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Red Cloud’s War and the Indian Victory over the United States
by Albert Winkler

Introduction

Following the American Civil War, the United States fought a major war against the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho Indians known as Red Cloud’s War, which lasted from 1866 to 1868. The conflict is noteworthy for its many raids, for its three significant battles, and because it was a costly American defeat and an important Indian victory. A prominent leader of the Native Americans was the great war chief, Red Cloud, who engineered much of their success. The conflict included several important and bloody engagements including the Hayfield and the Wagon Box Battles in 1867, and the highly significant Fetterman Massacre in 1866 in which William J. Fetterman of the U.S. Cavalry and his command of eighty soldiers were annihilated.

The Fetterman Massacre was so impressive that it ranks among the most significant battle victories for Indians in American history. It is comparable with the Battle of the Monongahela in 1755 where the French and Native Americans killed and wounded nearly one thousand British soldiers and colonial militiamen, and the famous Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876 in which the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors killed approximately 265 American cavalymen. Even though the Indians won the battles of the Monongahela and the Little Bighorn, they lost the war in each case. However, the victory of Native Americans at the Fetterman Massacre contributed significantly to a triumph in the war.

Background to War

In one of the most shameful policies in the history of the United States, white Americans subdued, slaughtered, and pushed the native peoples to the point of extinction in a conquest of North America which was a process that took three hundred years. Despite being badly outmatched and heavily outnumbered in nearly all the conflicts, the Indians enjoyed some important successes and won at least two wars against the federal government. In a series of three conflicts from 1816 to 1858, the United States tried to remove the Seminole Indians from Florida. While many of these people were forced to go to the Indian Territory in the future state of Oklahoma, a significant number of them held out and stayed in their ancestral lands in Florida. These Seminoles never surrendered, and their descendants still live in that state. ¹ This was the first war that the federal government lost.

Also, in one of the most notable defeats in American history, the United States lost Red Cloud’s War from 1866 to 1868. The federal government had planned to remove the Indians from the Powder River area of Wyoming and Montana but failed to do so. Red Cloud’s men and other groups of warriors waged a successful war, and at the end of this conflict, the United States capitulated and sued for peace. The federal government was forced to remove its troops from the region and to sign a treaty very favorable to the Indians that gave the Native Americans much of what they wanted.

Red Cloud

The war chief Red Cloud was born in 1821 near the North Platt River in Nebraska. His father was Lone Man, a member of the Brule division of the Sioux, and his mother was Walks As She Thinks from the Oglala Sioux. Red Cloud was the youngest of nine children, and his father

died a few months before his last son was born. From childhood, Red Cloud was known for his physical abilities, and his feats included swimming across both the Missouri and the Yellowstone Rivers. He was especially renowned as a good horseman who was also courteous and kind. The young man first went to war at age fourteen. The young warrior came to prominence roughly at age twenty when he killed the leader, Bull Bear. The drunken older chief had threatened to attack Red Cloud’s village, and many potential victims of this crime thought his action in killing the enemy leader was a wise precaution that could have saved lives. Soon after this incident, the Oglala Sioux divided into two groups, and Red Cloud, still a young man but with clear attributes of leadership, led one of them.

Contemporary sources leave a favorable impression of the Sioux leader. Red Cloud was "represented as one of the ablest Indian warriors of any time." He was described as "tall, handsome, athletic, and perfect in his horsemanship and in his physical appearance." In another account, he was "physically one of the finest specimens of a wild untamed Indian, fully six feet tall, straight as an arrow and active as a panther . . . and is as fine a horseman as the world can produce." By the fall of 1866 Red Cloud had "proved [to be] the equal of history’s great guerilla tacticians," and he was one of the most formidable fighters the United States ever faced.

The United States Government and Indian Lands

The United States amassed a huge national debt by the end of the Civil War in 1865, which had been a very costly conflict, and the leaders of the government hoped that the vast mineral wealth in the American West, largely in gold and silver, could ease the financial burdens of the nation. To accommodate the acquisition of the minerals, the federal government tried to assure easy and safe access to the mines where the ore was excavated. White Americans had traditionally gone west to seek new wealth and opportunities, and this movement was enhanced at the end of the Civil War because many people were optimistic about their chances in that region of the country. Additionally, the South was defeated in the Civil War, and the physical destruction by the conflict impoverished that area of the country. Many former Confederates went west in search of their fortunes and to regain their personal dignity. This migration would

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3"Red Cloud, the Indian Leader" in the Milwaukee Sentinel May 9, 1867. "Red Cloud, the Indian Leader" in the Union and Dakotain, May 25, 1867.

4"From Julesburg Fort Sedgwick, Col., Feb 10, [1867] in the Union Vedette, March 1, 1867.

5Drury and Clavin, Red Cloud, 6.

lead white Americans into more confrontations with the Indians.

For decades before the end of the Civil War, the white Americans had already pressed the Indians hard by destroying the natural habitat for game animals and by forcing the Native Peoples to move into areas with fewer and fewer natural resources. By the 1850s, the Indians of the northern plains had to rely on the lands east of the Bighorn Mountains in present-day Wyoming because it was one of the few good places remaining to hunt. Not only had the whites killed much of the game near the immigrant trails, but starting largely in 1849, the newcomers brought new diseases—primarily smallpox, measles, and cholera—which devastated Indian populations. Clearly, “Most of the Indians believed that these diseases were forms of magic which the whites were employing against them.”7 The loss of hunting areas and the introduction of diseases greatly increased the resentment the Indians felt against the white people coming onto the lands long controlled by the Native Peoples.

**The Whites move onto Indian Lands**

While the federal government did almost nothing to protect the Indians from the immigrants, it went to great lengths to defend the whites from any threats from the Native Peoples, and the United States established three military forts along the Oregon Trail in a two-year period. The first was Fort Kearny in 1848 in Nebraska. The next garrison stations were Fort Laramie, established in Wyoming in 1849, and Fort Hall, created in Idaho in the same year. According to the treaty of Fort Laramie in 1851, the Indians living east of the Bighorn Mountains received a huge grant of land in Montana, Wyoming, North and South Dakota, and Nebraska. The government also promised them $50,000 worth of goods and commodities annually for a period of ten years. In return, the Native Peoples agreed to allow settlers to migrate along the Oregon Trail unmolested.

Some of the Indians never received the promised goods, and the treaty was hard to enforce because white people kept encroaching on lands owned by the Native Peoples. However, the agreement stayed in effect until the payments stopped in 1861. Shortly afterwards, white prospectors made significant gold strikes in Montana including Grasshopper Gulch in 1862 and the nearby Alder Gulch in 1863. Last Chance Gulch was added in 1864. The discoveries of gold near Alder Gulch caused several boomtowns to appear, but the most impressive community was Virginia City where many prospectors and merchants swarmed, and the town numbered five thousand inhabitants within six months of the strike.

Access to this area was challenging because of the rough terrain and the distances involved especially if the travelers wanted to avoid Indian lands. One of the most-used routes was to follow the Overland Trail from Independence, Missouri, past Fort Laramie to Salt Lake City, Utah, which was a distance of 1,100 miles (1,770 kilometers) and then to go directly north to Virginia City nearly 400 miles (644 kilometers) farther for a total of 1,500 miles (2,400 kilometers). This distance could be cut down by 400 miles (644 kilometers) by following a new trail that could lead directly from Fort Laramie to the gold fields.

In 1863 John Jacobs and John Bozeman followed Indian trails and a track used by fur trappers from the gold fields near Virginia City to the Oregon Trail near Fort Laramie. The new

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route saved much time and distance. In the following year, 1864, Bozeman led one of four wagon trains along the trail, which included fourteen hundred settlers. The Bozeman Trail had been established as a valuable shortcut, but it went right across Indian lands and settlers on that route were subject to attack.\(^8\)

At the same time that the Bozeman Trail was coming into use, there was an increase in Indian hostilities on the western plains. After John Chivington and his Colorado Militia massacred about two hundred peaceful Cheyenne Indians on November 29, 1864 at Sand Creek, Colorado, the Indians struck back in a series of raids early in 1865.\(^9\) Many of the Cheyenne warriors went to Wyoming where they would soon cooperate with the Sioux in their war against the whites.

In the summer of 1865, Patrick Edward Connor led a large expedition of 2,300 soldiers into Wyoming and Montana to subdue the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho Indians in that area. Connor’s troopers campaigned in exactly the same region along the Bozeman Trail that would see activities in Red Cloud’s War a year later in 1866. The soldiers attacked a large camp of Arapahos on August 29, 1865. The troopers reportedly killed 63 of them and burned 250 of their lodges. On September 8, these same soldiers also clashed with a force of Indians warriors believed to include roughly 3,000 men.\(^10\) While indecisive, Connor’s expedition showed the Indians that they were subject to attack in the area east of the Big Horn Mountains. The campaign also demonstrated that the Indians were present in the area in large numbers, and they were willing to resist the invasions of the whites.

A Treaty to Cheat the Indians

The United States Army established Fort Reno to protect the Bozeman Trail in August 1865, but the post was small and undermanned, and the federal government decided it needed more forts to protect the travelers on the trail. Before building additional army posts, representatives of the government started to negotiate a treaty with the Indians to establish peace in the area. To assure a favorable reception to their proposals, the government gave the Indians a bribe of over 140,000 pounds [63,500 kilograms] of meat and other foodstuffs before the negotiations even began.\(^11\)

The federal commissioners met with various Indians starting on June 5, 1866 at Fort Laramie. The head of the delegation from the government was Edward B. Taylor, and he explained that he had no intention of buying the Indian’s lands. Rather, he wanted to assure peaceful relations with the native peoples. He stated that he just needed their permission for white travelers to cross their lands for purposes of trade and mining. As Taylor explained, “The

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Great Father [U.S. President] does not wish to keep soldiers in this country. . . . We only ask for roads to travel back and forwards, and no roads will be made except by orders from the Great Father, so as not to disturb the game and whatever damage are done by roads would be paid for by the Great Father.” 12

The next day many of the Indian leaders, including Red Cloud, responded harshly to Taylor’s proposal. As an eyewitness stated, “The Indians object very strongly to the whites going through their country or making any new roads and they also ask that the troops be withdrawn from Fort Reno; but the Peace Commission are equally decided in refusing their demands and [to] allow [the whites] to go wherever they saw fit.” 13 Proof that the government was negotiating in bad faith was evident because wagon trains kept moving along the route to the Bozeman Trail during the discussions as though the proposed treaty was already in force. This “travel made the negotiations seem contrived, even hypocritical.” 14

The Sioux leaders became upset when the Eighteenth Infantry commanded by Henry B. Carrington arrived at Fort Laramie on June 13, 1866, while the negotiations were still in progress. When the Indians learned that these soldiers were on their way to establish another post on the Bozeman Trail, they made insightful comments. One leader stated, “Great Father sends us presents and wants the new road, but white chief goes with soldiers to steal road before the Indian say yes or no!” 15 Red Cloud was not at Fort Laramie when the Eighteenth Infantry arrived, but when he heard of the government’s dishonesty, he reacted angrily stating, “White man lies and steals. My lodges were many, but now they are few. The white man wants all. The white man must fight, and the Indian will die where his father’s died.” 16

The agreement stated that the Sioux would be well supplied if they signed the treaty. “The said bands represented in council shall withdraw from the routes overland already established, or hereafter to be established, through their country, and in consideration thereof the Government of the United States agrees to pay to the said bands the sum of $70,000 annually for twenty years.” In addition, the Cheyennes would be given $15,000 annually for the same period of time. Since the Indians could not read, the treaty had to be read to them by translators who had little interest in clarifying all the elements of the agreement. As a consequence the Indians had been misled on the nature of the treaty they would sign. They believed they had granted permission to allow only one trail to go across their lands in Wyoming, while the agreement stated

12 Taylor as cited in McDermott, 1: 53.

13 Brannan “From Ft. Laramie, Fort Laramie, D.T. June 7, 1866” in the Union Vedette, June 22, 1866, 2.

14 McDermott, 1: 56.


16 Ibid., 185.
they had allowed many roads. In a surprising aspect of the treaty, the Indians had also stated they
would stop roaming and become farmers.17 Few of them would have agreed to surrender their
traditional way of life if they had known that the treaty obligated them to do so.

Many white witnesses to the proceedings criticized the treaty as being almost meaningless.
One observer at the conference noted that many Indians who signed the treaty forfeited lands far
from where they actually lived. “A large number of chiefs . . . were from bands that did not
occupy any part of the country along the route in question. Some of these had resided near Fort
Laramie; others, the Brule Sioux, occupied the White Earth River valley; and still others were
from along the tributaries of the Kansas River.”18 The White Earth River Valley was in North
Dakota about 640 miles (1030 kilometers) away from Fort Laramie. The Kansas River system
covered a vast area, but many of these Indians could have also lived 640 miles (1030 kilometers)
or farther away.

The Indians who had signed the treaty were not important leaders, and one newspaper
reported simply, “There has not been an Indian chief of any consequence or popularity present at
the Grand Council since it had been in session.” It was clear “that only a few unimportant,
harmless Indians signed the treaty.” Many of the Native Americans who endorsed the agreement
were old, infirm, and incapable of waging war against the settlers. Observers described these
people as little more than “loafing Indians,” “Laramie loafers,” “road beggars,” and “fort
beggars.” About all that the agreement proved was the “idea that the Government is afraid of
them [the Indians] and will continue its policy of paying a bounty for murder and robbery.”
Rather than bringing peace to the area, the treaty made war more likely. “We should advise
ranchmen, citizens, and soldiers to rub up [polish] their ‘guns’ and prepare for warm work.”19

The treaty made little sense. The federal government had no intention of being bound by
the agreement, and the whites would do much as they pleased despite the compact. If anything,
the accord was an attempt to give some legitimacy to the government policy of cheating the
Indians at every turn, and the prominent leaders of the Native Peoples knew that the treaty was a
sham and resolved nothing. The issue of who controlled the routes to the gold fields in Montana
would have to be resolved by war.

Establishing Fort Phil Kearny

While the meaningless treaty at Fort Laramie was being concluded, the army continued to
advance into positions to protect the Bozeman Trail from the Indians. Colonel Carrington led the
Eighteenth Infantry to Fort Reno where the command arrived on June 28, 1866. The troopers left
the post on July 9 advancing in the blistering heat that reached 112 degrees [44.4 Celsius]. On
July 14 Carrington reached a location 250 miles [402 kilometers] from Fort Laramie, and he
examined the area near the Big Piney stream, which eventually emptied into the Powder River, for

17McDermott, 1: 61.


