martha, who was certain that he had not regained his full strength, was determined to set a slow pace to Rome, but his monthly reports to the surgeon general indicated that she was not very successful. In January they visited Genoa, Pisa, and Naples, where they remained for two weeks on their journey to the Eternal City. The first 2 weeks of February included stops in Florence, Venice, Milan, and Turin. By the middle of the month, they had returned to Paris. By the beginning of April, Sternberg had recovered his health, satiated his thirst for ancient monuments and ruins, and anticipated his next assignment.⁵

Sternberg reported to Colonel Crane once again in late April 1876. Crane gave the new major a choice of two assignments: the Department of the Dakotas or the Department of the Columbia. Sternberg discussed it with Martha, but their decision to accept the Department of the Columbia assignment was probably not difficult to make. The Dakotas offered desolate posts with relatively primitive accommodations, horribly rough winters, and a guarantee that he would be campaigning from spring to late summer. Although posts in the Department of the Columbia were far from luxurious, the climate was milder, and—for the moment anyway—the threat of Indian hostilities was not great.⁶

The journey from New York to Portland was a rough American adventure, memorable only for the magnificent buffalo herds observed on the western plains and the harsh conditions experienced over every mile of track. The transcontinental railroad had been operating for 7 years, but passenger comforts, such as dining and sleeping cars, did not exist. The seating was hard and desert dust filled the

drafty cars, almost to the point of suffocation. With the exception of Kansas City and Denver, lodging facilities were crude and inadequate at best, and as Martha recalled, most of the food encountered was “greasy, coarse, and badly cooked.”⁷ On June 8, Sternberg’s 38th birthday, he reported for duty to Brigadier General Oliver O. Howard at headquarters, Department of the Columbia, and temporarily assumed duties as acting medical director for the department in the absence of Lieutenant Colonel and Surgeon Elisha J. Bailey.⁸

For the next 12 weeks, Sternberg became familiar with the department and, for a short period near the end of that time, was also attending surgeon at Fort Vancouver. Sternberg’s experience and expertise made him valuable not only to the command, but also to the local medical community. Frequently consulted in difficult cases, he enjoyed the professional stimulation afforded by interaction with his civilian colleagues. In pleasant lodgings, he and Martha explored and appreciated their new surroundings. Martha was particularly taken with the majestic scenery of Mounts Hood, Jefferson, and Rainier, and the robust beauty of the local flower gardens. On June 26, they had another reason to be thankful: they had decided to accept the northwestern posting. Telegraph wires hummed with the news of a terrible disaster in Montana Territory: Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer and approximately 215 troopers of the 7th Cavalry had been attacked by overwhelming Sioux and Cheyenne forces near the Little Big Horn River. Sternberg remembered the flamboyant Custer from campaigns in Kansas and the winter at Camp Supply, and took consolation that at least his friend, Albert Barnitz, had been spared this gruesome end by a forced retirement. Mrs. Sternberg, undoubtedly, was relieved and offered a thankful prayer that they had decided not to go to the Dakotas.⁹

Her relief, however, was short-lived. Tensions mounted in the department between the Nez Percé tribes and the U.S. Government over ownership of the traditional Nez Percé homeland. This was not a new problem, and it was openly acknowledged as such by the government. From 1805, when the Nez Percé first met the white man, until 1853, when Congress created the Washington Territory, relations between these Indians and whites were relatively free from strife. The establishment of Presbyterian and Roman Catholic missions to the Nez Percé, however, resulted in a political and religious schism within the tribe that led to the murders of missionary schoolteachers Marcus Whitman, his wife, and 14 others in November 1847. Missions were closed, and the government sought to control the tribe through the use of reservations. This situation, and the advent of the mining industry in the northwest in the early 1850s, induced Territorial Governor Isaac I. Stevens to urge the Nez Percé chiefs to conclude a treaty or simply have their land stolen by settlers. The pro-white Christian Nez Percé leadership concluded a treaty at the Walla Walla Council in May 1855 that relinquished a third of its land and agreed to live on 3 million acres that included the Snake, Salmon, Clearwater, Grande Ronde, Wallowa, and Imnaha valleys. Congressional sloth in ratifying the treaty and the discovery of gold in the Clearwater Valley led fortune seekers to cross the boundary line, and Indian protests only resulted in the establishment of Fort Lapwai in 1862. In June 1863, Nez Percé leaders relinquished more of the reservation,

which resulted in the tribe being divided into “treaty” and “non-treaty” factions. Over the next decade, tensions escalated, and in June 1873, President Grant relegated the Nez Percé to a small and unarable tract of land in the highlands of the Wallowa country, which was completely inadequate for the tribes. Two years later, the Indian Bureau forced Grant to rescind this order, which—in effect—opened the entire Wallowa region to white settlement.¹⁰

