

Chapter 1 of: An International Mountie

Adventures of the First Woman Mountie

Book 4

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LAURIE SCHRAMM

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Miners and packers ascending the summit of the Chilkoot Pass in the winter of 1898. Photo by E.A. Hegg, courtesy of Library and Archives Canada, C-005142.

CHAPTER 1. PRELUDE: THE CHILKOOT

April 12, 1898

Chilkoot Trail, Alaska,

Two miles north of the Canyon City camp.

Sitting in the snow, huddled-up against a tree trunk, bleeding, and nearing complete exhaustion Corporal Frank Pool, of the North West Mounted Police¹, knew he was in trouble. He had faced danger many times in his first year of being posted to the Klondike but now, for the first time, he had to face the practical reality that he might not survive the day.

It had, at first, seemed like just another day when Superintendent Sam Steele² had assigned Inspector Stone, Frank, and five constables to transport some 150,000 dollars in gold and notes over the Chilkoot Pass, down the mountain to Skagway, Alaska, and from there on to Victoria, British Columbia. The gold had been collected as customs duties, mining lease registrations, and production royalties from miners and others that had joined the Klondike Gold Rush.

The gold rush had been triggered by the discovery, nineteen months earlier (in August, 1896), of placer gold at Bonanza Creek, which is a tributary of the Klondike River. As the news permeated North America, and then the rest of the world, the Klondike became – almost overnight – the scene of the greatest gold rush in North American history. It began with prospectors, but then spread to anyone willing to travel and risk their lives in the pursuit of potentially striking it rich, whether by mining, providing services to the miners, or simply stealing from the miners. Determined to keep the peace, at least on the Canadian side of the border, Mounted Police reinforcements and supplies were almost immediately sent into the Yukon to bolster the small detachment that had already been in place.

Now, with the long 1897/98 winter finally beginning to retreat, it was time to begin escorting batches of gold ingots out of the territory. Although it was considered ‘safe’ to transport valuables on the Canadian side of the border, the same could not be said of travel on the American side, which had already fully earned the reputation of being a completely lawless part of the “Wild, Wild West.” The portion of Alaska stretching from Skagway to the summit of the Chilkoot Pass, in particular, had become controlled in its entirety by the infamous Soapy Smith³ and his huge gang of thieves and accomplices.

The Mounties’ main concern was not for the rigors of the trail, the mud and snow, the likelihood of avalanches and premature river-ice breakup, or the virtual certainty of bad weather along the way, but rather how to get the gold past Soapy and his gang.

Soapy had so many spies and accomplices that the maintenance of secrecy was viewed as sheer fantasy. Instead, Superintendent Steele and Inspector Stone had quietly let it be known

¹ Later renamed Royal North West Mounted Police, and later yet the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

² Superintendent S.B. (Sam) Steele, was one of the heroes of the Klondike Gold Rush (where he was referred to variously as Steele of the Mounted, or the Lion of the Yukon), and one of the most famous Mounted Police officers of all time.

³ Jefferson Randolph Smith II, commonly known as Soapy Smith, was a notorious confidence artist and gangster-boss in the late 1800s American West, principally in Texas, then in Colorado, and finally in Skagway, Alaska. He was killed in a famous Skagway shoot-out during the 1898 gold rush.

that Stone was being transferred to the prairies, specifically Regina, and was taking with him only his baggage. The men, in turn, each carried on their horses one large box or trunk, plus their ordinary Mounted Police kit bag. The boxes and trunks were empty – simply part of the illusion. The gold ingots were hidden in the kit bags beneath layers of clothing and pemmican⁴.

As the group set out, there was no immediate danger from Soapy Smith or his gang. Steele and his Mounties had done such a good job of enforcing peace on the Canadian side that it was rare indeed that any member of Soapy's gang crossed the border to test the Mounties' mettle. So, it was natural for Stone's patrol to expect a quiet journey to the summit of Chilkoot Pass. Trouble, if there was to be trouble, was expected on their descent from the summit on the American side, particularly as they descended the steepest section that led to The Scales, during which they could be simultaneously assailed by rough terrain, bad weather, and well-hidden attackers. If they were going to be ambushed, they thought, that is where they would have to have their wits about them. This was a very reasonable, and time-tested, rationale.

Unfortunately, they were only partly right.

The first sixteen and a half miles of their journey were completely uneventful. On the first day, they proceeded from their headquarters at Lake Bennett, past Lindemann City, and then above the tree-line to Happy Camp, where they spent the night. The second day, they proceeded past Stone Crib and up the short but steep section to the summit of the Chilkoot Pass. Here the Mounties had a permanent camp and Customs Post that was equipped with men, provisions, two Maxim machine guns, and ammunition. At this exposed but secure post they paused for a rest, and to ensure that their water bottles were full, before embarking on the great descent that was to come.

The next phase of their journey was to carefully descend some 3,500 feet, of which the first section – from the summit to The Scales – was the steepest, involving the descent of a thousand feet in just over half of a mile. This was arduous going, as the entire slope was still covered in snow and, although there was a well-travelled path, the men had to proceed on foot, each leading their horse behind him.