19“The Fort Laramie Indian Council,” and “Indian Affairs” in the Union Vedette, July 16,
1866 page 2; “Aspect of Indian Affairs on the Plains,” in the Union Vedette, Aug. 9, 1866, p. 2;
Carrington, Absaraka, 79; and McDermott, 1: 64.
a place to establish a fort. The commander chose what he considered to be a favorable location, which had sufficient water, grass, and fuel to maintain the garrison and the fortress. The post appeared to be safe because it was out of range of rifle fire from the nearby hills, and those areas were within reach of shells from the fort’s artillery, so cannons could place any adversary under fire.20

Carrington believed that the fort’s location was favorable for strategic reasons as well. The position was in the middle of the Indian hunting grounds where the Native Peoples would naturally congregate, and where the army could watch and monitor them. Of course, this location was also a direct threat to the Indians who would react to the presence of the fort with hostility. The position had another severe limitation. The only place to obtain wood for the fort’s construction and for heating and cooking as well was in the foothills which were about four or five miles [6.4 to 8 kilometers] away. Under the best of conditions in the summer, the trip from the trees to the fort could take an hour or more. In severe winter weather, such a journey could be very trying or almost impossible. The troopers constructed the fort over the next several months, and Carrington named the position Fort Phil Kearny after a valiant Union General who was killed in the Civil War at the Battle of Chantilly in 1862.21 The fort was laid out four hundred feet [122 meters] on two sides and six hundred feet [183 meters] on the other two, and the troopers worked to construct the post for several months.

Colonel Carrington immediately placed pickets on the hills near the fort, to provide places from which troopers could observe the area and provide warnings in the event of trouble. He named a hill north of the post the Sullivant Hill after his wife, Margaret Sullivant Carrington, and he stationed a lookout on its highest point during the daytime to scan the area for any signs of the enemy. On Pilot Hill, to the south of the fort, the colonel also placed a picket to watch the area during the daylight hours. These men on lookout duty would signal the troopers in the fort by the use of simple flag signals, waving the banners in recognizable patterns. This activity amused the Indians who were always nearby, and they often mimicked the activities of their adversaries on Pilot Hill. As a witness, John Bratt, explained, “These signals would give the approximate number of Indians in the party and from what direction they were coming. This guard would sometimes stay at their post until the Indians came very close, when the men would come tearing down the steep hill at breakneck speed. Then the Indians would take the places of the guard and with a buckskin fastened to their bows, would imitate the guard, much to the disgust of Colonel Carrington and fellow officers.”22

The War Begins

Red Cloud had left Fort Laramie in indignation before the treaty of Fort Laramie was finished and signed. He was angry at the unfavorable treaty and advocated going to war. He chided his fellow Indians who wanted to accommodate the settlers and the army. “My countrymen, shall the glittering trinkets of this rich [white] man, his deceitful drink [alcohol] that

20McDermott, 1: 87.

21Ibid., 1: 87-8, 90.

22John Bratt, Trails of Yesterday (Chicago: University Publishing, 1921), 95.
overcomes the mind, shall these things tempt us to give up our homes, our hunting grounds, and
the honorable teaching of our old men? Shall we permit ourselves to be driven to and fro—to be
herded like the cattle of the white man?” He added, “Before the ashes of the council fire are
cold, the Great Father [US President] is building his forts among us. You have heard the sound
of the white soldier’s ax upon the Little Piney [Fort Phil Kearny]? His presence here is an insult
and a threat. It is an insult to the spirits of our ancestors. Are we then to give up their sacred
graves to be plowed for corn? Dakotas [Sioux], I am for war!”

Only a few days after the arrival of the Eighth Infantry at the Big Piney stream to establish
Fort Phil Kearny, the Indians began raiding emigrant trains and attacking the soldiers. On July 16,
1866, the Indians struck a group of wagons led by French Pete. The warriors plundered the
wagons and killed six men and one woman. On the following day, the Indians staged their first
raid on the army. They stole cattle and killed three soldiers and one teamster while wounding five
additional troopers. Red Cloud’s War had begun in earnest.

In the following months, the Sioux and Cheyenne Indians were relentless in harassing and
fighting the soldiers and the other whites who were using the Bozeman Trail. The warriors came
and went as they pleased. They stole cattle, killed and wounded travelers and troopers, and
attacked wagon trains. These raids made all communications difficult for the whites, and the
warriors often left dead and wounded enemies after their attacks.

The Indians showed themselves to be masters of hit-and-run tactics, and their skill in
riding horses and fighting from horseback was most impressive. The army had no means of
adequately thwarting the maneuvers of the warriors. After the Indians had struck, about all the
soldiers could hope to do was to apprehend them by a chase on horseback, but this effort almost
always ended in failure. The troopers were incapable of dealing with their adversaries, and they
failed in their assigned mission, which was to protect the travelers and to control the Indians.

The infantry fought the warriors at a number of serious disadvantages. These men on foot
were often called “Walk-a-Heaps” by their adversaries, and infantrymen were very slow to deploy
in action against the Indians who were usually on horseback. The men on foot could not
effectively pursue or advance on their enemies, and the warriors could easily attack them or fall
back any time they wished.

**Army and Indian Weapons**

The infantrymen were also using outmoded .58 caliber muzzle-loading Springfield rifles. While
these guns were the standard issue during the Civil War, they were badly out of date by
1866. These weapons had an effective range of about 300 yards (274 meters), but few men could
hit anything at such long distances. The rifle also weighed nine pounds (4 kilograms). It was

23 Red Cloud in Charles Eastman, *Indian Heroes and Great Chieftains* (Boston: Little,
Brown, and Company, 1919), 15.

24 Red Cloud in Eastman, *Indian Heroes*, 16.

25 McDermott, 1: 93-5.

26 Ibid., 1: 97, 117.
heavy, awkward to handle, and slow to load. The soldiers had to stand up straight to pour the powder down the barrel and then ram the bullet after it. These men were much larger targets when standing up, and their rate of fire was quite slow as well. Under the best of circumstances, a good soldier could perhaps fire 2 to 3 rounds per minute, but in battle conditions, the rate of fire was often slower. One infantryman commented that “after the first shot [the rifles] were about as good as clubs against the Indians.”

The cavalrymen at Fort Phil Kearny had a great advantage which the infantry did not enjoy because the horse soldiers were wielding the repeating Spencer breech-loading carbines, which was a state-of-the-art rifle at the time. The weapon used metallic cartridges. These bullets were placed in the butt plate of the weapon, and they were moved into the firing chamber by the use of a lever. This was a big advantage over the Springfield rifle which had to be loaded by pouring powder down the barrel. The Spencer was a rapid-fire weapon that could discharge seven rounds in thirty seconds. It was .52 caliber (13 mm) and was highly effective at close range. Most importantly, the weapon could be fired from the prone position, meaning that the soldiers could hug the ground and did not have to stand up to load and fire it.

While some of the Indians had rifles and pistols, most of them wielded bows and arrows, and the warriors could load (nock) an arrow and shoot a shaft from a kneeling or even laying-down position when they would be much smaller targets. They could also shoot from horseback while riding at a full gallop, and the Indians were noted for using the animal for protection against enemy fire, shooting arrows from under the horse’s neck or even its stomach.

The famous American painter of the old West, George Catlin, visited the Sioux and other Indians of the plains eight times in the 1830s, and he described the ability of the warriors to fight from horseback. “An Indian, therefore, mounted on a fleet and well-trained horse, with his bow in his hand, and his quiver slung on his back, containing a hundred arrows, of which he can throw fifteen or twenty in a minute, is a formidable and dangerous enemy.” The historian, Walter Prescott Webb, claimed that the Indians could achieve even a higher rate of fire from horseback, stating that they could be expect to fire their bows at a rate of at least twenty per minute, and many could do much better than that.

George Catlin also visited the Mandan people, who were closely related to the Sioux, and the white traveler observed them achieving even more impressive rates of fire with their bows when they were standing on the ground. “I have seen a fair exhibition of their archery this day, in a favorite amusement which they call the ‘game of the arrow.’” The young men took turns

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27Ibid., 1: 47.


“shooting their arrows in the air, endeavoring to see who can get the greatest number flying in the air at one time, thrown from the same bow.” These warriors aimed their shafts high, so it would take the arrows as much time to hit the ground as possible. Catlin was very “surprised . . . at the quickness of fixing them [the arrows] on the string, and discharging them in succession.” The most successful of the warriors “get as many as eight arrows up before the first one reaches the ground.” To accomplish this feat, the warriors would have had to fire the arrows at the rate of about one per second or even more rapidly. This rate of fire was four times as fast as the Spencer carbine wielded by the cavalry and perhaps 20 to 30 times as fast as the muzzle-loading Springfield rifles used by the infantry.

The accomplishment of keeping so many arrows in the air at one time was long thought to be impossible. Will Thompson the “dean of American archery” stated that no one ever has ever or ever will “keep more than three arrows up in the air at once.” However, Saxton Pope later admitted that he had seven arrows in flight at the same time, and “I almost accomplished eight at once.” He believed that eight or more was a possibility. He was correct. The world record is probably now held by Lars Andersen of Denmark who in 2011 kept eleven arrows in flight at the same time. Other plains Indians including the Sioux and Cheyenne could also achieve impressive rates of fire. If these warriors could approach the rate of their Mandan neighbors, the soldiers at Fort Phil Kearny faced very impressive adversaries who could potentially mow them down with a hail of arrows fired very rapidly.

The effective range of the Indian bows, where the Indians could expect to hit their targets, was from 40 to 70 yards (36.6 to 64 meters), but the extreme range of the weapon was nearly 400 yards (366 meters). The Indian bows were more lethal than the army’s weapons. As Colonel Carrington recognized, “The arrow is shot with more precision than the pistol-ball, and its blade is not like a bullet, to be deflected by tendon, cartilage, or bone. Its shaft has grooves, through which, as conduits, the blood of the wounded man or buffalo must continue to flow, if the victim escape capture as soon as shot.” The bows had an additional advantage because they could be used to lob arrows onto adversaries with deadly effect. This indirect fire could be used against enemies that were out of sight, meaning that the warriors could hit soldiers event though they were hiding behind rocks or were laying prone on the ground.

The Indians’ arrows also had great penetrating power. The Cheyennes told numerous stories about the strength of their bows. On several occasions, a single shot was known to go completely through a buffalo (American bison), and reportedly a single arrow went through two


32 Saxton Pope, *Hunting with the Bow and Arrow* (San Francisco: Barry, 1923), 51.

33 Youtube, “World Record: 11 arrows shot into the air before the first arrow reaches the ground,” larsandersen23.

buffaloes killing each. The American bison were very large animals that frequently reach six feet (1.83 centimeters) in height and often weighed over a ton (1,000 kilograms). The only advantage the soldiers had was the significant noise their rifles made when fired. The sound gave the army a psychological advantage and no doubt gave them more courage on the battlefield. However, the famous Indian war cries also boosted their bravery and could almost drown out the noise made by the soldiers.

**Indian Attacks**

When the army was constructing the fort, much wood was needed for building materials and for fuel. Since the timber was located primarily on the Sullivant Hills, these wood trains had to travel up to five miles (eight kilometers). Precautions were essential because these parties were vulnerable to attack. “These timber parties always had their armed teamsters, their armed choppers, and armed guard. Chopping details varied from sixteen to thirty, with a special guard of about the same number, making, with teamsters, a resisting force of from seventy to one hundred men, and sometimes, . . . the force of teamsters and wagonmasters alone was nearly that number.”

The warriors often hid among the trees in the Sullivant Hills or on the opposite side of the ridge line, and the Indians frequently attacked or harassed the wood cutters and their escorts. Even though the danger of attack was almost constant, no soldiers or civilians were killed in these wood-cutting forays in the fall of 1866. Other soldiers and civilians along the Bozeman Trail in or near the post were not as fortunate, and many were victims of continuous Indian raids.

On September 4, 1866, forty wagons driven by white civilians were crossing the Crazy Woman’s Fork of the Powder River on the way to Fort Phil Kearny. Apparently, the warriors waited until the teamsters were distracted while crossing the stream before they struck. The Indians stole seven head of cattle and shot three men with arrows. Unfortunately for one of the teamsters, infection set into the wound of one of the men, James Edison, and he died of disease three days later. Civilian workers near the fort frequently slept in the wagon boxes, but they often took the opportunity to play cards—usually poker—late in the evening. They built large bonfires, so they had sufficient light to continue their games, not realizing that they could easily be seen against the backdrop of the light cast by the flames. One evening, a group of Indians fired at these illuminated targets, hitting three men. Two were killed instantly, but the third recovered later even though he had a “bullet hole through him.”

On September 8, 1866 warriors drove cattle from a corral near the fort. On the same day,
Indians stole twenty mules. On September 12, the raiders drove off cattle, and on the following day, the warriors successfully stole more cattle, wounding one soldier in the effort. The Indians killed Private Orlando Gilchrist and Private Peter Johnson on September 14, and on September 17 Sioux raiders successfully got away with seventy-eight mules and thirty-three horses. On the same day, a search party found the body of the photographer, Ridgway Glover. He was a Quaker who did not believe in making war. He put his faith in his religion, and he refused to carry a gun, believing that no Indian would kill him. His body had been badly mutilated when it was found. In total at least twenty-one whites, a number which included three soldiers, had been killed on the Bozeman Trail in September 1866.

However, this tally of dead might be incomplete as the Montana Post newspaper complained on September 15, “If we copied from our exchanges all the accounts of Indian outrages and murders which have occurred since the so called treaty of Fort Laramie was ratified, our columns would be filled with horrible details.” According to the newspaper, the only way to resolve the problems with the Indians was “by the emphatic and long-remembered lessons of gunpowder and lead.”

**Weaknesses in Army Leadership**

The Indians took horses and cattle from the army almost every day, and their success hurt the morale of their adversaries. Additionally, the obsolete Springfield rifles, many of which had been used in the Civil War, were deteriorating and becoming less trustworthy. The ammunition supply was also inadequate and too few officers were available to lead the men properly. Colonel Carrington continuously complained to his superiors about all his problems. He did not get enough help to alleviate all his difficulties, but he got some aid to help his situation. In the fall of 1866, a few soldiers arrived as reinforcements to help overcome the shortages in manpower. This number included Lieutenant George Washington Grummond who would play a big role in the Fetterman Fight. The Lieutenant arrived at the fort with his young wife, Frances Courtney Grummond, on September 17.

Lieutenant Grummond had gained a reputation for brutality during the Civil War. During that conflict, he served in the army four years, and he achieved the temporary rank of lieutenant colonel. While he was an effective combat leader, eight of his subordinate officers brought accusations against him for misconduct late in the war. They charged that he had been repeatedly drunk on duty, and he had shot a fellow officer for disobedience, who was in fact following an order. Grummond reportedly whipped a sergeant with a pistol and brutally beat a private, and he had shot an elderly unarmed civilian to whom he had later denied medical attention. In a drunken rage on the midnight of June 26, 1864, Grummond had ordered his command to assault the

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40 McDermott, 1: 133-8.