The deeply religious General Howard arrived at this time with a bible and a strong belief that it was his divine mission to resolve the matter. Howard believed he could use the same diplomatic techniques as he had with Cochise and the Apaches in Arizona in 1872 to resolve the Nez Percé dilemma. He felt the government was wrong to just take the Wallowa Valley from the Indians; however, he did not believe the Indians should be allowed to remain there. He conceded that the Nez Percé owned the land and should receive compensation for it—by force if necessary—but considered President Grant’s order as binding. This line of thinking had become Howard’s policy position by early 1876, although he never made this clear to the Nez Percé chiefs. He requested a commission from Washington to settle the land dispute and directed Indian leaders to control their warriors until the commission could meet.¹¹

Upon the return of Medical Director Bailey, Sternberg was given a choice of two posts within the department. Forts Vancouver and Walla Walla in Washington Territory both needed a surgeon, but Walla Walla offered a better climate and longer stability. He opted for the second post and reported on August 31, moving into a one-and-a-half story duplex on the parade ground. Fort Walla Walla was a relatively new post in that it had only been reoccupied by the army after the Modoc War in August 1873. In September, Captain Stephen G. Whipple assumed temporary command of the garrison until Colonel Cuvier Grover arrived, which consisted of E, H, and L troops; 1st Cavalry; and B and H companies of the 21st Infantry. Several buildings, including the barracks and officers’ quarters, showed signs of neglect and needed repair. The inadequate and badly planned 10-bed wooden hospital, which sat a couple hundred yards directly west of officers’ row, was turned over to Sternberg by outgoing surgeon Charles H. Alden. It, too, needed repair and renovation because it was poorly ventilated; lacked a lavatory, bathroom, and water-closet; and had too few storage rooms.¹²

As at other posts, Sternberg opened a private office off post for three reasons. The first—and most pertinent—reason was to supplement his income. Congressional appropriations for military funding declined through the 1870s. In 1877, there was no appropriation until the end of November and, hence, soldiers received no pay during the year. Second, while his duties on post were not wholly unremarkable—he dealt with a typhoid outbreak and a soldier with gastric cancer, among other things—sick call and sanitary inspections of kitchens, barracks, and laundress’ quarters did not provide the volume or variety of practice required to maintain his professional skills and keep him occupied. Third, private practice opened an avenue for introduction into the Walla Walla community, an opportunity that he and Martha welcomed—and fostered—for the social and cultural interactions it offered off post.¹³

The mother of one of Sternberg's patients was a well-educated and multilingual woman of French birth, and he inquired whether she gave private lessons because he thought it would be a nice diversion for his wife. The woman consented, but Martha perceived another opportunity to disengage her husband from his laboratory and agreed to lessons if he also would attend them. Whether Sternberg was sufficiently motivated to overcome his loathing of languages by maturity, their recent trip to France, or because he could not read the French medical literature remains a mystery, but he agreed. The woman was an excellent teacher. After three years of study, Martha noted he had "mastered every difficulty of the language, and could deliver lectures in French."¹⁴

Sternberg also met a civil engineer in town who shared his interest in paleontology. This man, who may have been J. L. "Jake" Wortman, showed Sternberg some fine specimens he found in the fossil field at Washtuckna Lake, which was some distance north of Walla Walla. This impressive collection whetted Sternberg's appetite to investigate the area. He obtained permission from his commander to accompany the next contingent of soldiers to Fort Colville and found a physician in town to take sick call for a few days.¹⁵

A two-day journey put the Sternbergs and their party at the ferry on the Snake River. As they prepared their camp, elders from a local tribe ran their canoes ashore and approached the camp. A few of the soldiers had made contact with these Indians to ensure they understood the party was passing through peaceably, and they informed them that the group leader was a physician. Mrs. Sternberg recalled the chief was not pleased and, through an interpreter, questioned them in detail about their destinations and plans. After a lengthy monologue, the chief came to the real point of his visit. He had a daughter who had been coughing for "two snows."¹⁶ Could the white medicine man offer her any help? Sternberg realized that the chief's daughter was probably suffering from tuberculosis. Although his first instinct was to ask whether he could see the girl, he decided it may be a foolish act and quickly prepared a cough mixture from his medical kit to satisfy her father.¹⁷