Experienced mountaineers know well that, regardless of whether one is ascending or descending a mountain, there is a psychological tendency to relax at the end of a strenuous and/or hazardous segment. None of the Mounties were particularly experienced at mountaineering, so they may not have been aware of this, and whether such was part of Soapy's calculations or not will probably never be known. When the Mounties had reached The Scales, Inspector Stone gave a huge sigh of relief and allowed his men to take a break to rest and relax, after which they resumed their downward travel. When they reached Sheep Camp, and had put most of the steep decline behind them, the Inspector let out an even greater sigh of relief and ordered his men to remount their horses. They should now be able to relax somewhat, he thought, as they rode the much gentler terrain for the rest of the way.

The ambush came two miles further ahead, as the Mounties were passing Pleasant Camp and riding up a short rise on the west side of the valley. It was here that Soapy Smith and his gang had positioned themselves. Soapy had brought twenty of his men, every one of them armed with pistols and some of them carrying repeating rifles. Here, they had hidden themselves. The location was well chosen. In addition to having the element of surprise, they were below the tree-

⁴ Invented by Indigenous Peoples, and a staple of pioneer travelers in Canada's West, pemmican was made from dried, finely pounded bison meat mixed with melted fat and sometimes other ingredients, such as bison bone marrow. Well prepared and stored pemmican has been known to last for more than fifty years.

line at this point, so Soapy and his men were able to take cover among the plentiful supply of trees and dull grey boulders. From their hiding places, when the time came, and completely without warning, they suddenly unleashed a blistering volley of gunfire.

Although caught completely off-guard, the Mounties were quick enough to respond. At the first sounds of shots Inspector Stone had ordered his men to dismount, spread out, take cover, and return fire. There was no need for any of these orders, however, as to a man they had immediately leapt from their horses and spread out. Having established what cover they could, each Mountie returned fire on their own.

Although outnumbered four-to-one, and with hastily chosen cover, the Mounties soon gained the advantage in the gun battle that ensued. This was because, although Soapy and his men had chosen their location and their cover with care, their shooting was both undisciplined and generally poorly aimed. The Mounties, on the other hand were well-trained, disciplined, and much better shots. They took their time, conserved their ammunition, and carefully squeezed off their shots only at the most favourable, if fleeting, exposures of Soapy's men. As a result, after what seemed like an eternity but was in fact only about fifteen minutes, more than half of Soapy's men's guns had been silenced, whether because their owners had become incapacitated or killed, or because they had rashly expended their ammunition and were no longer able to participate in the ambush.

At this point in the battle only about half of Soapy's men were still firing, but the survivors had learned their lesson. They were now conserving their remaining ammunition, and were finally choosing their shots with greater care – although their accuracy had not noticeably improved.

Correctly guessing that these were the more skilled and experienced members of Soapy's gang, and not wanting to press the providential luck that had so far enabled all of his men to avoid being shot, Stone made the difficult decision to order his men to run for their horses.

Here was another difference between these opposing forces. Whereas Soapy and his men had ridden whatever horses they could conveniently borrow or steal in Skagway, all Mountie horses had been chosen with great care and carefully trained to stand fast under fire. As a result, every one of them was to be found patiently standing nearby, waiting for their human masters and partners. Had Soapy been a better strategist he would have had his men shoot the horses first, thus effectively trapping his quarry where they had taken cover. Perhaps he had thought it unnecessary. Amazingly, however, none of the Mounties' horses had yet been injured – or worse – in the gun battle.

As the Mounties ran for their horses, Stone yelled out his orders to disperse and “make a run for it as best they could” straight down the trail, through the centre of Soapy and his men, and on to Finnegan's Point, where they would regroup.

Stone was taking a dangerous, calculated risk with this manoeuvre but he judged it to be less risky than remaining in place with declining ammunition and against a superior, if diminished, force.

For the most part his plan was successful.

Seeing the Mounties break from cover and run for their horses, Soapy and the remainder of his men immediately knew that their targets were about to “make a run for it,” and they all stood up in plain sight and attempted to shoot the fleeing Mounties, and/or their horses before they could escape.

Fortunately for the Mounties, their zig-zag run for their horses coupled with the gang's lack of

coordination and poor marksmanship soon took them right through Soapy and his men. Up the rest of the hill they raced, quickly moving beyond the range of the pistols, and leaving only the few attackers that were equipped with repeating rifles to worry about. Soon, however, they gained the crest of the hill, and disappeared over the other side, taking them out of sight of the rifles as well.

Unfortunately for Frank, who was the last to reach his horse, two of the repeating rifles had been aimed at him throughout the final phase of the battle. For his part, he'd quickly mounted his horse and spurred him ahead, but no sooner had he passed the gang than one bullet hit him and another struck his horse.