42 As cited in “Lo! The Poor Indian,” in the Union Vidette September 27, 1866, 2.

43 McDermott, 1: 150.
heights of Kennesaw Mountain, Georgia, and his men arranged a ruse to keep them from being killed in this suicidal advance. Corporal Patrick Walsh threw small stones at the drunken commander convincing Grummond that the gravel was enemy fire, and he called off the attack.\textsuperscript{44}

A court martial convened to examine the case against him. While most of the charges were dropped, the court found Grummond guilty of threatening to shoot a junior officer and wounding an unarmed civilian. The punishment was relatively minor. He received a public reprimand, which was presented to every unit of the entire Second Division in which he served.\textsuperscript{45}

When Lieutenant Grummond arrived at Fort Phil Kearny, he was certainly rash, impulsive, and brutal, and he would also likely take unnecessary risks. These were personality factors that helped lead to the Fetterman disaster.

Captain William Judd Fetterman arrived at Fort Phil Kearny on November 3, 1866. Fetterman came from a military family, his father and step father having both been officers in the army. He joined the Union Army at the beginning of the Civil War in 1861 with the rank of lieutenant, and he steadily worked his way to the temporary rank of lieutenant colonel. His career was impressive, and he fought in numerous battles and engagements. He was officially praised for his gallantry on two occasions, and he gained much self confidence. In fact, he seemed to suffer from a personal belief in his own invulnerability because he had been fired upon numerous times but was never wounded. Even though Fetterman had no previous experience fighting Indians, he held the martial abilities of his adversaries in derision. Margaret Carrington quoted the reckless captain as bragging that a “a company of regulars [80 men] could whip a thousand, and a regiment [800 men] could whip the whole array of hostile tribes.”\textsuperscript{46} Frances Grummond quoted Fetterman in almost identical language. She reported that he said that a “single company of Regulars [80 men] could whip a thousand Indians, and that a full regiment [800 men] . . . could whip the entire array of hostile tribes.”\textsuperscript{47}

The brash Captain clearly thought he had a better understanding of how to trap the warriors than those who had dealt with them for years. Fetterman set up and ambush on November 5 just two days after he had arrived at the fort. He placed some hobbled mules in a grove of cottonwood trees near the fort, and he hid troopers nearby. The Captain hoped that the Indians would attempt to seize the animals after dark, allowing the soldiers to trap the warriors. He deployed the men at 2 AM and waited the rest of the night, but no Indians approached. After Fetterman gave up and brought his men back into the fort in the morning, the warriors struck less than a mile (1 kilometer) away driving off a herd of army animals. The Indians’ attack was so well managed that many soldiers in the fort wondered why they had not advanced and destroyed

\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., 1: 139-40.

\textsuperscript{45}Ibid., 1: 140.

\textsuperscript{46}Carrington, \textit{Absaraka}, 171.

\textsuperscript{47}Frances C. Carrington, \textit{My Army Life and the Fort Phil Kearney Massacre} (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1911), 119. Hereafter cited as F. Carrington, \textit{My Army Life}. 
Fetterman and the force with him.\textsuperscript{48}

The impulsive Captain had courted disaster by taking this unnecessary risk, but rather than learning a valuable lesson about the skill of his opponents, Fetterman still held them in derision and sought to get even for his embarrassment. He clearly had “a desire to settle accounts,” and “he was impatient because the Indians were not summarily punished” for their misdeeds.\textsuperscript{49} Jim Bridger, the famous mountain man and explorer, was Colonel Carrington’s chief guide at the time, and he commented on Fetterman’s brashness. “Your men who fought down South [in the Civil War] are Crazy! They don’t know anything about fighting Indians.”\textsuperscript{50} Fetterman clearly underestimated his adversaries, which was a recipe for disaster.

The numbers of warriors in the area were reported to be very large in the late summer of 1866. Colonel Carrington believed that there were fifteen hundred lodges belonging to hostile Indians in the vicinity of the Tongue River.\textsuperscript{51} Many of these warriors were within fifty miles (eighty kilometers) of Fort Phil Kearny, and they could have assembled at the post within a few days. An Indian lodge typically held one family unit. This usually included a grown man and often an older son, who had grown to maturity but had not yet left home. If the estimate on the number of lodges was correct, the warriors could have numbered close to three thousand.

C. M. Hines the acting assistant surgeon at Fort Phil Kearny agreed that there were 1,500 Indian lodges in the vicinity, but he gave a larger estimate of the Sioux and their allies. “The whole number of warriors must amount to four or five thousand, well mounted and armed.”\textsuperscript{52} More recent estimates have placed the number of Red Cloud’s force at “three to four thousand warriors.”\textsuperscript{53} Even if these figures are inflated, the garrison of roughly four hundred soldiers at the fort were outnumbered at least five to one, and they could have faced odds of ten to one.

**Skirmish on December 6, 1866**

The soldiers’ courage, skill, and resourcefulness were tested in a major skirmish on December 6, 1866. With the onset of the severe winter weather in northern Wyoming, few whites traveled on the Bozeman Trail. This meant that the Indians were no longer tempted to attack

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\textsuperscript{49} Carrington, *Absaraka*, 217 and 245.


\textsuperscript{52} C. M. Hines to John, January 1, 1867 in *Letter of the Secretary of the Interior Communicating, in compliance with a resolution of the Senate of the 8th instant, information touching the origin and progress of Indian Hostilities on the frontier 40th Cong. 1st sess. Senate Executive Document no. 13* [Washington, DC, 1867?], 15. Hereafter cited as *Indian Hostilities*.

\textsuperscript{53} McDermott, 1: 184.
them and could concentrate their considerable forces on Fort Phil Kearny as a convenient target. The weather was bright and clear on the morning of December 6, and Margaret Carrington hoped that the garrison would get a rest from the constant Indian attacks, but she was to be disappointed.54

Early in the morning, the wood train with about twenty-five soldiers and civilians was sent to retrieve lumber from the Sullivant Hills. The train had gone about four miles (seven kilometers) when it was attacked by a party of warriors at 1 PM. The sentinels on Pilot Hill gave the appropriate signals alerting the fort to the situation. Colonel Carrington immediately planned a pincer movement. He sent Captain Fetterman to aid the threatened wagons and to dislodge the attacking Indians. The commander believed that the Captain would be successful in driving off the attackers who would likely retreat over the Sullivant Hills. This gave Carrington the opportunity of sweeping behind the hills, intercepting the warriors, and hopefully inflicting heavy losses on them.

The Colonel decided to take personal command of the flanking column. Commanding officers rarely left their posts to engage in a small-unit action at this time, but Carrington thought he had something to prove. He was aware that many of his junior officers, who had direct combat experience in the Civil War, thought that he lacked this essential background to lead them properly, and they often held him and his abilities in contempt. Carrington obviously hoped that leading a successful attack on the Indians would redeem him in the eyes of his subordinates.

Captain Fetterman led the mounted infantry and a part of Lieutenant Horatio S. Bingham’s cavalry unit. Together, these two groups numbered about thirty men. Lieutenant Alexander Wands soon joined Fetterman’s command. Fortunately, the young Lieutenant wielded a Henry Rifle which soon became an important factor in the developing fight. The weapon was not issued by the army, and Wands had probably purchased it with his own funds. The Henry Rifle was the first truly successful lever-action repeater. It used a .44 caliber bullet (11 millimeters), held sixteen rounds, and could fire that many aimed shots in thirty seconds. It could also be reloaded rapidly. It was a superb weapon at close range, and it was far superior to any other rifle in use at that time.55

Colonel Carrington’s chose Lieutenant Grummond as his second-in-command, and his column numbered twenty-six men. The combined strength of the detachments under Fetterman and Carrington was roughly sixty men. The commander later estimated that they faced three hundred warriors. When the colonel rode across the Big Piney creek in pursuit of the Indians, his horse fell through the ice, and he plunged into the cold water. The temperature had fallen below zero that day (-18 Celsius), and campaigning in such frigid temperatures while wearing wet clothes was clearly dangerous, so Grummond suggested that the commander should return to the fort to get into dry clothing and to keep warm. “No,” Carrington replied, “If I go back, the men will call me a coward.”56

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54 Carrington, Absaraka, 194.

55 Riley Sword, The Historic Henry Rifle (Lincoln, RI: Mowbray, 2002).

56 Thomas Mack as cited in McDermott, 1: 186.
The colonel and his command pushed forward. The Indians fell back as the soldiers advanced, and the troopers soon saw four warriors on the top of a hill. They proved to be decoys who were trying to draw the soldiers into a trap. In a ravine nearby, an additional thirty-two Indians were hidden waiting to strike at Carrington and his men. The commander’s attention was then drawn to a force of one hundred Indians who were retreating from Fetterman’s advance. Even though he was outnumbered, the Colonel continued his approach at a gallop, and he picked up stragglers from Fetterman’s command in the process. Both Colonel Carrington’s and Captain Fetterman’s forces became engaged with the Indians, and about one hundred of the warriors came “circling around and yelling” out of the ravines to fight the soldiers.  

The warriors under Yellow Horse struck Fetterman’s command on three sides, and the Captain ordered his men to halt to meet the threat better. Unwisely, Lieutenant Bingham and most of the cavalry did not follow Fetterman’s example, and they continued to advance. The men still on horseback broke through the Indian formations in the direction of Fort Phil Kearny, but when the warriors closed in, the soldiers were in grave danger. The officers realized that many of their men would be reluctant to maintain their positions to fight the enemy, and these experienced leaders reacted well to the situation by becoming more fearsome to their troopers than were their adversaries. These officers pulled out their weapons and threatened their men at gunpoint, forcing the remaining cavalrymen to dismount and take up a defensive position.  

When Fetterman’s troopers saw Carrington’s column, they naturally thought that the Colonel had come to their rescue, and they were surprised to see their relief party turn away to pursue some fleeing Indians. There were only about fourteen men in Fetterman’s group at the point, and they faced roughly 150 warriors. The troopers could have been overwhelmed, but Lieutenant Wands’s cool courage, and his Henry Rifle came into play. He kept up a heavy rate of fire, and he hit an Indian at roughly 50 yards (46 meters) with one shot. The victim tumbled through the air much liked “a flying squirrel.” The rest of the troopers were anxious to keep the warriors at bay by firing their revolvers. While these weapons could be fired rapidly, they suffered from lack of range and poor accuracy. The Indians were at such a great distance that the weapons did little more than make noise and were totally ineffective.  

Lieutenants Grummond and Bingham became so excited that they took several troopers and advanced on about thirty Indians who seemed to be fleeing. When the warriors turned on their pursuers, the troopers were forced to fight their way out of a possible encirclement. Bingham fired his pistols until they were out of ammunition, and he then attempted to cut his way out with his sword. The warriors soon killed him. Later they stripped the clothing off the corpse and scalped the body. Sergeant Bowers made the mistake of turning around to fire on his pursuers, but the warriors overtook him and “put an arrow in him and split his skull open above

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58 Alexander Wands as cited in McDermott, 1: 188.  

59 Carrington, Absaraka, 196-7 and McDermott, 1: 189.
the eyes.” He had been struck with an ax or tomahawk. Grummond was more successful. He “ran against the Indians, cutting right and left with his sword, [and] got through with the balance” of his men.60

One of the Carrington’s men fell with his horse on top of him, pinning him to the ground. The commander saw a warrior trying to creep up to the man obviously with the intent of killing and scalping him, but the Carrington succeeded in “dismounting, with 1 man to hold the horses, and reserving fire, I succeeded in saving the man and holding the position until joined by Fetterman.”61 When the warriors saw Fetterman’s command join Carrington’s men, “the Indians broke in every direction.” They left the soldiers alone on the field of battle, and the fight was over. The troopers looked for their missing comrades. “After an hours search we found Lieutenant Bingham’s body and that of Sergeant Bowers.” The sergeant was still alive, and he had not been scalped, but his wound was very serious since he had been hit in the head with an ax or tomahawk. “He died before an ambulance arrived from the fort, having been cleft to the brain.” Carrington’s final assessment of the battle included a list of his losses. “My total casualties were: One officer killed, 1 sergeant killed, 1 sergeant and 4 privates wounded. Three horses were killed and 5 wounded.”62

The commander reported that his men had killed ten Indians, but he gave no information on why he thought that many warriors had died, and his numbers might have been enlarged to make his forays seem successful. Lieutenant Grummond had a completely different assessment of the engagement as he told William Bisbee, a fellow officer. “He stated that upon rejoining the command he very hotly asked the Colonel if he was a fool or a coward to allow his men to be cut to pieces without offering help.”63 In reality, Carrington’s attack on the Indians had accomplished nothing, and his men and their officers had not learned the valuable lessons which the engagement should have taught them. They went out with too few men, divided their forces in the face of a numerical superior adversary, and they were too far from the fort to expect additional help if they were under attack. Also, they fell for the old Indian trick when the warriors acted like they were in retreat thus bating the whites into pursuing them. After they had drawn the cavalry far away, and when the whites were scattered in an effort to catch up to the Indians, the warriors would then turn no them. At that time, the warriors clearly had the advantage. This was a ruse that the Indians would use to bate Fetterman into foolish and unwise actions which led to the annihilation of the brash Captain’s command more than two weeks later.

Lieutenants Wands and Grummond each gave Margaret Carrington “the whole story” on the fight, and she stated that “It is of God’s mercy that any one [soldier] escaped.” Later, Captain


61Carrington to Litchfield, Indian Operations, 37-8.

62Ibid., 38.

63William Henry Bisbee, Through Four American Wars (Boston, Meador, 1931), 172.
Fetterman came to visit her, and he said that “he has learned a lesson, and that this Indian war has become a hand-to-hand fight, requiring the utmost caution.” Fetterman should have followed his own advise to be more vigilant and careful in dealing with his adversaries. Despite his observation to Mrs. Carrington, the Captain clearly had learned no valuable lessons in fighting the Indians, and his incompetency would lead to disaster fifteen days later.

**The Preparations for Battle**

Many of the troopers looked forward to fighting the enemy again to settle old scores, prove their manliness, or relieve the endless anxiety of the constant raids from the warriors. Despite the problems of skirmishing with the occasional enemy, the soldiers knew little about Indian warfare, and they were overconfident thinking their adversaries could not possibly withstand them when engaged in relatively large numbers. The troopers severely underestimated the cunning and resourcefulness of their adversaries.

Captain F. H. Brown was so anxious to meet the enemy that he wore his uniform to bed, so he would not have to dress before rushing outside to meet any threat. He also had weapons close at hand, so they could be easily retrieved. As Margaret Carrington explained, “Only the night before the massacre he made a call, with spurs fastened in the button-holes of his coat, leggings wrapped, and two revolvers accessible, declaring by way of explanation, that he was ready day and night, and must have one scalp before leaving for [Fort] Laramie, to which place he had been ordered.”

Captain William Fetterman, obviously having forgotten the lessons learned at the skirmish on December 6, expressed a similar attitude. He spoke of “taking Red Cloud’s scalp,” and he bragged that “with eighty men I can ride through the whole Sioux Nation.” The warriors were willing to accommodate the army, and by every indication, the Indians were spoiling for a fight. They openly challenged the soldiers to meet them in battle. As Dr. Hines reported, “For some time back they were in the habit of coming on the bluffs near this fort, calling out to us and challenging us to the fight.”