The encounter with the Indians was unexpected, but neither Sternberg nor the soldiers were alarmed by it. Early the next morning, the soldiers parted company with the fossil hunters, and the Sternbergs and five enlisted men accompanying them crossed the deep and swift Snake River. Two days later, Sternberg was thrilled to gaze out over the Washtuckna Lake bed, untouched and unexplored except for the survey of his friend in Walla Walla. The specimens they found were clean, and the variety was astonishing. In the post-Pleistocene era, not only had horses, elk, and deer come to the lake to drink, but also camels and mammoths. In a few hours they had gathered and packed what Sternberg considered a sufficient quantity of prime specimens. Although they had planned to visit Shoshone Falls a short distance away, Sternberg was reluctant because of the Indians and decided to head for home instead.¹⁸

The commission Howard had lobbied for so strenuously became a reality in November 1876 at Fort Lapwai in Idaho Territory. The nontreaty chiefs, such as

Joseph, his brother, Ollikot, and others came to parley, but their arguments fell on deaf ears. The commissioners had already decided on their recommendations: the military occupation of the Wallowa Valley should commence immediately, nontreaty Indians should return to the Lapwai reservation within a reasonable time, and any acts of resistance or hostility would be met with force. On January 6, 1877, nontreaty Nez Percé leaders were notified to be on the reservation by April 1. A week later, General William Tecumseh Sherman ordered Howard to send troops into the Wallowa Valley. Joseph remained recalcitrant, but fearful. He sent Ollikot to meet with Howard at Walla Walla in April. Nothing was achieved at this council, and while Joseph's message was a stubborn refusal to leave the Wallowa Valley, it carried a plea to continue peaceful negotiations. Ollikot requested another meeting with all of the nontreaty chiefs at Fort Lapwai to which Howard agreed.¹⁹

A large hospital tent had been raised for the council on Friday morning in May 3. The council was merely a formality to allow the Nez Percé to present their grievances one last time, but it would not alter their future in the Wallowa Valley. Howard was in no mood to participate in lengthy, futile discussions as Chief Toohoolhoolzote rose to speak for the assembled chiefs. Although an eloquent orator, he despised all whites, and his long monologue contained no hint of conciliation. A few curt remarks from the general offended the chief and tempers flared to the point where an adjournment until Monday morning was agreed upon to allow passions to cool, but the tenor of the council had been set. When talks resumed, it was quickly apparent that neither Howard nor Toohoolhoolzote had softened their positions. The general's fury only mounted during the obstinate discourse of the Nez Percé chief. Insults once again filled the air. Then, in stunned silence, the audience watched as Howard abruptly seized Toohoolhoolzote and escorted him to the guardhouse. Howard then dictated an ultimatum to the nontreaty chiefs: they would be settled on their respective reservations by mid-June. Humiliated, and with one of their chiefs now captive, the remaining Nez Percé leaders had to submit to Howard's demands.²⁰

On the morning of June 14, Captain David Perry, commanding officer at Fort Lapwai, met Howard and Colonel Watkins, Inspector of Indian Affairs, at Lewiston in Idaho Territory. This was the day the Nez Percé were to be settled on the Lapwai Reservation. Perry commented that the Indians were coming in as directed, but this encouraging news evaporated late in the afternoon, when couriers brought word that settlers had been murdered by Indian war parties in the village of Cottonwood. Howard directed Perry to march with companies of the 1st Cavalry to Cottonwood immediately. Perry's 99-man detachment reached the town early the following morning, then pushed on to Grangeville where they were informed the Nez Percé were camped in White Bird Canyon on the Salmon River. The column pushed on, but Perry did not need to rush into the canyon. The Cottonwood murders had been perpetrated without sanction by vengeful young warriors, and the various tribes had congregated in the defensive safety of White Bird Canyon. To avoid further bloodshed, they had to wait for Howard to come to them, but they were uncertain whether he would talk or fight. Sentries

guarded the approaches to the canyon and watched for the inevitable column of mounted soldiers.²¹

Just before dawn on June 17, Perry led his exhausted troopers down a long grassy draw into the deep canyon. The Nez Percé sent a small group under a flag of truce, but whatever this delegation might have hoped to accomplish was lost when a shot was abruptly fired at them. Warriors hidden among the hills and rocks immediately unleashed a barrage of fire into Perry's companies, costing him a third of his command before he could disengage. A messenger reached Howard at Lapwai later in the day with news of this second disaster. Assuming Chief Joseph was the instigator and leader of the rebellion, Howard sent a series of telegrams to nearly every post in the department that ordered soldiers to meet him at Lapwai by June 21 for an expedition against the Nez Percé. Surgeon Charles T. Alexander, attending surgeon at headquarters in Portland, was designated the chief surgeon for the expedition, and Assistant Surgeons William R. Hall at Fort Wrangel, Alaska, and Jenkins (John) A. Fitzgerald at Fort Lapwai, joined him.²²