Frank had immediately fallen from his saddle, but his horse stood firm. Reaching up for his saddle and reins, he was just barely able to remount. Then, leaning far forward over his saddle horn, he urged his horse forward, and they managed to slowly ride off in the direction of their comrades, who were already over the crest of the hill and far ahead along the trail, well out of sight.

Left behind were Soapy Smith and ten very angry and vocal gang members, several of whom continued to fire in the direction of the escaping Mounties notwithstanding the fact that there was no longer anyone in sight at whom to actually aim. Although none of the gang were motivated to jump on their horses in pursuit, their continued shooting had the unfortunate effect of convincing the fleeing Mounties that they were being actively pursued. As a result, they continued their retreat without taking time to assess whether or not all of their detail was still intact.

For his part, Frank didn't feel very intact. It was all he could do to hang on and remain in the saddle. As a result, he made it most of the way down the hill towards Canyon City before he realized that, like him, his horse Angel had been shot. He'd been so concerned with staying on the trail and stemming his bleeding wound that he didn't even notice the first few times that Angel had stumbled, but eventually it became clear that something was wrong. Quickly dismounting to check, he noticed two things simultaneously. One was that there was a long trail of blood behind him; and the other was that Angel was trembling violently. He no sooner found the entrance wound and began an attempt to stop the bleeding than Angel raised his head, gave out a huge sigh, collapsed, and died. Brave and loyal to the end, Mounted Police Horse Angel had lived up to his name and given everything he'd had to get his master away from the gun battle.

Mentally attempting to set aside mourning for a more appropriate time, Frank removed the saddle, placed the horse blanket over Angel's head, and whispered a few words of thanks and good-bye. Then he wearily grabbed his kit bag, forced himself to stand, and trudged ahead on foot.

As Frank determinedly kept moving forward, it wasn't long before pain, loss of blood, and the encroaching cold began to take their toll. Frank eventually fell into a kind of delirium that caused him to lose the proper trail and follow a game trail that branched off to the west, thus missing the canyon, and Canyon City, completely.

Most of the snow had melted away at this elevation so that a mile along the game trail, Frank encountered a creek. Mistaking this for the Taiya River, rather than one of its tributaries, he followed it further west. Four miles later the creek abruptly ended, and while trying to understand what had happened, Frank collapsed at the base of a youngish balsam fir tree. He was now cold, exhausted, still bleeding, disoriented, and completely lost. Realizing that his chances of survival were now running very low, Frank forced himself to eat a few bites of his pemmican, then used his sheath knife to scrape a shallow depression in the ground near the base of the tree. He

placed his kit bag into the depression and covered it with the earth that he'd removed. On top of this, he built a broad but low cairn of rocks to mark the spot.

With his load lightened, he struggled to his feet and staggered back the way he had come, retracing his steps in hopes of regaining the proper trail back to his post. It was impossible to lose his way back because of the bright red trail of blood, but stamina was another matter. Sheer determination was all that kept him moving at this point and, amazingly, he managed three of the miles back, but only three.

Corporal Frank Pool of the North West Mounted Police collapsed and died where his searching colleagues later found him, just two miles west of the Chilkoot Trail, and slightly north of Canyon City. Although they searched until dusk made further searching impossible, they never found the buried kit bag.

RCMP Constable Alexandra Houston's adventures continue in: ***An International Mountie. Adventures of the First Woman Mountie Book 4***, by Laurie Schramm, 2020.

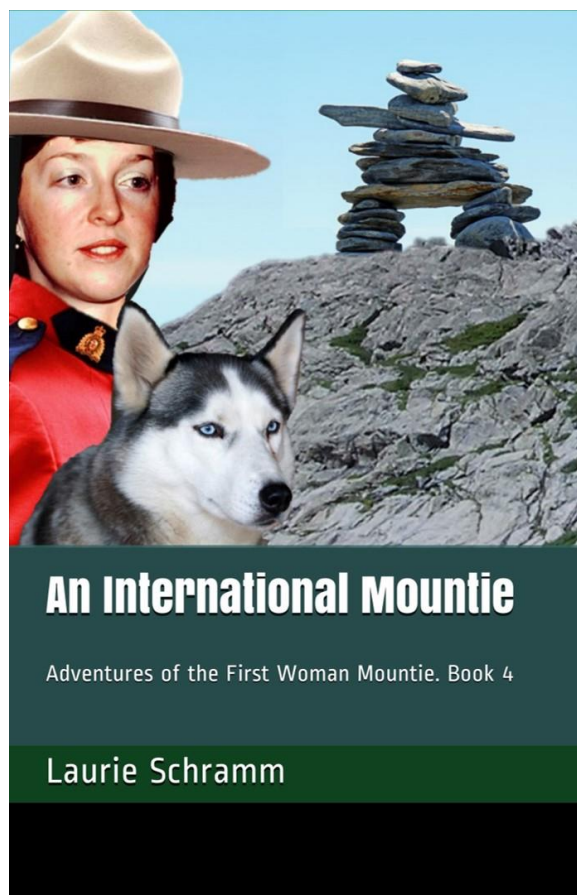
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