For weeks, many Indians had been assembling for battle. Some of these warriors were met with skepticism by the other Indians. One such person, Heemaneh, was a “berdash” or a man who dressed as a woman. This “half-man-half-woman” was rejected by the Sioux warriors as unsuitable for combat, and they did not want to serve with him until they noticed that he had brought a hundred men with him to do battle with the whites. A contingent of warriors was

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64 Carrington, *Absaraka*, 194-5.

65 Ibid., 208-9.


67 Hines of John, January 1, 1867 in *Indian Hostilities*, 15.

chosen to attack the wood train in the morning, which was an act that would start the day’s hostilities. They were then supposed to run away when the soldiers came to the rescue, and an additional ten men were assigned to withdraw slowly and temp the troopers to follow them into the trap. The night before the battle these ten warriors were chosen to be ready to serve as decoys. Two of these men were Cheyennes, Little Wolf and Wolf Left Hand, two were Arapahos, and two were from each of the three tribes of Sioux who were present, the Minniconjou, Oglala, and Hunkpapa.69

The Cheyennes were the guests of the Sioux, and they were given the choice of where they stood in the ambush. Their leaders declared that their men and the Arapaho warriors would be hidden on the upper or western side of the ridge. The Oglala Sioux warriors under Crazy Horse was with them. The other Minniconjou and the Hunkpapa Sioux would deploy on the opposite or eastern side of the trail.70 All of the Cheyennes and Arapahoes were on horseback, while some of the Sioux men were on foot. Some women had accompanied the warriors, and they stayed with the men who were on foot and had no horses. Everyone knew their places and what was expected of them, and they all stayed as quiet as possible.71

When all the warriors were in their assigned locations, they prepared for battle. They took the white buckskin covers off their shields, put war paint on their faces, and they sang and prayed.72 White Bull stood with the Minniconjou Sioux, and he wore clothing and had weapons similar to the other warriors. He was armed with a lance, a bow, and forty arrows. He had two eagle feathers in his hair, and he held his gray war horse. The young man also fastened his blood-red blanket around his shoulders much like a coat. White Bull was like many other warriors that day. He was ready for combat, and he was anxious to show his courage in battle.73

The number of warriors who actually participated in destroying Fetterman’s command is unknown, but the estimates range from 900 to 3,000 men. The Indian accounts tend to favor the lower estimates, while the whites use more inflated conclusions. The only white observer to look at the Indian forces was Captain Tendor Ten Eyck who viewed the warriors at a distance when they were in celebration after annihilating Fetterman’s force. Ten Eyck had experience in estimating the numbers of men during the Civil War, so his he was a skilled observer, and his opinion carried the most weight. The army officer stated “I am sure that there were not less than

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70 Vestal, White Bull, 58.


72 Vestal, Warpath, 99.

73 Vestal, White Bull, 58.
1,500 and I think [not] over 2,000” warriors. The number of white men in the upcoming battle was 81, and if Ten Eyck’s estimate of the Indian numbers may be considered the most reasonable, then Fetterman’s command was outnumbered by about 19 or 25 to 1.

**Fetterman’s Command Marches Out**

The morning of December 21, 1866 dawned clear and cold. Despite being the shortest day of the year, there were only scattered patches of snow on the ground, and the snow did little to encumber the movement of both the Indians and soldiers. Early in the morning, the wood train left the fort and moved to retrieve wood on the south side of the Sullivant Hills. These wood cutters were accompanied by ninety soldiers for their protection. Soon the troopers on the watch post on Pilot Hill one mile (two kilometers) south of the fort signaled that many Indians were advancing, and the wood train soon placed their wagons in a circle for defense. Colonel Carrington used his telescope to observe the nearby terrain, and he saw small bands of warriors on the nearby hills and in the thickets along the Big Piney Creek right in front of the fort. The Indians seemed to be deployed to test the strength of the garrison and to find out how many troopers would come to the aid of the wood cutters. The Colonel ordered his men servicing the three howitzers in the fort to fire several rounds at the Indians. These projectiles exploded in mid air, each cannonball sending more than eighty smaller balls of shrapnel in every direction. The Indians dubbed these weapons the “gun that shoots twice,” and the warriors soon withdrew beyond the range of these fearsome weapons.

Colonel Carrington ordered Company C of the U.S. Cavalry to ride out and come to the aid of the wood train. However, Company C had no regular officer assigned to lead it, and Carrington initially gave the assignment to Captain James Powell. Captain Fetterman was unhappy with the choice because it left him out of the pursuit. If Powell remained in command, Fetterman would have to remain in the fort, and he would have no chance to engage the enemy. Stating that he was the senior captain at the post, Fetterman soon requested that he be given command of the troops, and the Colonel then gave him overall control over the expedition. Captain Frederick Brown soon also asked that he be given “one more chance to bring in the scalp of Red Cloud himself,” and Carrington granted his request to accompany the column. Technically, Brown had authority only over the two civilians with the command, and he need not participate in the expedition. He just went along out of a sense of adventure.

While Fetterman had overall command, he was only directly in control of the Second Battalion, Eighteenth U.S. Infantry. Lieutenant Grummond was the commander of the cavalry, but he also was second in overall command of the expedition. Each infantry company was part of the Second Battalion Eighteenth Infantry. In total, Company A included 21 men, Company C was comprised of 9 men, Company E had 6 men in it, and Company H included 12 men. One other soldier, Thomas M. Madden, accompanied the infantry. He was a new recruit, and he was

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technically unassigned because he had not been formally placed in any company. In total, the number of foot soldiers was 49. Each man carried 20 to 30 rounds of ammunition for their Springfield muskets.

There were also 27 men in Company C of the Second Cavalry, and each man had roughly 60 to 70 rounds of ammunition for their Spencer carbines. Adolf Metzger was the bugler for Company C of the cavalry. He was from Germany, and he was considered to be the most experienced soldier at the post, who was serving in his fourth enlistment. Also accompanying the expedition were 2 private citizens, John (Isaac) Fisher and John Wheatley. These men were frontiersmen who had been serving as civilian scouts for the army. Wheatley had lost some stock to the Indians and was probably seeking revenge. All together, this made a total of 76 soldiers and 2 civilians. Including the three officers; Fetterman, Grummond, and Brown; the entire command comprised 81 men. Fetterman had bragged that he could take eighty men and defeat the Indians, and that was the exact number under his command.

The size and configuration of the command was most unwise. The infantry carried the unwieldy Springfield musket which was only marginally effective under any practical circumstances, and the foot soldiers would have to march too slowly to close with their mounted adversaries. Additionally, the infantry would be an impediment to the cavalry if the soldiers came under attack because the mounted men would have to cover the more vulnerable men on foot. Also, the number of cavalymen was too few to engage the Indians at an advantage. If sixty mounted men could not deal effectively with the warriors on December 6, then half that number of cavalymen could be expected to be even more insufficient on December 21. The cavalymen carried Spencer breech-loading carbines, but they were too few in number to alter the outcome of the battle. Only the two civilian packers, Fisher and Wheatley, had the most effective weapon wielded by the whites, the Henry Rifle. While these two men gave a good account of themselves, they were unable to change the outcome of the battle. The small size and the poor configuration of the soldiers showed that the expedition was misconceived, misdirected, and foolish. All it took was an aggressive attack by a numerically superior force to slaughter all the troops.

Colonel Carrington emphatically told Lieutenant Grummond, "Report to Captain Fetterman, implicitly obey his orders, and never leave him." Then the commander of the garrison gave the Lieutenant additional instructions, "Under no circumstances must you cross Lodge Trail Ridge." Lieutenant Wands was not in a position to give orders to his fellow Lieutenant, but he offered Grummond some additional advice. "[For your] family’s sake to be prudent and avoid rash movements, or any pursuit [of the enemy]." Colonel Carrington also presented Fetterman with direct and clear orders, "Support the wood-train, relieve it, and report to me. Do not engage or pursue Indians at its expense; under no circumstances pursue over the Ridge, namely, Lodge Trail Ridge."
Lieutenant Grummond’s wife, Frances Courtney Grummond, was standing near Colonel Carrington’s headquarters and both saw and heard everything. She confirmed what the Colonel told the officers who were leaving on the expedition, “Support the wood-train, relieve it, and report to me.” When the men marched out of the fort, Carrington jumped to the sentry walk at the top of the stockade yelling to the column to stop while he repeated his orders, “and in clear tones, heard by everybody, repeated his orders more minutely.” He yelled to them, “Under no circumstances must you cross Lodge Trail Ridge.” Mrs. Grummond knew the character of her husband, and she feared he was about to take unnecessary risks. “I was filled with dread and horror at the thought that after my husband’s hairbreadth escape scarcely three weeks before he could be so eager to fight the Indians again.”

In all these instances, Grummond and Fetterman had been given clear orders and helpful advice, but these officers would soon recklessly disregard what they had been told.

Colonel Carrington prepared the remainder of his men in case they were needed to come to Captain Fetterman’s aid, and the fort’s commander called the general alarm, putting every man in the garrison on full alert. When the Captain’s command left the fort, his column did not march directly to help the men in the wood train who were under attack. Instead, Fetterman led the troopers on a march to the north side of the Sullivant Hills in an apparent attempt to intercept or cut off the Indians from the rear. Apparently, he had also noticed the small group of warriors serving as a decoys in an attempt to lure the command into the ambush. This party of Indians fell back slowly and some of them acted like their horses were lame, giving the impression that they could be easily overtaken and killed. The captain took the bait and then disobeyed the direct order from Carrington not to pursue the Indians. Acting on his own initiative, Fetterman soon marched out of sight over the crest of the Lodge Trail Ridge. From that point, the men in the fort could no longer see the men in Fetterman’s command, and the garrison could only guess what was happening to them when they heard the reports of rifle fire in the distance.

The Indians Spring their Trap

The Indians set their ambush and waited in silence for a long time. They then heard a single shot, and later they heard the reports of more rifle fire. Then there was silence again. Finally a number of bugle calls were heard and shortly a troop of cavalry marched out in their direction, followed by the infantry. The decoys were doing their job admirably. The cavalry would fire and then stop, and the Indians would return and act like they were attacking. Once again the troopers would fire at them and then continue to pursue the Indians. Fetterman’s column marched about four miles (6.5 kilometers) from the fort. They followed the track of the Bozeman Trail and had advanced along Lodge Trail Ridge over a prominence, later known as “massacre hill,” when they were attacked.

The Cheyenne warrior, Big Nose, placed himself in great danger to show his courage. When the soldiers approached the ridge line, the Indian, who was on a black horse, rode back and forth in front of the soldiers as though he was engaging them in battle. In turn the troopers fired at him at a very rapid rate. The warrior appeared to be trying to hold the soldiers back to help

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80 F. Carrington, My Army Life, 144.

81 Grinnell, Fighting Cheyennes, 230.
another man get away. At one point, Big Nose charged back through the ranks of the troopers, and he disappeared among them. He rode through the formation of the troopers, and he then turned his horse back and rode again through the disposition of soldiers from the opposite direction. This was a remarkable feat of horsemanship and courage, but it was also reckless and foolish.82

A young warrior, Fire Thunder, was only sixteen years old, but he stood in ambush with the other warriors waiting for the soldiers to approach. After waiting what seemed to be a long time, the warriors heard a shot over the hill, and they knew the soldiers were coming. To keep their horses from giving away their position, the Indians tried to keep their horses quiet by holding the nostrils of their ponies, so the animals would not whinny in a greeting to the cavalry's mounts. The warriors in hiding soon saw their men coming back, “some of them were walking and leading their horses, so that the soldiers would think they were worn out” to give the impression they could be easily overtaken. The Indian decoys, who had been sent out to lure the soldiers into the trap, came running back, the white men on horseback shooting in hot pursuit. When the cavalry reached the bottom of the hill, the fighting began.83

The Indian Attack

The soldiers kept following the decoys down the old Bozeman Trail which ran along the crest of the ridge. The Indians affirmed that the warriors were at their stations. “The mounted Sioux were hidden behind two rocky ridges on the east side of this ridge, while the Cheyennes were on the west side of it.” The cavalry rode in advance of the infantry, and the two groups were close to the Sioux, well within the Indian positions. The decoys finally separated into two small bands, and they rode away in opposite directions from each other. They then turned back and crossed the path of the other group. This was one of the signals for the Sioux to charge. However, the Cheyennes looked to Little Horse for the order to advance. The warrior was a Contrary or Hohnūhk'ē who were known for doing everything backwards or to the reverse of what was expected. The man had his “contrary” lance in his left hand, and he passed it behind his neck, taking it into his right hand. The Cheyennes knew this was the signal to charge, and they all sprang up and advanced against the soldiers.84

When White Bull of the Minniconjou Sioux saw the signal to advance, he called to his fellow warriors, “Come on! We must start!” The men on both sides of the soldiers jumped on their horses and rushed forward. The Minniconjou were closer to the troopers than the Oglala and Cheyennes, and they reached their targets first. The most prestigious act of courage for the Indians was to touch or strike an enemy with a weapon or a stick, known as a “coup” or blow. The brave, Thunder Hawk, was ahead of the other warriors, and he had the honor of being the first

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82Ibid., 230 and 232.


84Grinnell, Fighting Cheyennes, 232.
to strike or “count coup” on a soldier.\(^8^5\)

The hoofs of hundreds of horses in the charge sounded much like thunder. When the soldiers saw the warriors’ attack, they stopped advancing. After the Indians got close enough to shoot their arrows, hitting a couple of soldiers, the troopers began to fall back. The infantry retreated up the hill, took a position behind some loose, flat stones on the ridge, and lay prone on the ground as much as possible. The cavalry did not join the infantry but retreated past the men on foot farther up the slope eventually to deploy about one hundred yards (91 meters) away.\(^8^6\)

**Three Men Make a Stand**

The two civilians with Carrington’s command, James S. Wheatly and Isaac Fisher, both from Blue Springs, Nebraska, apparently had advanced with the cavalry. They were the most formidable whites on the field of battle that day because each was wielding a Henry rifle with which they could keep up a heavy rate of fire. They were probably on horseback and had the opportunity to fall back with the cavalry in the attempt to save their lives, but they decided to make a stand together farther down the slope by firing from the protection of two large rocks. These men could clearly see the predicament of the entire command as the soldiers were on the verge of being overwhelmed by a large numbers of warriors.