Early on June 19, the Sternbergs accompanied the last of the 21st Infantry Regiment—departing for Wallula, Washington—a short distance from post in their carriage to ensure last-minute messages to families and loved ones were delivered. At Wallula, transport steamers conveyed these soldiers to Lewiston on the Snake River in Idaho Territory, and from there they marched to Fort Lapwai, where Howard waited to consolidate his forces for the expedition against Chief Joseph. The Sternbergs arrived home shortly before noon and found an unexpected directive. Sternberg was to immediately gather ample medical supplies and accompany the soldiers—to whom he had so recently bid farewell—to Fort Lapwai. This was a shock, particularly to Mrs. Sternberg. Perhaps due to Sternberg's bout with yellow fever, Medical Director Bailey had promised that he would not deploy if hostilities ensued, but he might be called to duty in Portland to replace Alexander. The current situation, however, dictated that Bailey renege on his promise. He needed a medical officer immediately because as legal proceedings in Portland precluded Assistant Surgeon Fitzgerald from joining Howard's expedition. Mrs. Sternberg was frustrated and upset, but her husband was an experienced soldier and knew such promises can become null and void in a crisis. While his hospital steward prepared his medical supplies, Sternberg readied his field equipment and horse, Kitty, for the train ride to Wallula on the Columbia River, where he would take the steamer to Lewiston.²³

Sternberg's primary role was to support the infantry, and it may be presumed he packed extremely light. Medical supplies and equipment had to fit on the back of a mule for this rugged, mountainous campaign. Late in the afternoon of June 19, Sternberg boarded the steamer *Tenino* with his friends in the 21st Infantry from Forts Vancouver and Walla Walla and the 4th Artillery from Fort Stevens. As the *Tenino* made its way down the Columbia and up the Snake River to Lewiston, Walla Walla officers discussed the military situation and probable plans of action with their comrades from the more distant posts. Sternberg wrote to Martha with the scant new information he had received. He believed "quite a strong force" would

be assembled at Fort Lapwai.²⁴ He sent her his love, a promise to be home as soon as he could, and a warning not to “allow yourself to be alarmed by sensational rumors.”²⁵ The soldiers disembarked at Lewiston, a small farming and mining community, which served as Howard’s supply base during the expedition, on the morning of June 21. Pack mules and supplies were hastily procured; horses and equipment were put in order. A sense of urgency spurred the column over the last 12 miles of the journey to Fort Lapwai. Worn and weary, it arrived at 1:00 the following morning.²⁶

At the fort, rumors abounded of continued and extremely vicious Indian depredations. Companies E and L, 1st Cavalry, commanded by Captain Stephen G. Whipple, and a small contingent of civilian volunteers completed the force gathered at the small post. Although three companies of artillery and one of infantry, as well as medical officers Alexander and Hall, had not arrived, Howard was confident in his numbers and anxious to move against the Nez Percé. He dispatched this force, under the command of Captain Marcus P. Miller, 4th Artillery, down the trail to Craig Mountain at noon on June 22. The command covered 12 miles before making camp near Junction Trail and was on the move before dawn in cold, snowy weather. Captain Perry and the remnants of his command joined Howard that evening at Norton’s Ranch. Sternberg reported to Martha that they were “getting pretty close to hostile Indians,” and he expected the column would be reinforced, including medical officers, very soon.²⁷ Indeed, four companies of the 4th Artillery, armed as infantry, and one company of the 21st Infantry, were en route with medical officers. As the possibility of Indian contact increased, so did anxiety within the command, and it intensified when Howard ordered a reconnaissance into White Bird Canyon early on June 26. While the reconnaissance party located Indians on the hills overlooking the far side of the Salmon River, Perry led a burial detachment, which included Sternberg, into the canyon. It was a gruesome task. Only the blackened, bloated corpses of F and H Companies remained to mark the extent of the battlefield. Exposed to the heat and rain for 10 days, the bodies were in an advanced state of decomposition, and portions of the remains had been scattered by scavenging animals. In the overpowering stench and incessant rain, the troops dug shallow graves as close to the bodies as possible and then rolled in the remains. Sternberg and the soldiers “returned [to Johnson’s Ranch] at dark tired, wet, and hungry.”²⁸

The expected reinforcements caught up with the command on Wednesday, June 27 at White Bird Canyon. In his diary, Captain Wood indicated that rain, poor shelter and food, and the fear of Indian attack had reduced morale and put everyone’s nerves on edge, including his. At midnight that evening, he mistakenly shot one of the pickets, Private Reed, E Troop, 1st Cavalry, killing him instantly. Sternberg had seen these mishaps before during campaigns in Kansas and recognized that, until a definitive encounter with the Nez Percé occurred, camp life would become increasingly more dangerous. Howard’s force now consisted of 530 soldiers, two howitzers, and two Gatling guns. This army moved to Horseshoe Bend on June 28 to cross the rain-swollen Salmon River. Here, they had their first contact with the

Indians when Joseph “paraded his warriors to our view with much pomp” and fired on the soldiers from long distance, and Sternberg related to Martha that the Indians “may dispute our crossing tomorrow.”²⁹ He only anticipated “a little skirmishing,” however, for “we are strong enough to whip them without any trouble.”³⁰ The Nez Percé demonstration proved to be only a diversion, which faded into the mountains as the soldiers began to cross the river the next day. At that moment, Joseph’s main force was recrossing the Salmon River at Craig’s Ferry, 25 miles downstream. It took Howard three days to get infantry and artillery across the swift and dangerous river. On Saturday morning, June 30, he sent a detachment of cavalry to intercept and arrest Chief Looking Glass and all the Indians with him on the south fork of the Clearwater.³¹

The main column began a 12-mile, 3,500-foot ascent into the Salmon River Mountains on July 2. The steep, rocky, and narrow trail was made extremely slick and treacherous by inclement weather that tortured man and beast. Mounted on the ever-faithful Kitty, Sternberg continued on “the hardest march we ever had.”³² Darkness and exhaustion dictated the infantry and artillery camp half-way up the mountain; but, Howard, his staff, and the cavalry reached the summit at 7:30 that evening to dine on bacon, hard tack, and coffee. Sternberg had departed Walla Walla with an upper respiratory infection. He had written Martha on June 23 that he was “feeling quite well,” and the march had “not fatigued me much and my cough is better.”³³ However, 2nd Lieutenant William Parnell found the surgeon “ill and exhausted” after the grueling march up the mountain and “made him turn in under my blankets and canvas for the night.”³⁴ Sternberg reported to Martha, “we all got thoroughly wet during the night and did not sleep much.”³⁵ A large part of the following day was spent drying out around large campfires while the infantry and artillery companies ascended up a now fog-enshrouded mountain.³⁶

Howard pursued Joseph’s shadow another 20 miles down the Salmon River before he learned that his foe had doubled back, recrossed the river, and was headed for the south fork of the Clearwater. Word was also received that the cavalry had engaged the Indians, and a 10-man reconnaissance detachment had been ambushed and wiped out on July 3. Retracing his steps, Howard crossed the wicked 250-foot expanse of river once again at Craig’s Ferry on July 6 and 7. A frustrated Sternberg wrote this home from their camp near Deer Creek between the Salmon and Snake rivers: “Our marching for the past week has been of no use. We have not seen an Indian, and we learn that we left them behind us and that the cavalry has been doing all the fighting.... I do not know which way we will move next.”³⁷ He sounded eager for a fight, but his comments more likely reflected his desire to engage in—and be done with—the inevitable battle. Fatigue and anxiety frayed everyone’s nerves. On the evening of July 6, another accidental shooting claimed the life of Private Michael W. Cassidy. Alexander and Sternberg attended to Cassidy, but he died about 5:00 a.m.³⁸

Between July 8 and 10, the main column endured more fatiguing marches through White Bird Canyon, across the mountains to Grangeville, and over the Salmon River at Jackson’s Bridge to camp on the bluffs above the east bank of the

Clearwater River. Howard hoped to cut off the Indians' retreat by taking them in reverse. While Howard consolidated his forces, 80 local volunteers conducted a reconnaissance of Joseph's camp from the west, but soon found themselves on a hilltop hopelessly outnumbered. They requested assistance, but Howard refused to attack until all of his troops were assembled.³⁹