If these two men had any chance of survival, they must either run for their lives or join the troopers in their retreat, but they chose to stay and fight instead. With their superior firepower, these two civilians were likely trying to provide some cover for the troopers who were hard pressed from the beginning of the flight. If so, they sacrificed their lives trying to give others a chance to live. Wheatley and Fisher gave a good account of themselves as the numerous spent cartridge shells found near their bodies attested. More than fifty spent shells were found near the corpse of one of these men, and they probably held out until they ran out of ammunition. These two men also might have found their marks with many shots because sixty pools of blood and the bodies of ten Indian ponies were found nearby. This was noteworthy because no Indian horses and pools of blood were found at any other point on the battlefield.\(^8^7\)

While the Indians mutilated their corpses after they fell, the native people gave the remains of Wheatley and Fisher some special treatment in retaliation for how well they fought. The Indians gave a compliment to the fighting ability of these men in a curious way after the battle because they filled these men’s bodies full of arrows. “One having a hundred and five arrows in his naked body. . . . The cartridge shells about them told how well they fought.”\(^8^8\)

The cavalry bugler from Germany, Adolph Metzger, probably joined the two civilians in their desperate defense because his body was found nearby. The physical evidence indicated that the courageous German gave a good account of himself. “The bravery of our bugler is much spoken of; he having killed several Indians by beating them over the head with his bugle.” The

\(^{8^5}\)Vestal, *White Bull*, 60.

\(^{8^6}\)Grinnell, *Fighting Cheyennes*, 233 and Vestal *White Bull*, 60.

\(^{8^7}\)General Sanborn as cited in McDermott, 1: 223-4.

man’s courage was noted by his adversaries, and they gave his corpse special respect. “The Indians mutilated every body in Fetterman’s command with the exception of the bugler who fought so courageously that his remains were left untouched but covered with a buffalo robe.”

Some Indians covered the body of a fallen enemy as a sign of respect to indicate that the corpse of the valiant foe was to be preserved and was not to be mutilated. But it is unlikely that Metzger could have killed several men with a bugle because it was a poor weapon. The instrument was light, and it probably weighed less than one pound (.45 kilograms). It was made of brass, which was a malleable metal, that would collapse when it hit anything hard such as a man’s head. Most likely, Metzger fought with his rifle, and he only swung the bugle in the desperate last moments of his final life-and-death struggle with the warriors.

**The Destruction of the Infantry**

As Wheatley, Fisher, and Metzger were fighting to their deaths, the battle raged farther up the hill. Eats-Meat, a courageous Minniconjou warrior, came charging down the old road against the foot soldiers, and the troopers unexpectedly stood up as though they were going to leave their position. They allowed the warrior to pass through their ranks, but they then turned to shot and kill the man. He was the first Indian to die in the battle.

This tactic of allowing a warrior to pass by or through their position before firing on the man was an old stratagem used by white men wielding muzzle-loading rifles when attacked by Indians. If the troopers fired when their adversaries were riding past them, the soldiers could perhaps hit their targets and still have time to reload before the warriors could turn around and repeat the attack. This maneuver could be effective against a few enemies, but it only helped a little when a small contingent of troopers faced many hundreds of attackers.

Another young warrior attacked on foot, shooting his arrows at the troopers as he advanced. The soldiers got up and killed the young warrior. When the troopers stood up to shoot at the Indian, they made much better targets, and the other warriors also rose up at the same time to take better aim and shoot the white men.

The Indians rode around the infantry with the Oglala Sioux and Cheyennes sweeping around the men on foot on the north and east, while the Minniconjou Sioux circled on the south and west. Demonstrating great skill, the warriors used an old tactic of attacking while their horses protected them from fire. The men hung off the sides of their mounts, so the body of the animals protected them from the soldiers’ rifle fire, and the Indians continued to shoot arrows at their enemies from under the horses’ necks or even from under their horses’ stomachs. The troopers on foot were severely hampered by their slow-firing muzzle-loading rifles, and the fact that they had to stand up to reload these weapons. The volume of the fire from the warriors was so rapid, and the numbers of braves were so many that the infantry only resisted a short time.

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91Grinnell, *Fighting Cheyennes*, 233.

After most of the foot soldiers had been killed, three of the white survivors got up from the ground and ran up the hill to join the cavalry. The Sioux saw these fleeing men and immediately went after them. Bull Eagle was on foot, and he ran forward to strike the trooper in the lead of the small group of whites with his bow. The Indian was apparently attempting to count coup on the unfortunate man, but another soldier shot the warrior. The bullet went through his right thigh, and Bull Eagle fell onto the ground and was unable to move. Whenever possible, the Indians retrieved their wounded and dead from the battlefield, but the fire from the soldiers was so intense that no one came to his aid. When White Bull saw his fellow warrior bleeding and groaning on the ground, the young man jumped from his horse to help. He grabbed Bull Eagle by the wrists and dragged him over edge of the ridge out of sight from the troopers and to safety.93

The firing from the infantry was becoming less and less, and White Bull mounted his horse again to rejoin the fight. When he advanced, he was shot from his horse, and he fell to the ground still holding onto the rope around animals’s neck. Even though he fell hard onto the dirt, the bullet missed him because it had passed harmlessly through the red blanket the warrior had wrapped around his left shoulder. Surprisingly, the near miss made White Bull angry rather than frightened, and he got on his pony again and returned to the battle.94

The Indians shot their arrows so rapidly that a few of the projectiles flew over or through the trooper’s position, wounding warriors on the opposite side. An arrow struck an Indian in the forehead at the top of his nose. He was hit right between the eyes, and the missile went into his brain killing him. Many of the warriors advanced and engaged the infantry in hand-to-hand combat. While all this was happening, the cavalry retreated past the foot soldiers to the top of a nearby hill, and they offered little or no assistance while the infantry was being annihilated.95

The Destruction of the Cavalry

If the army had any chance of surviving the Indians’ onslaught, both the infantry and the cavalry needed to stay together to offer mutual aid and to present a unified defense. The fact that the cavalry felt forced to continue their retreat and to abandon the foot soldiers to their fate meant that the warriors could destroy each part of the command piecemeal or one after the other. But the cavalry showed skill in their fighting retreat, and they fell back slowly and in good order. Some of the men were on foot leading their horses, which allowed other men to fight on foot where they could take better aim and wield their weapons more effectively. Under such circumstances, it was common practice for one cavalryman to hold four horses. However, this took one quarter of the whites out of action. The Indians pursued the cavalry, but their advance was slowed by the ice and snow on the hill sides which made the ground very slippery, and they were unable to rush up to the calvary’s position immediately.96

The cavalry showed good discipline and good unit cohesion. When the soldiers retreated

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93 Ibid., 61-2.
94 Ibid., 62.
95 Grinnell, *Fighting Cheyennes*, 233.
96 Grinnell, *Fighting Cheyennes*, 233.
slowly up the ridge in the direction of the fort, they continued to fight. They were close together, and they fired continuously. Their rate of fire was so rapid that they were partially hidden behind the smoke of their own rifles. Some men who were not leading horses would stop, kneel down on one knee to take better aim, and then fire. These troopers would then stand up again and continue to withdraw.

At the rear of the soldiers, White Bull saw one of the white men on foot. This trooper faced the warriors while he was running backwards, and he was shouting as loud as he could. The soldier carried a carbine, which was a shorter version of the infantry rifle, and he threatened his adversaries by pointing it at one warrior and then at another. White Bull rode directly at the trooper and shot an arrow into his chest which pierced the man’s heart and killed him. In triumph, the warrior struck the trooper on the head with his lance, knocking the man’s cap off his head. The Indian had counted his first coup.97

Fire Thunder mounted his sorrel (reddish brown) pony when the soldiers began to fall back up the trail. The young warrior had one of the few firearms used by the Indians that day. “I had a six-shooter [revolver] that I had traded for, and also a bow and arrows. When the soldiers started back, I held my sorrel [horse] with one hand and began killing them with my six-shooter, for they came close to me. There were many bullets, but there were more arrows—so many that it was like a cloud of grasshoppers all above and around the soldiers; and our people, shooting across, hit each other.”98

A Cheyenne, Little Horse, crept to within twelve meters of the soldier’s position, where he engaged the enemy by shooting arrows. The whites returned fire, but the warrior was never hit. Another Cheyenne, White Elk, saw the Indians shooting arrows at the troopers, and the projectiles flew so rapidly that, once again, the shafts seemed like swarms of grasshoppers flying over them. Again Indians were hit by arrows from other warriors, this time Thunder Hump and King were hit. The warriors fired so many arrows that the ground was covered with them, and the Indians did not have to use their own because they could pick up the shafts almost anywhere.99

A valiant officer was riding a white horse, which identified him as Lieutenant Grummond. After the battle, his body was found a quarter of a mile from where the cavalry made their last stand, indicating that the Lieutenant was killed while trying to cover the troopers’ retreat. The warrior, Wild Horse, reported that the officer had lost his hat and was bare headed. By that time, the white man had been severely wounded, and his shattered arm dangled loosely from his side. His face was covered with blood from a deep gash in his cheek, but the soldier continued to resist. Grummond had apparently lost his rifle or had expended its ammunition, so he no longer wielded it, but he briefly used his pistol to smash the head of an Indian. He then rode about wildly cutting and slashing with his saber. Reportedly, he cut the head off a warrior with a single slash of the weapon. But the Lieutenant’s stand was futile, and he was soon killed by the blow of a warrior’s


98 Fire Thunder in Black Elk Speaks, 11-12.

99 Vestal, White Bull, 63.
After Lieutenant Grummond was killed, the soldiers seemed to give way and fall back farther up the ridge. They took their final position for defense between four boulders at the top of the highest point. The area was roughly square, but it was quite small and was only about six feet (two meters) on each side. In a surprising move, some of the troopers let their horses go when they were retreating up the ridge. They released the remainder of their mounts when they reached the top of the ridge.\textsuperscript{101} This action could have sealed their fate because they no longer had the option to flee on horseback. If these men had any chance of survival at this point, it was to mount their horses and try to run through their enemies and try to reach the fort. Maybe a very few could have been fortunate enough to get away. As Two Moons stated, “After this [release of the horses] Fetterman couldn’t do anything else but fight, and it was soon all over.”\textsuperscript{102} However, releasing their horses meant that the men holding them were then able to participate in the battle, briefly bolstering the number of men desperately trying to defend their position.

The freeing of the horses did give the troopers a short respite, because some of the warriors were eager to capture the animals, and the left the battle briefly to retrieve the mounts. White Bull was among the warriors who chased the horses, but his pony was too slow to capture any of them. However, other Indian ponies were faster, and the warriors soon caught all the animals.\textsuperscript{103}

Big Nose rode after the horses, and he captured two of them, but his own mount had become so exhausted from its exertions that the warrior could not get it to move, and the Indian was stationary at that point. He was a relatively easy target for the soldiers, and he was shot off his horse. He lay on the ground badly wounded. His friend, White Elk, came to help while the soldiers continued to fire at them. Big Nose said simply, “Lift my head up the hill and place me where I can breath the fresh air.” He died a day or two later from his wounds.\textsuperscript{104}

The Indians’ efforts to capture the horses gave the soldiers a respite from the Indian fire, but the lull in fighting was short lived. The cavalry fell back to a place almost 400 meters from where the infantry were annihilated. A few warriors worked out a method to get the white men to expose themselves to fire. At times an Indian would stand up as though he was about to charge, but when the troopers rose up to shoot him, the other warriors would fire at the soldiers. By this method, the Indians were able to kill a few troopers.\textsuperscript{105}

\textsuperscript{100}W. F. Hynes, \textit{Soldiers of the Frontier} ([Denver.] s.n., 1943), 162-3, and McDermott, 1: 223-4.

\textsuperscript{101}Grinnell, \textit{Fighting Cheyennes}, 234.

\textsuperscript{102}Two Moons in F. Carrington, \textit{My Army Life}, 14

\textsuperscript{103}Vestal, \textit{White Bull}, 64.

\textsuperscript{104}Grinnell, \textit{Fighting Cheyennes}, 234.

\textsuperscript{105}Ibid., 234-5.
The Final Assault

The warriors continued to creep ever closer to the white men’s position and to prepare for one final assault that would end the battle. Indians at war did not have any recognized hierarchy of leadership. A few charismatic and influential men were called chiefs, and their example could inspire others to fight well, but many men went into battle largely fighting as individuals, doing much as they pleased in combat. The warriors often called to each other to inspire their fellow fighters and to coordinate their efforts.

The Indians surrounding the troopers’ position called to each other, “Be ready. Are you ready?” The others would reply, “We are ready.” Finally, the signal was given, and the warriors rushed to the white men from a close distance, and they soon engaged the soldiers man to man. Little Horse led the Cheyennes in the attack. The warriors pressed close to the soldiers, and they were soon among them. Then hand-to-hand fighting erupted. The Indian, Wild Horse, reported that during this fight a trooper avoided a warrior’s vicious thrust with his knife. The soldier then grabbed his adversary by the hair, shoved his pistol between his eyes, and fired, killing the warrior. A few Sioux were killed in this melee, but all of the soldiers died.

Fire Thunder gave further details on the last action of the battle. “The soldiers were falling all the while they were fighting back up the hill, and their horses got loose. Many of our people chased the horses; [but] I was after Wasichus [white men]. When the soldiers got on top [of the hill], there were not many of them left and they had no place to hide.” The troopers’ situation soon became hopeless, but they gave a good account of themselves. “They were fighting hard. We were told to crawl up on them, and we did. When we were close, someone yelled: ‘Let us go! This is a good day to die. Think of the helpless ones at home!’ Then we all cried, ‘Hoka hey!’ (It’s a good day to die) and rushed at them.” The soldiers, “got up; and fought very hard until not one of them was alive.”

White Bull crept up to the soldiers with his friend, Charging-Crow. Finally Long Fox, an important leader of the Minniconjou stood up and yelled, “Hopo! Let’s go!” Then all the warriors rushed forward. In an instant Charging-Crow was shot fatally, and the dead man fell at White Bull’s feet. This frightened the young warrior, and White Bull dropped to the ground. Soon after, the young man’s uncle, Flying Hawk, fell dead, shot through the chest. The other warriors charged the troopers and fought hand-to-hand with the soldiers. Many men were involved in the melee, which the Sioux called “Stirring Gravy.” This was the final act of the battle because all the soldiers were killed. White Bull arrived too late to participate in this final attack against the troopers, but he retrieved a cavalry rifle from the battlefield.

106 Ibid., 234-5.
107 W. F. Hynes, Soldiers of the Frontier ([Denver,] s.n., 1943), 162.
108 Grinnell, Fighting Cheyennes, 234-5.
Many of the soldiers fought well. One Sioux later said that “the soldiers fought bravely, but by huddling close together, gave the Indians a better opportunity to kill them than if they were scattered about.” The warrior added that “The soldiers’ ammunition did not give out, but they fired to the last.”111 Years later, Red Cloud talked about one trooper who killed seven warriors and wounded nine others before he was finally overwhelmed and slain.112 However, this claim appears to be exaggerated, and other troopers were probably less heroic. Red Cloud and American Horse stated that some of the soldiers were so terrified when they fell into the trap that they appeared to be paralyzed and offered little resistance before they were killed.113

**Fetterman’s Death**

The sources differ on how Captain Fetterman died. American Horse claimed that he killed the officer. The warrior said he rode his horse at full speed and knocked the Captain down to the ground. The Indian then leapt from his mount and killed Fetterman with his knife, probably by slitting his throat. Red Cloud agreed that American Horse had killed the Captain.114 But there are reasons to doubt this assertion. Clearly, many a courageous warrior would like to claim that he had dispatched his most formidable adversary. American Horse likely had never seen Fetterman, and few warriors could easily identify their adversaries in the heat of battle. The man the Indian believed he killed may have been someone else.