Breaking camp early on the morning of July 11, Howard moved down an old mining road along high bluffs cut with steep ravines. He found the Nez Percé camp at noon 800 feet below near the mouth of Cottonwood Creek and immediately ordered 2nd Lieutenant Harrison G. Otis to unlimber one of the howitzers and both Gatling guns. With attention focused on the hapless volunteer force to their front, the Nez Percé were unaware of Howard's presence. Well out of range, the howitzer caused only momentary havoc among the Indians, but Howard's ill-conceived order lost him the element of surprise. To close in on the Indian village, he moved his column back around the head of the ravine, which had been passed only an hour before. As he did so, angry warriors swarmed up those bluffs to meet the soldiers racing onto the rocky, grass-covered plateau. Nez Percé sharpshooters put intense and frighteningly accurate fire into Howard's ranks, forcing them to congregate in the center of the plateau that offered little more than tall grass for cover, and mounted warriors attacked the vulnerable pack train. Warriors flanking Howard's right and left soon established a two-and-one-half mile semicircular battle line that was 700 yards in diameter. In the center of this area, pack mules were unloaded, supplies and pack-saddles were stacked to provide a light defense position for headquarters, and the three surgeons established their hospital just behind it.⁴⁰

The cold, wet weather that had made the campaign so miserable now reversed itself. A broiling sun seemed to conspire with Joseph to rid the valley of blue coats. Howard launched multiple charges throughout this oppressively hot afternoon to dislodge the Indians and secure a water spring to his left front. These bold attempts put the ravine on the left and the ridge to the front in army hands, but the spring could not be held. Alexander, Sternberg, Hall, and their orderlies treated the increasing numbers of wounded on the firing line and removing them to the hospital. More than half of the Clearwater casualties were sustained during this initial engagement. After sunset, the hot, loud, smoke-filled battlefield became clear, quiet, cool, and intensely dark, but Nez Percé riflemen remained alert for any movement or inadvertent light that could give them a mark, and rifle fire continued intermittently until dawn.⁴¹

Shrouded in darkness, Sternberg crawled among the rocks and tall grass along the firing line in search of wounded soldiers. When practicable, he moved the wounded to the hospital or an area of relative safety for treatment. He found one severely wounded packer with arterial bleeding and prepared to operate. Light was needed to appropriately evaluate the extent of the wound and tie off the severed vessel, but the smallest flame would bring a hail of bullets. His finger pressed on the artery—he had one option to save the man's life. Sternberg directed his two orderlies to hold up a blanket while a third lit a candle. As soon as the

candle illuminated the operating field, Sternberg later reported, "bullets came thick and fast at this faint little mark, and it had to be quickly extinguished."⁴² He worked rapidly, from the fleeting memory of the briefly observed wound and sense of touch, "with the utmost coolness" in the stygian darkness.⁴³ The suture was placed, a knot was tied, and the bleeding stopped. As Sternberg continued his rounds, he was moved by the pleas of thirsty men for water. The Indians still held the spring and observed it closely, knowing it was the only water source on the plateau. He organized a water party from volunteers recruited at headquarters and, with knowledge of the terrain gained from making rounds on the wounded, described how they could approach the spring with minimal risk of detection. With canteens, buckets, and any other container that would hold water, the courageous men made numerous trips to the spring—under fire—to provide relief to their comrades on the line.⁴⁴

Firing increased along the line as daylight spread over the plateau. Howard had the artillery companies withdrawn from the line to prepare for an assault that would penetrate the Indian left-center position. Once they were through the Indian barricade, they would immediately face right and roll up the Nez Percé line. Near mid-afternoon, Miller and the 4th Artillery stood ready to execute the mission, when a dust cloud announced the approach of a supply train from Fort Klamath. Miller and his men were dispatched to cover this arrival. An hour later, after substantial skirmishing, the train entered Howard's lines safely, but as Miller—following behind—came abreast of the Indian barricade, he wheeled his troops to the left and charged. Desperate fighting raged for several minutes, but Miller's sudden attack and the weight of reinforcing soldiers accomplished Howard's original plan of the morning. The Nez Percé line was turned, and it fled down the bluffs, across the river, and beyond.⁴⁵

The abandoned village consisted of 80 lodges and large stores of food, equipment, cooking pots and utensils, blankets, furs and tanned skins, ornamented robes, and moccasins. Naturally, Sternberg was interested in rummaging through these spoils of war for relics worthy of the Army Medical Museum and his own collection begun in Kansas. He had little time and claimed only a beaded robe and a large leather bag used for loading ponies. Alexander recommended to Howard that Sternberg accompany the sick and wounded to Grangeville and establish a field hospital there. Howard concurred and detailed Captain Winters' E Company to escort him. Only three lumber wagons and 30 mules could be spared for the task, but Sternberg had 29 wounded, at least nine of which were severe. To augment his inadequate transportation, he ordered lodge poles collected from the Indian village, obtained some extra canvas, and constructed 15 horse litters.⁴⁶