The statement of Samuel Horton, the post surgeon, seems to verify that Fetterman was killed by a knife. “Fetterman’s body showed his thorax [chest] to have cut crosswise with a knife, deep into the viscera [internal organs]; his throat and entire neck were cut to the cervical spine [neck bones], all around. I believe that mutilation caused his death.”115 But there is reason to question the accuracy of Horton’s claim that these cuts caused death. Each of the wounds he describes was sufficient to kill the victim, and it is very unlikely that American Horse would have taken the time to disembowel and hack up the victim in the heat of battle. The doctor’s description is consistent with the mutilation of the bodies of the fallen, and these wounds were likely administered after Fetterman was already dead.

Shortly after the battle, Colonel Carrington reported on the nature of the wounds suffered by Captain Fetterman and Captain Brown that would lead to another conclusion, and they may

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have taken their own lives. After examining the bodies, Colonel Carrington reported, “Fetterman and Brown had each a revolver-shot in the left temple. As Brown always declared that he would reserve a shot for himself, as a last resort, so I am convinced that these two brave men fell, each by the other’s hand, rather than undergo the slow torture inflicted upon others.”

This assertion is also unlikely. Unless both men were left handed, it is unlikely that each of them shot themselves in the left temple. If they were both right handed, they could have shot the other in the left temple, but they would have had to shoot each other at the same time, which was very risky indeed. However, there is no doubt that these men feared that they would be tortured if captured, and killing themselves would be preferable to such suffering.

Even though all the soldiers were dead by the end of the battle, one pet or mascot had survived, because a dog had been with the cavalrymen. After all the troopers had been killed, the animal ran away barking. One of the warriors yelled, “All are dead but the dog; let him carry the news to the fort.” Another man replied, “No, do not let even a dog get away.” The animal was soon shot full of arrows.

Fire Thunder gave further details on the death of the dog. “They [the soldiers] had a dog with them, and he started back up the road for the soldiers’ town [fort], howling as he ran. He was the only one left. I did not shoot at him because he looked too sweet; but many did shoot, and he died full of arrows. So there was nobody left of the soldiers.”

Indian Losses

The accounts of how many Indians were killed in the battle vary significantly, and their losses reportedly could have been just several or well over one hundred. Many of the numbers given were highly imprecise. For example, some of the Cheyenne sources indicated that only two Cheyennes were killed in the battle, but the Sioux losses were much larger. Their bodies were laid out in two long rows numbering about fifty or sixty warriors. A careful examination of the evidence suggests more reasonable numbers of fatalities. Indian witnesses often gave low numbers for their losses, but each warrior only saw a part of the battlefield, and many others might have been killed. A careful examination of the accounts by the Indians list the names of 21 Sioux and 5 Cheyennes who were killed. The name of only 1 Arapaho who died in the battle is known. This meant that 27 Indians for whom their names are known died in the battle. This is a possible number, but there may have been other men who fell without their names being remembered.

Also, the question of the number of warriors who were wounded and the number who later died from their wounds are equally difficult to discern with accuracy. Mitch Boyer, the famous scout who was killed with Custer in 1876, talked with a Sioux Indian after the Fetterman battle.

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120 McDermott, I: 262-3.
The man stated that only eight Indians were killed fighting Fetterman, and fifty were wounded, “twenty-two of whom died from their wounds.” Most likely, at least two or three dozen warriors died fighting Fetterman and at least a score or more died later from wounds. Possibly, the men with Fetterman were able to administer almost as many fatalities on their enemies as they received. The Indians plundered the dead troopers, and they stripped the clothing off the soldiers. White Bull took an overcoat and two pairs of pants from the dead troopers. He cut the legs off the trousers, so that his father could use them like chaps to protect his legs, and White Bull threw the seat of the pants away. The warriors found paper money and silver coins in the troopers’ pockets. The Indians knew that the silver had value, but the paper money was a mystery to them. They only saved some of the new bills because they thought their children at home might like to play with them. White Bull estimated that the soldiers had used only half of their ammunition in the fight meaning that the warriors took the remaining cartridges. Likewise, the young warrior had shot twenty of his forty arrows in the fight, but many arrows were laying all over the battlefield, and he soon picked up enough of them to refill his quiver.

Ten Eyck’s Relief Column

Frances Grummond was very anxious about the safety of her husband and the other men in Fetterman’s command. After the column disappeared from sight, she found the “silence so intense as to be torture to all who watched for any sound however slight.” Only when the sounds of battle later reached them did the people in the fort have some sense of what was happening to Fetterman’s command. Mrs. Grummond finally heard a few shots which increased in rapidity, indicating that a “desperate fight was going on in the valley behind the ridge.” This was in the exact location where the Colonel had ordered Fetterman not to go. “Then followed a few quick volleys, then scattering shots, and then, dead silence.” She added, “Less than half an hour had passed, and the silence was dreadful.”

Shortly after Fetterman left the fort, Colonel Carrington realized that he had two units, the wood train and Fetterman’s command, which were engaging the enemy, but neither had a surgeon with them to care for the wounded. The garrison’s commander then ordered the doctor, C. M. Hines, to ride to the wood train and offer his services. Hines reported that Carrington told him, “If I found them [the wood train] safe [I was] to join the other command.” The doctor rode about three miles [five kilometers] and noticed that the wood train seemed to be under no immediate danger, so he turned in an attempt to reach Fetterman’s command.

Apparently, the doctor could hear the reports of gunfire, and he knew that these men were in danger. Even though Hines had four other men with him, he saw so many Indians when he rode to Lodge Trail Ridge that he knew he could not reach the men engaged in battle. The doctor admitted, “If I had obeyed my instructions I would have been killed.” There was no possibility of the doctor and his small party of reaching Fetterman, and Hines requested that a relief force be

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123 F. Carrington, My Army Life, 146.
sent out immediately to help the beleaguered command.\textsuperscript{124}

Colonel Carrington believed that the condition of the men in Fetterman’s command could be desperate, and he immediately sent Captain Tendor Ten Eyck with a company of forty men and two wagons with orders “to join Colonel Fetterman at all hazards.” Ten Eyck and his troopers marched out. “The men moved promptly and on the run, but within little more than half an hour from the first shot, and just as the supporting party reached the hill overlooking the scene of action, all firing ceased.” The Captain apparently saw the Indians in some kind of victory celebration, and he sent a mounted messenger back to the fort, reporting that they could see nothing of Fetterman’s command. Carrington added that Ten Eyck’s men could see “a body of Indians on the road below him [who] were challenging him to come down, while larger bodies [of warriors] were in all the valleys for several miles around.” Ten Eyck was wise not to engage the warriors in battle because he was badly outnumbered, and he also had clearly arrived too late to help Fetterman’s soldiers and change the outcome of the battle because the troopers were probably already dead.\textsuperscript{125}

Ten Eyck wrote in his diary for that day that he came within sight of the Indians about four miles (6.4 kilometers) from the fort. He estimated the number of warriors he saw at 1,500 to 2,000, and these adversaries were scattered over about 1 ½ miles (2.4 kilometers) of road. Ten Eyck’s small command was heavily outnumbered, and he immediately sent back to the fort for reinforcements, but he still continued to advance cautiously.\textsuperscript{126}

Even though the sounds of gun shots from the hills had stopped, Mrs. Grummond and others in the fort were hopeful that Captain Ten Eyck’s troopers would still find the men in Fetterman’s command alive. The fear that a disaster had befallen these soldiers was enhanced when Private Archibald Semple rode back to the fort with the first report of what had happened. He stated that the “valley was full of Indians, that several hundred were on the road below, and westward, yelling and challenging him [Ten Eyck] to come down to do battle, but that nothing could be seen of Fetterman.” Ten Eyck also requested that cannons be sent to assist him, but there were too few men available to move those heavy weapons.\textsuperscript{127}

When Captain Ten Eyck and his forty troopers approached the battlefield, the Indians pulled back, perhaps thinking that the two wagons with the soldiers were pulling cannons, and the warriors wanted nothing to do with such fearsome weapons. Ten Eyck and his men continued to advance “When we discovered the dead bodies of Col. Fetterman’s [men] lying naked and terribly mutilated.” Soon after Ten Eyck received more assistance form the fort to help him retrieve the bodies of the slain troopers. An additional “3 wagons, 1 ambulance, and 40 men having joined me

\textsuperscript{124}Hines to John, January 1, 1867 \textit{Indian Hostilities}, 15 and F. Carrington, \textit{My Army Life}, 145-6.


\textsuperscript{126}Ten Eyck “Diary” Dec. 21, 1866 in Special Collections, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona.

\textsuperscript{127}F. Carrington, \textit{My Army Life}, 147.
from the fort, I loaded them with the slain."\textsuperscript{128} The captain “rescued from the spot where the enemy had been nearest forty-nine bodies, including those of Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel Fetterman and Captain F. H. Brown.” After loading the bodies onto the two wagons, Ten Eyck and his men fell back slowly to the fort. The Indians followed them at a safe distance.\textsuperscript{129}

**Terror in the Fort**

The women in the fort were not given the full details of the disaster, but they soon understood what had happened that day. “The evening gun was fired at sunset as usual, but what of us women! Agonizing fear possessed me. The ladies clustered in Mrs. Wands’ cabin as night drew on, all speechless from absolute stagnation and terror.” Their worst fears were soon confirmed. “Then the crunching of wagon wheels startled us to our feet. The gates opened. Wagons were slowly driven within, bearing their dead but precious harvest from the field of blood and carrying forty-nine lifeless bodies to the hospital, with the heart-rending news almost tenderly whispered by the soldiers themselves, that ‘no more to come in,’ and that ‘probably not a man of Fetterman’s command survived.’”\textsuperscript{130}

Frances Grummond took some comfort in the routines of the fort which continued after the news of the disaster. She praised, “The faithful sentinels [who] went their rounds of exacting and dangerous duty, at every risk, and it was from them alone that our ears caught, half-hourly, the call of the hour, the number of the post, and the cheering words, ‘All’s well!’”\textsuperscript{131}

Despite these assurances, she still had many concerns, and “There was little repose, however, for any one that dreadful night.” Everyone had fears of what had happened and what might still take place. “All ears were expectant of a momentary alarm” in the case of attack, and there was “Subdued discussion of whether some of the missing ones might not have fallen into the hands of the savages as prisoner.” They feared that such captives might be tortured, which was “a worse fate than death itself.” These discussions “continued late into the night, as some of the bodies had not been discovered by the party returning from the battlefield, and yet it was somehow born in upon our minds that all were dead.”\textsuperscript{132}

The fear of the day gripped Mrs. Grummond, and she was unable to sleep the entire night. Finally the dawn came and the post had to be concerned over the duty of day. One of the pressing issues among the officers in the command was what to do about the bodies still remaining on the battlefield. Soon “came a Council of Officers, to meet the commanding officer as to a search for the bodies of the remaining dead.”\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{128}Ten Eyck’s “Diary” Dec. 21, 1866.


\textsuperscript{130}F. Carrington, *My Army Life*, 147-8.

\textsuperscript{131}Ibid., 150.

\textsuperscript{132}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{133}Ibid., 150-1.
Retrieving the Dead

The men in the fort were badly shaken by the annihilation of Fetterman’s command, and some of the officers did not want to return to the battlefield the day after the slaughter to retrieve the remaining bodies of the fallen. They argued that a small party would be in danger of annihilation, because the Indians were still celebrating their victory. Furthermore, if a large force left the stockade, the lives of everyone left behind would be in danger, since the Indians with their large force, could take advantage of the situation and overwhelm the fort. But Carrington announced his decision. “I will not let the Indians entertain the conviction that the dead cannot and will not be rescued. If we cannot rescue our dead, as the Indians always do at whatever risk, how can you send details out for any purpose, and the single fact would give them an idea of weakness here, and would only stimulate them to risk an assault.”

The call to assemble troops went out immediately, and picked men from each of the companies formed in front of the headquarters building for orders. The women in the fort could hear much of the discussion among the officers about retrieving the dead, but they had not been asked their opinion of the dangerous mission. Finally, the women were startled by rap on the door, and Colonel Carrington entered to tell his wife and Mrs. Grummond about his decision. Francis Grummond was laying down mulling over their precarious situation, while Mrs. Carrington was sitting near the window also deep in thought. The women sprang to their feet when the door opened, and the colonel walked to his wife to tell her about his decision to retrieve the dead. Mrs. Carrington was pale, but she showed her womanly fortitude. She placed her hands on her husband’s shoulders and replied, “Yes, it is our duty. God bless you! He will care for us. Go and rescue the dead, Henry.”

The Colonel tried to say something to Frances Grummond who no doubt had lost her husband in the battle. Turning to the bereaved women, he said, “Mrs. Grummond, I shall go in person, and will bring back to you the remains of your husband.” She answered calmly, “They are beyond all suffering now. You must not imperil other precious lives and make other woman as miserable as myself.” But Carrington believed that he must make the effort. He said a tender goodbye to his wife, and went outside to mount his horse. The bugle sounded “forward march,” and the men left with wish of “God speed” of everyone in the endangered garrison.

However before Colonel Carrington left, he took one final precaution for the women and children remaining in the fort because he did not want them to be captured in case of an Indian attack. He went into the magazine for the storage of gunpowder and other explosives where he set the timed fuses on the exploding cannon shells. Carrington also adjusted the open boxes of explosives so that a single match could explode everything. He left specific orders to the soldiers remaining in the fort. “If, in my absence, Indians in overwhelming numbers attack, put the women
and children in the magazine with supplies of water, bread, crackers and other supplies that seem best, and, in the event of a last desperate struggle, destroy all together, rather than have any captured alive." 138

Mrs. Carrington and Grummond gazed through the windows and watched the soldiers work around the magazine. It seemed odd to them how the men took boxes and barrels inside the building, but the women soon understood why the troopers were doing such work. Yet the women remained calm, and they realized that every precaution was made by the garrison to defend them.

Carrington advanced cautiously, and he kept a picket in the rear on a hill who could signal both the fort and his relief party in case of danger. 139 The soldiers reached the battlefield late on December 22 to retrieve the remaining bodies of the fallen and to examine the physical evidence found there. This effort would give them insights into what had happened to Fetterman’s command. The Colonel described the scene, “The road, on the little ridge where the final stand took place, was strewn with arrows, arrow-heads, scalping-poles, and broken shafts of spears. The arrows that were spent harmlessly [doing no damage], from all directions, show that the command was suddenly overwhelmed, surrounded, and cut off, while in retreat.” Sadly, they had to confirm the extent of the disaster. “Not an officer or man survived! A few bodies were found on the north end of the divide, over which the road runs, just beyond Lodge Trail Ridge.”