On the morning of July 13, the last of the dead were interred in a single, shallow grave behind the field hospital. When Sternberg finished preparing the wounded, he and Winters began the 25-mile journey to Grangeville. Sternberg remembered, "Each mule was led by a mounted man from the cavalry escort, and dismounted men stood by ready to lift the dragging ends over rough places."⁴⁷ Fortunately, the trail was smooth and the litters performed well. The possibility of an Indian attack

caused great anxiety in the slow-moving column. Sternberg later commented that, "it was not improbable that the Indians might come to our side of the river again and, finding how weak an escort was left behind with the wounded, might murder us all."⁴⁸ Consequently, halts were infrequent and only for water, necessary repairs, and tending to the wounded. During two of these halts, Sternberg attempted desperately—but in vain—to save the lives of Corporal Charles Carlin and Musician John G. Heinemann.⁴⁹

Sternberg was exhausted from more than 48 hours of almost continuous activity. Once more on the trail, the fatigue, darkness, and Kitty's easy stride soon had him slumbering in the saddle. He awoke with a start as a gentle hand grasped the bridle and another stabilized his swaying form. Sternberg recognized the trooper, a young orderly sent by Winters to ensure the surgeon did not sustain a fall. The two conversed until he became fully alert. Determining that activity was the best deterrent to sleep, Sternberg proposed to Winters that he ride ahead to Grangeville to alert the citizens and prepare for the wounded. Winters agreed and Sternberg departed into the darkness alone.⁵⁰

The dozen or so houses that comprised Grangeville were overflowing as many residents from the neighboring area had taken refuge there. They received Sternberg's companions with generosity and kindness in the early hours of July 14. The community meeting house that served as a hospital was comfortable, and while Sternberg had sufficient medical stocks, the severely wounded needed more definitive treatment than he could provide in Grangeville. He was anxious to continue on to Fort Lapwai, but had been ordered to set up a hospital at Grangeville and felt compelled to seek Alexander's permission to proceed to the fort. Couriers did not bring these orders for three long days, and he delayed two more before he was satisfied that a few of the wounded could tolerate the trip.⁵¹

The delay in Grangeville provided Sternberg the opportunity to write home, something he had not had time to do since the encampment at Craig's Ferry. Without a letter from her husband and no word from any officers arriving at Walla Walla, Mrs. Sternberg could only prepare for the worst and hope for the best. Sleep did not come easy. One night in mid-July, as she contemplated the darkness of her bedroom, she heard a rider approach and then the jingle of spurs on the front porch of the duplex they shared with the post commander. A knock on the neighboring door followed. Before the knock was answered, Mrs. Sternberg was poised at the top of the stairway, intently listening for any word. Momentarily, Mrs. Grover, the commander's wife, tapped on the Sternberg's front door, "They have had a battle, your husband is safe and here is a letter from him."⁵² The letter was dated Grangeville, July 16, and Sternberg related that his hospital was established, the wounded were progressing well, and he was "reveling in luxury. Have a straw bed on the floor of my office and get three regular meals at a neighboring house with plenty of fresh bread and butter and beef. I am quite well and nearly rested from the excessive fatigue of the past few days."⁵³

Late on the afternoon of July 19, the train of wounded, augmented now by six more wagons donated by local farmers, resumed its journey. The wagons traveled

54 miles over the next two days and, on the evening of July 20, camped at White's deserted ranch. It was a busy and troubling night for Sternberg. Private Fritz Heber called out that he was bleeding. Sternberg was nearby and "arrested the profuse hemorrhage from a wound in the leg by compressing the femoral artery. As soon as light could be procured and a tourniquet applied I put the man under ether and enlarged the wound in the upper part of the calf of the leg to secure the bleeding vessel. I could not find it readily and discovered the head of the tibia had been badly shattered by the ball which had entered the head of the bone two inches below the knee joint, perforating the tibia in front, and comminuting it to a considerable extent posteriorly. I decided that amputation at once through the knee joint would be a better operation than ligation of the femoral [artery] with a certainty, almost, that amputation would have to be performed subsequently. I therefore amputated through the knee joint. The man is doing well."⁵⁴ Sternberg also dressed the stump with carbolic acid dressings, which may have been instrumental in the wound's prompt healing. Sternberg was also worried about Captain Bancroft, who had been shot in the chest on the first day of battle and was not doing well. Hope for them all was at Lapwai, and he had the column on the trail at 6:00 the following morning.⁵⁵

When the column arrived at Fort Lapwai near mid-morning of July 21, Sternberg was relieved to find assistant surgeon Fitzgerald had prepared the hospital to receive them. Unfortunately, Fitzgerald had orders to join Howard as soon as the wounded were made comfortable. The one-and-a-half story hospital at Lapwai had only 300 square feet of ward space and two small garret rooms upstairs. The wounded soldiers overflowed this space and several hospital tents. Only one hospital steward and four men, who were assigned as nurses from the garrison and completely untrained, remained to assist him. By virtue of his location, which was only 12 miles from the expedition's supply base at Lewiston, Sternberg also became Howard's medical purveyor, responsible for ensuring all requested supplies were ordered and sent to Surgeon Alexander as the command followed Joseph up the Lolo Trail. When Fitzgerald rode away with Winter's company, Sternberg also became the post surgeon by default. He was no stranger to hard work, but by the end of the month Emily Fitzgerald, wife of the deployed post surgeon, wrote, "Poor Dr. Sternberg is disgusted and worked to death."⁵⁶

From the beginning, Sternberg had not been content for the wounded to remain at Lapwai. If Howard sustained more casualties before the Indians surrendered, it would be impossible to adequately accommodate them there. In the oppressive heat, those living under canvas were more comfortable than their comrades in the hospital where daytime temperatures reached 98°, but their security was in doubt. Although Howard was supposedly pursuing the Indians to the northeast away from post, rumors circulated that Joseph had once again evaded the army and was on his way back to the valley. Should the fort be attacked, Sternberg and his hospital steward would have difficulty protecting their tent-bound patients. He requested the wounded be removed to Fort Walla Walla or Fort Vancouver. It was a reasonable request, and, if the command agreed, he could be home with Martha

in a matter of days. A decision on the issue was delayed, however, and Sternberg determined that if he were to see her in the near future she would have to come to Lapwai. Perry had returned to the post, but was preparing to leave for Spokane for an extended period. Rather than leave the house empty, he offered to let the Sternbergs occupy it. Discounting the rumors of possible Indian attack, Sternberg sent a message to Martha asking her to come to the post. She was to bring their Chinese cook, June, with her if he consented to go. Both agreed to the venture and arrangements were made for their journey.⁵⁷

Sternberg met Martha in Lewiston early in August. Although he was elated to see her, he was concerned that he may have brought her into a tenuous situation. Since her invitation, Lapwai had become an Indian prisoner-of-war camp. Relatives and friends of these captives converged on the post in increasing numbers. The war had reduced the size of the garrison to a mere skeleton force—20 men from the regimental band, according to Mrs. Sternberg—and as the number of Indians milling about the post grew, so did the tension at Lapwai. Sternberg embraced his wife for the first time in more than a month as she stepped from the steamer. “The whole situation has changed so since I asked you to come,” he said, “that I am not sure that I do not owe it to you to send you immediately home again.”⁵⁸ Sternberg explained his current worries, and she listened patiently. The danger he related was manmade and tangible, not some mysterious disease that struck without warning. She was determined to share this danger with her husband. Mrs. Sternberg smiled, “I don’t want to be sent home...where you are is home for me.”⁵⁹ He could not argue with such love and devotion. In truth, the wartime atmosphere of Lewiston and Fort Lapwai was a stimulating change of pace for Mrs. Sternberg. Although she may not have envied the wives at Lapwai for their primitive routine existence, she did envy the experience they shared with their husbands during this crisis. Neither excitable nor complaining, she eagerly accepted the perils of the situation and endeavored to assist and support not only her husband, but also the few other women and soldiers at Lapwai. The Sternbergs opened their home to many of the officers who were continually on the road between Howard’s army and the fort, which gave the officers a welcome rest and kept the Sternbergs informed about friends at the front.⁶⁰

By and large the Clearwater casualties were recovering well. The packer, Private Heber, and even Captain Bancroft survived. Sternberg received instructions in August to accompany all wounded soldiers stable enough to make the journey to Fort Vancouver. By late September, Howard had chased the Nez Percé into Montana Territory. With the army well beyond any support offered by Fort Lapwai, Sternberg received orders to return to Walla Walla. His departure from Fort Lapwai marked a major turning point in his career. He would never again deploy to combat—his days as a field surgeon were over. In the not too distant future, his desire to seriously engage in—and influence—the world of medical science would become a reality. Ironically, the national prominence he achieved as a medical scientist over the next 15 years would position him once again to deal with combat medicine issues. When he did so, it would be as the Army Surgeon General, and the problems he

faced would not be those of his frontier-oriented predecessors, but rather those of a Medical Department chief providing medical support to an army of thousands in two separate theaters of war.⁶¹