The men from the fort found the place where Fetterman’s cavalrymen had made their last stand. Carrington further observed, “Nearly all [the dead] were heaped near four rocks, at the point nearest the fort, these rocks, enclosing a space about six feet [two meters] square, having been the last refuge for defence. Here were also a few unexpended rounds of Spencer cartridge.” 140 The evidence indicated that the vast majority of troopers were killed by arrows. When Doctor Samuel M. Horton, the head surgeon at the fort, examined the bodies, he stated that only six of troopers died from gunshot wounds. 141 If Captain Fetterman and Lieutenant Brown had shot themselves, the Indians actually killed only four men with firearms. The warriors killed the remaining seventy-five with arrows, knives, or clubs.

The location of Lieutenant Grummond’s body gave the impression that he was killed trying to slow the Indians’ attack because he was found between the dead infantrymen and the cavalrymen. Apparently, neither of the two groups could have come to each other’s aid because they were too far apart. The party sent to bring in the remaining bodies were impressed with the evidence on the battlefield, and the “terrible massacre bore marks of great valor [by the soldiers], and has demonstrated the force and character of the foe; but no valor could have saved them.” The troopers believed that the dead soldiers inflicted heavy casualties on the warriors before they were overwhelmed. “Pools of blood on the road and sloping sides of the narrow divide showed

138 Ibid., 153-4.


140 Ibid., 17.

141 Ibid., 18.
where the Indians bled fatally, but their bodies were carried off. I counted sixty-five such pools in the space of an acre, and three within ten feet [three meters] of Lieutenant Grummond’s body. Eleven American [cavalry] horses and nine Indian ponies were on the road, or near the line of bodies; others, crippled were in the valleys.”

Carrington’s assumptions that the pools of blood on the battlefield meant heavy Indian casualties might have been little more than wishful thinking. The Colonel would have no way of knowing whose blood he found or how it got there. Certainly, some of the gore could have come from the Indians, but it is likely that the warriors would have tried to stop the bleeding or to place cloth or some kind of bandage over their wounds. More likely, the soldiers were unable to cover their lacerations as they fought desperately for their lives. Also the warriors were using arrows, which caused blood to flow freely from their victims, meaning that the soldiers were likely to bleed more than the Indians who were shot by army bullets. Carrington’s reference to wounded horses, seems to be the clue to understanding the source of the blood on the ground. The Colonel never gave a full counting of the injured animals, but the number was doubtlessly large. Being much larger than men, the horses bled more freely than humans. These mounts were also incapable of covering a wound with a cloth and would have more likely bled onto the ground.

The bodies of the fallen troopers had been stripped of their clothing and had been horribly mutilated. Carrington reported: “Eyes torn out and laid on the rocks. Noses cut off. Ears cut off. Chins hew off. Teeth chopped out. Joints of fingers cut off. Brains taken out and place on rocks, with members of the body. Entrails taken out and exposed. Hands cut off. Feet cut off. Arms taken out from the socket. Private parts severed, and indecently placed on the person. Eyes, ears, mouth, and arms penetrated with spear-heads, sticks, and arrows. Ribs slashed to separation, with knives; skulls severed in every form, from chin to crown. Muscles of calves, thighs, stomach, breast, back, arms, and cheek taken out. Punctures upon every sensitive part of the body, even to the soles of the feet and palms of the hand.” After presenting these ghastly descriptions, the Colonel admitted that he had not been thorough in his account stating, “All this does not approximate the whole truth.” Obviously, the reality was much worse than he had described.

Captain Ten Eyck gave a similar description of the dead. “They were all stripped stark naked, scalped, shot full of arrows and horribly mutilated otherwise, some with their skulls mashed in, throats cut of others, thighs ripped open, apparently with knives. Some with their ears cut off, some with they bowels hanging out, from being cut through the abdomen, and a few with their bodies charred from burning, and some with their noses cut off.” When the soldiers picked up the internal organs of their fallen friends which were often scattered on the ground, the men could not be sure they had returned the appropriate entrails to their proper owners.

Colonel Carrington later stated that the Indians mutilated their dead adversaries to punish them in the afterlife. The Native Peoples believed that they could continue to abuse their enemies

142Ibid., 17.

143Ibid., 26.

in the next life by destroying their bodies in this life. As the Colonel explained, “Persons, thus maimed are supposed to have lost the power of walking, running, climbing, and using weapons, in the spirit land; so that while the pious roam the happy hunting boundaries of Paradise, with no desire ungratified, the bad Indian and red man’s foes continue to exist, with ceaseless longings, yet deprived of the power to partake of bounties within sight and grasp.”

Later, Carrington also asked the Sioux why they filled the bodies of their enemies with arrows. The warriors did not often use an arrow already shot at an enemy believing that the shaft missed because the Great Spirit willed it. However when an Indian failed to get the scalp from a fallen enemy, he would often shoot arrows into the corpse to show that he still had power over his adversary. Therefore, the arrows shot into the body of an enemy was much like counting “coup,” and “the hundreds of arrows found in the bodies after the Fetterman Massacre showed that the whole force of the red man was employed to silence the brave men who fought with desperation against an overwhelming force.”

Only one animal from Fetterman’s command was still alive when the men came to retrieve the bodies of the soldiers. Captain Brown had ridden the horse “Calico” into battle. He had purchased the little pony in 1865, but it was a full grown animal in 1866. When Colonel Carrington retrieved the bodies of the fallen troopers, he saw the horse laying at the foot of the hill. One of Carrington’s last orders when removing to bodies was for a soldier to check on the animal. If it were still alive he was to “put it out of his misery with a bullet.” The order was carried out.

Late that night, the wagons returned from the battlefield and moved slowly to the hospital carrying the bodies of the remaining dead soldiers. The scene was gut wrenching for Francis Grummond. “Then our tears mingled, for the whole garrison was under arms, as we watched, unavoidably watched, the wagons moving slowly to the hospital bearing the remaining dead.” The men in the garrison treated their fallen comrades with great respect, and they brought their best uniforms to be used to clothe the bodies as decently as possible.

Colonel Carrington made a special visit to Mrs. Gummund to assure her that he had kept his promise to retrieve the body of her dead husband. He came to her room before the mournful procession of wagons had reached the hospital, “and taking from his breast [pocket] an envelope, handed it to me, and left before it was opened. I opened it with eager but trembling hands. It

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146 Carrington, “The Indian Question,” 22.

147 F. Carrington, My Army Life, 154.

148 Ibid., 154-5.

149 Ibid., 154-5.
contained a lock of my husband’s hair. He had redeemed his pledge!"

On the following day, December 23, began the “melancholy duty of preparing the dead [for burial] and digging graves.” This work went on all day. The following morning, Dec. 24, the temperature was 28 degrees below zero (-33.3 centigrade) at 10 AM. The ground was frozen, so the burial details dug graves with great difficulty, and “the cold was so intense that the men worked in fifteen-minute reliefs, and a guard was constantly on the alert lest Indians should interrupt their service.” The work was so slow that it took four days to bury the dead.

The carpenters made coffins for the dead, and the noise grated on the nerves of some of the people in the fort who were thinking about the burial of friends and family members. As Frances Grummond commented, “I knew that my husband’s coffin was being made, and the sound of hammers and the grating of saws was torture to my sensitive nerves.” The soldiers took great care that they would record the location of the graves properly. “The burial of the dead was accomplished, calmly, systematically, and safely, each case being number and full data, recorded for any future re-burial, if desired by the Government or friends of the dead.”

A Desperate Messenger: Portugee Phillips

When the news of the destruction of Fetterman’s command reached Fort Phil Kearny on the evening of December 21, the soldiers and civilians at the post were very fearful of an Indian attack, believing they could be overwhelmed and annihilated as well. In their terror, many people went from underestimating the fighting ability of the Indians to overstating their resources and capabilities. Such concerns were understandable, but they were largely exaggerated.

Colonel Carrington knew he had lost many of his soldiers in the Fetterman disaster, but he still had enough manpower in the fort to present a serious obstacle to any possible Indian attack. Doctor Hines estimated that the post had little more than four hundred men remaining to defend the fort from thousands of warriors. Yet according to the records of the post, more manpower was available for defense. This included 8 officers, 320 enlisted men, 119 male civilian employees and at least 50 other men in the fortress for a total of more than 497 defenders.

Carrington’s fears of being overwhelmed were largely unjustified, and the Colonel did not realize the nature of warfare among the plains Indians. These Native Peoples rarely attacked forts, and laying sieges to fortified areas was virtually unknown. In addition, the warriors soon dispersed

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150Ibid., 155.


152F. Carrington, My Army Life, 155.

153Carrington, Absaraka, 212 and F. Carrington, My Army Life, 155.

154Hines to John January 1, 1867 in Indian Hostilities, 15 and Carrington to Fort Laramie, December 21, 1866, in Indian Hostilities, 26.

to hunt for game to make sure they and their families had sufficient food for the winter.

However, the Colonel clearly believed that his command was potentially in great danger, and he wrote an immediate plea to Fort Laramie for aid because that post had enough manpower to send assistance. Carrington’s dispatch was hastily written, and it was little more than a series of short sentences. “Do send me reinforcements forthwith... I need prompt reinforcements and improved arms. Every officer of the battalion should join it today. I have every teamster on duty, and at best only one hundred and nineteen left at Post. I hardly need urge this matter it speaks for itself. Give me at least two companies of cavalry forthwith, well armed or four companies of infantry exclusive of what I need... Promptness will save the line, but our killed show that any remissness will result in mutilation and butcher beyond precedent... Promptness is the great thing. Give me officers and men. Only the new Spencer arms should be sent. The Indians are desperate and they save none.”

The message was a frantic plea, and some very brave man would have to deliver it in hostile territory, under trying weather conditions, and over a long distance. Fort Laramie was 235 miles (380 kilometers) from Fort Phil Kearny. But fortunately for the courier, he would only have to get to the nearest telegraph office, Horseshoe Station in the North Platte Valley, about 190 miles (306 kilometers) away. That station could then send a telegraph message to the commander of Fort Laramie. Carrington asked for volunteers, and John “Portugee” Phillips and Daniel Dixon stepped forward. No doubt their willingness to risk their lives was enhanced by the fact that each would be paid the handsome sum of $300 for their efforts. Both of these men were civilians, and Phillips was Portuguese having been born in the Azore Islands. Apparently, he was just spending the winter at the fort, but he was a courageous man willing to take the opportunity to earn some cash and perhaps save lives. For some reason, he had a special liking for Mrs. Grummond even though they had never formally met, and she had never even noticed him.

There was a sense of apprehension and gloom among the women in the fort about their desperate situation. They believed that only quick reinforcements from Fort Laramie could save them, and they wondered which brave man would attempt to carry the message requesting aid. Frances Grummond was waiting in the home of Mrs. Carrington, when “A knock at my door brought me to my feet.” Private Semple announced that a man was waiting to speak with Mrs. Grummond. “There I was met by an entire stranger, John Phillips by name, a miner and frontiersman, in the employ of the quartermaster, clad in the dress of a scout, who had something to communicate.” The man was clearly impressed by the gravity of their circumstances, and he wanted to comfort Mrs. Grummond perhaps regarding her as an unfortunate woman who had just lost her husband. With tears in his eyes, he politely shook her hand and said, “I am going to Laramie for help, with dispatches, as special messenger, if it costs me my life. I am going for your sake!” In obvious affection for her, he left her a memento, “Here is my wolf robe. I brought it for you to keep and remember me by it if you never see me again.”

156 Carrington to Fort Laramie Dec 21, 1866 in *Indian Hostilities*, 26.


158 F. Carrington, *My Army Life*, 149.
Phillips needed the best horse available to take him on his mission, and he chose a strong animal named “Dandy” a “fine thoroughbred” who was owned by Colonel Carrington. The messenger took a Spencer rifle and one hundred rounds of ammunition. He and Dixon took food for their horses but only some crackers for themselves. They left the evening of December 21 in a swirling snowstorm. Frances Grummond described the severe weather when the messengers left the fort. “Nature herself seemed shocked by the awful tragedy of the day, for that very night the weather became unparalleled in its severity, almost too extreme for man or beast.”

The couriers pushed their mounts and arrived at Fort Reno early on December 23. They kept going and reached Horseshoe Station about 10 AM on December 25, Christmas morning. The telegrapher, John Friend, sent the dispatches electronically by Morse code, but Phillips could not be sure about their accuracy, and he decided to carry the messages to Fort Laramie personally. He then left Dixon at the station and carried the messages an additional forty miles (64 kilometers) to the post where he arrived at 11 PM that same evening. At that time, the temperature was twenty-five degrees below zero (-32 degrees centigrade), and there was 10 to 15 inches (25 to 38 centimeters) of snow on the ground. Phillips was so exhausted when he arrived that he could barely speak, and his magnificent horse was so spent that it died the next day.

The courier handed his message to Colonel Palmer who was then attending a Christmas party with his subordinate officers. The news of the distress of the garrison at Fort Kearny ended the festive atmosphere of the celebration, and the men began to prepare a relief column. Despite the rapid preparations, Palmer did not send aid immediately. In fact, he complained two days later that a “blinding snow storm” kept the expedition from leaving.

A Winter of Suffering

While Colonel Palmer delayed his departure, the people at Fort Kearny lived in dread and anxiety, and the soldiers stayed at their designated positions night and day. “Lights burned in all the quarters. Every man had his designated loop-hole, or other position.” The sergeants had the assignment to be constantly on duty in each of the buildings of the fort, so the soldiers would be ready in an instant in case of an alarm. Colonel Carrington set the example of being constantly ready for action, and he “did not remove his clothing for sleep for more than a week and was constantly going ‘the grand rounds’ to see that every man was on the alert.”

Many in the fort lived in fear that John Phillips had failed in his attempt to spread the alarm and to bring aid from Fort Laramie, believing that only these reinforcements could save their lives. The intense fear of a possible Indian attack even led Frances Grummond to have nightmares. “During the nights I would dream of Indians, of being captured and carried away by Red Cloud

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159 McDermott, 1: 243.
160 F. Carrington, My Army Life, 150.
161 McDermott, 1: 243-5.
162 McDermott, 1: 245-6.
163 F. Carrington, My Army Life, 156.
himself while frantically screaming for help.” Luckily for anyone having a bad dream, she would shake herself awake and realize she was in no real danger. In her case, she would involuntarily jump from her bed and soon take comfort in the assurance from the sentry who called out regularly, “All’s well.”

The days were indeed wearisome and long. The weather also proved to be challenging, which lowered moods. The snowstorms constantly brought cold temperatures and freezing winds. The snow drifted to such depths that men could walk over the fort’s eight-foot (2.4 meters) walls in some places, and a trench ten feet (3 meters) wide had to be constantly dug out when it filled up with snow. But it was still necessary to shovel the snow to keep the Indians from being able to get into the fort easily, and the men were constantly at work to prevent this. No one left the fort except parties who went outside to bring in wood.

The preparations for defense gave many people in the fort some comfort, and almost everyone seemed to be able to control their anxiety with the exception of Dennis, Margaret Carrington’s African American servant, who became almost deranged by fear. He became so erratic that he “seemed to be actually possessed by a demon.” Dennis appeared to be trying to drive some spirit out of him or to relieve tension, and “He would strike his head with all possible force against the boards of the partition which separated the kitchen from my room, until they trembled with the shock.” He then continued his mania “by butting his head against the stove-pipe and even the stove itself, like a veritable mad-man.” Colonel Carrington finally frightened the Dennis back to his senses when the Colonel entered the room and pointed the muzzle of a cocked revolver at the head of the seemingly deranged man. At that point, “Equilibrium was restored and Dennis became content to live a while longer and discharge the normal functions of his usual employment.” But many of the people in the fort felt great fear, and they were somewhat sympathetic to Dennis and his “frantic dread of the surrounding Indians.”

The anxiety of many in the fort was greatly relieved when reinforcements finally arrived from Fort Laramie. After a series of delays, three companies advanced to Fort Reno and then to Fort Kearny arriving on January 16, 1867. This was twenty-six days after the urgent message had been sent and twenty-two days after it was received. Luckily, for the civilians and garrison at Fort Kearny, there was practically no Indian activity in the area during the entire winter, and the support of the relief column proved to be unnecessary for defense, but it was good for morale.

As 1867 began the soldiers and civilians at Fort Phil Kearny were virtual prisoners of the post. They were also almost paralyze by fear and nearly frozen for the lack of sufficient wood for fuel. The men had to go nearly seven miles (eleven kilometers) round trip every day to get the wood they needed. There was insufficient housing, and many of officers and men had to live in tents, which left them badly frozen in the severe winter weather. The temperature at times plunged

164 Ibid., 158.

165 Carrington, Absaraka, 213 and F. Carrington, My Army Life, 158-9

166 F. Carrington, My Army Life, 159.

167 McDermott, 1: 245-6.
to 40 degrees below zero (-40 Celsius), and the wind chill factor made the weather feel much colder.

Additionally, they only had one blanket to keep them warm in the night and no overcoats to help in the daytime. The diet was very poor often consisting of a small loaf of bread and rotten bacon, and many men became half starved from lack of sustenance. In addition many men began to suffer from scurvy due to a lack of fruits and vegetables. That winter the garrison at nearby Fort Reno suffered terribly as well. Of the two hundred men stationed there only sixty were actually well, and the rest suffered from scurvy. According to one observer, George Dandy, scurvy struck one third of the command at Fort Phil Kearny and killed many of them. “I have heard of no parallel since my service in the army to the suffering endured by the garrison of this post.”

The relief party that came from Fort Laramie suffered as well. Dozens of men had frostbite to the point that part of their fingers, ears, and feet that amputation became a necessity. When the fodder for their mounts had been consumed, the horses and mules began to eat the manes and tails off other animals. When the men arrived at Fort Phil Kearny they were met with hearty cheers from the garrison, but the new troopers brought few provisions with them. In fact, many men soon realized that the relief party became an additional burden to house and feed them when housing and supplies were already severely limited. 

While the army suffered losses from hunger, malnutrition, and the cold during the winter of 1866 to 1867, the number of Indians remained strong. Using information based on reports from the two army scouts, Mitch Boyer and Jim Bridger, Captain Kinney made an estimate of the number of Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho lodges in the area in February 1867. By his appraisal, the Sioux lodges numbered 2,010, the Cheyenne 200, and the Arapaho 60 for a total of 2,270 lodges. If accurate, this meant that the Indians could probably again deploy about 3,000 warriors in combat, and the Native Peoples were still willing to fight for their lands.

Shortly after the Fetterman Massacre, Colonel Carrington was relieved of command over Fort Phil Kearny. The timing of his removal from the post gave the impression that he had been relieved because of his mishandling of the garrison. This was not the case, because the decision to remove him had been made before the news of the Fetterman disaster was well known among his military superiors. Even though Carrington was later exonerated by an army court of inquiry, his reputation was still ruined. The Colonel tried to justify his actions for the remainder of his life. His wives also helped in the effort. Margaret Carrington, his first wife, published the book *Absaraka: Home of the Crows* in 1868 in which she supported her husband’s actions. After Margaret died in 1870, Carrington married Lieutenant Gunmond’s widow, Francis Gunmond in 1871. Francis also published a book on her experiences at Fort Kearny, *My Army Life and the Fort Phil Kearny Massacre* in 1910 which also showed her husband in a favorable light.

**The Hayfield Fight: War Resumes in 1867**

Between July 21 and December 21, 1866, the Indian warriors had killed 5 officers and 91
men of the enlisted ranks. In addition, 58 citizens had also been killed and 20 wounded. Nearly 800 oxen, cows, mules, and horses had been stolen. The Sioux and Cheyenne controlled transportation over the Bozeman Trail which had become closed to immigrants. The following year, the army would attempt to strike back and regain control over the areas that were lost. These proved to be very challenging goals.

Many whites were angered by the Fetterman Massacre and many other Indian raids, and there were calls for retaliation against the Native Peoples. At a mass meeting in one of the "little towns" in the Colorado Territory, "a fund of $5,000 was subscribed for the purpose of buying Indian scalps, and $25 each is to be paid for scalps with the ears on." However, the army did not mount any large expeditions against them in 1867, and the government left the initiative to the warriors who continued the war. Indian raids first struck the area of Fort Reno, Fort Phil Kearny, and Fort C. F. Smith in May and June 1867. These attacks increased in frequency throughout the remainder of the spring and into the summer.

The Sioux and Cheyenne held a sun dance to decide on a strategy to be used against the whites. This dance took place on the Rosebud River in July 1867, and it included a large number of warriors. The Indian groups agreed to attack the army outposts with the intention of wiping them out, but the warriors were divided on the precise targets to be hit. The Northern Cheyennes, with large contingents of Sioux, left to attack Fort C. F. Smith, while the remaining Sioux, over one thousand strong, still under the leadership of Red Cloud, marched on Fort Phil Kearny. The Cheyennes and their Sioux allies reached their target at Fort Smith first and attacked on August 1, 1867.

The Soldiers Prepare Defenses

The estimates on the number of Cheyennes and Sioux who marched on Fort Smith vary widely, but a reasonable appraisal would probably fall around 800 to 1,500 men. The vast majority of these warriors still wielded bows and arrows, and firearms were still relatively rare among them. There were 293 men in the garrison at Fort Smith, so they were badly outnumbered. The warriors strategy was sound, and they believed that they should attack the men working in the hayfield before they advanced on the fort. The men working at the hayfield were a smaller target that should be easy to destroy. The hayfield was about two and a half miles (4 kilometers) from the fort, where civilian workers harvested grass and straw, so the army's horses and mules would have enough fodder in the winterweather. The government contract was for three hundred tons of straw for $17 a ton. The commander of the fort, Colonel Luther P. Bradley, routinely sent a detachment of soldiers to protect the civilians in their work at the hayfield.

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171 McDermott, 1: 277 and 2: 327.
173 McDermott, 2: 380-1.
174 Ibid., 381.
175 Ibid., 382.
The soldiers were very fortunate because they had just been issued the modified Springfield 1866 breech-loading rifle, which was much superior to the old muzzle-loading weapons wielded by the infantry with Fetterman’s command. The new Springfield rifles used metal cartridges, so the men did not have to pour powder down the barrel to load them. The troopers could fire the weapon, eject the spent bullet metal casing by the use of a trap door, and then put a new round into the breech of the rifle. This meant that their rate of fire was much improved, and the soldiers could fire 8 to 10 rounds per minute. Most importantly, the men did not have to expose themselves to enemy fire by standing to wield their weapon, and they could shoot while laying down which was much safer.

On July 31, the soldiers received reports from the friendly Crow Indians that many enemy Sioux warriors were nearby. F. G. Burnett, a civilian employee with the soldiers, reported that the Crows came to them often and gave them “outlandish reports” on the numbers of their adversaries. Many of the whites thought the Crows were exaggerating enemy numbers just to frighten them. They soon learned that the reports were quite accurate. On July 31, “They told us the hostiles were coming to attack the fort the next day, and that they had seen more warriors than they could count. It was the intention of the allied tribes, so the Crows said, to destroy all the forts, . . . and drive the white men out of their country. We merely laughed at their fears.” The civilian workers and soldiers saw small bands of warriors daily, and they were sure they had no reason to be frightened.176

Second Lieutenant Sigismund Sternberg commanded the position. Sternberg was from Germany, and he was an experienced soldier, having served in both the Prussian and Union Armies. Under his direction, the men at the hayfield prepared their position well. The soldiers and civilian workers routinely stayed at the hayfield overnight, so they would not have to spend time going back and forth to the fort unnecessarily, and they built a simple stockade for defense. It was one hundred feet long and one hundred feet wide (30 by 30 meters). Mules had dragged logs that were as wide as two feet (.6 meters) for the lowest level of the corral. Smaller logs were placed on top of them. The men also set upright posts that had willows woven around them. They were so thickly interlaced that it was impossible to see through them. The defenders also dug rifle pits outside the enclosure from which they could lay down fire on an advancing foe. The livestock was kept in the stockade at night, so they would not wander off or be taken by the Indians.177

The men also cut down the grass from around the defensive position to make sure they had a clear field of fire in which they could see and shoot any targets that were nearby. Additionally, the soldiers spent an entire day “stepping off the various distances to the benches and the probable points of attack.”178 This was a very wise precaution because the troopers would then be able to aim their rifles better at their adversaries when they were aware of the distances involved. The

176Burnett in Hebard and Brininstool, Bozeman Trail, 2: 160.

177Burnett in Hebard and Brininstool, 161-3; McDermott, 2: 383, and James D. Lockwood, Life and Adventures of a Drummer Boy or, Seven Years a Soldier (Albany, Skinner, 1893), 182-3.

178Robert Beebe David, Finn Burnett: Frontiersman (Glendale: Clark, 1937), 163.
position was also near the War Man Creek, so water would be obtained when needed. As an additional precaution, the soldiers loosened the nails holding the lids of the ammunition boxes, so the bullets could be retrieved easily.\textsuperscript{179}

On the morning of August 1, 1867 the post was manned by twenty-three soldiers and twelve civilians. The troopers were well armed with the new Springfield rifles, but the civilians also had excellent weapons including Henry, Spencer, and Winchester lever-action rifles which could fire very rapidly. Each man also had a Colt revolver which could shoot six times before it had to be reloaded. Several of the men also had double-barreled shotguns, which could be highly effective at short range.\textsuperscript{180} The civilians had another advantage because many of them were experienced soldiers having fought in the Civil War. Approximately, three million men had fought in the Civil War which was roughly fifty percent of the total male population of the United States who were of military age. Only two years after the end of that conflict, many veteran soldiers were to be found almost everywhere in the country including at army posts in the West.

\textbf{The Warriors Attack}

That morning, Private Charles Bradley was stationed away from the stockade to be in a position to warn the others in case of an attack. Near 11 AM, he saw hundreds of Indians approaching and immediately fired his rifle and came riding to the post to warn the others. One of the men shouted, “For heaven’s sake, look at the Indians coming up the valley.” It appeared that, “The entire lower valley was a solid mass of advancing warriors.” The warriors came in line of battle to strike the stockade with simultaneous force. When the Indians came close they staged a dash on the white men’s position. “They began a great screeching and whooping. Hands were upflung, holding aloft war-clubs and tomahawks which their gestures promised to stain with the blood of white men that day. War-bonnets waved from hundreds of heads, and feathers streamed form horses’ mains.”\textsuperscript{181}

The white men immediately grabbed their weapons and ran to the corral to defend themselves. The warriors rode forward and seemed to be on the verge of storming the stockade, but once they had drawn fire from the defenders, they turned back. Apparently, the Indians believed that the whites were wielding mizzle-loading rifles that had to be reloaded slowly. This potentially gave the warriors a chance to rush them before the soldiers could reload, but the new rifles allowed the defenders to continue firing much to the surprise of the Indians who drew back. The fire from the soldiers and civilians was “as steady and continuous as the rumbling of mill, or the hum of machinery. The soldiers were delighted. The Indians, surprised and dumbfounded, scattered in all directions.”\textsuperscript{182} James Lockwood fired his rifle so rapidly during the battle that he feared that the weapon could cause the metal cartidges in it to explode. Luckily he was near the stream, and he

\textsuperscript{179}Burnett in Hebard and Brininstool, 161-3; McDermott, 2: 383, and Lockwood, \textit{Life and Adventures}, 182-3.

\textsuperscript{180}McDermott, 2: 386-7.

\textsuperscript{181}David, \textit{Finn Burnett}, 168.

\textsuperscript{182}Lockwood, 186-7.
“frequently dipped . . . [my] gun into the water to cool its heated breech block.”

Rather than look to the safety of his men, Lieutenant Sternberg unwisely called to the soldiers, “Man the rifle pits,” so the troopers would take up positions outside the stockade. Al Colvin was one of the civilian employees at the post, but he was an experienced soldier having been an officer in the Union Army during the Civil War, and the thought the order was foolish. He called to Sternberg, “Lieutenant, you are crazy.” The officer called back, “Who is commanding this place?” Colvin berated the commander, “A man who does not know anything about Indian fighting,” and called to the men to come into the stockade, and lie down to fire.

Sternberg also ordered his men to “Stand up, men, fight like soldiers.” He also admonished the defenders to stand and “fight like men,” apparently forgetting that the new Springfield rifles allowed the men to fire from a prone position. Finn Burnett was a civilian, but he was also an experienced soldier having fought with the Confederacy during the Civil War. He saw that Sternberg was risking his life needlessly, and he called “No! No! Lieutenant. Lie down, don’t expose yourself like that.” Then, a bullet hit Sternberg in the head, and he fell. Finn Burnett crawled to him and saw that the bullet had entered the dying man’s head above the right eye, crushing his skull. A soldier, Thomas Navin, was also shot and killed at the same time because he had stood up as ordered.

Al Colvin takes Command

Sergeant James Norton was second in command of the soldiers, but he had also foolishly stood with the Lieutenant and had been shot through the shoulder at the same time. Even though he was still alive, he was still in no shape to take control of the men. The soldiers were frightened and confused at the loss of their commander and by the fear of being surrounded and greatly outnumbered. The defenders needed effective leadership immediately, and Don A. “Al” Colvin filled the role. He took control of the situation, and he ordered the men to lie down on the ground, quit whining from fear, and fight the enemy. Colvin was a likeable man and was a “jolly, good-natured fellow, with a joke ready for every event,” but he was also a very good leader who was “cool” and “absolutely fearless.”

Colvin also earned praise for his marksmanship during the battle when he wielded a Henry rifle which allowed him to keep up a heavy rate of fire. Finn Burnett, an eyewitness, stated, “I don’t believe there is another man living, or that ever lived, who has killed as many Indians in a day as Colvin did on the occasion of the hayfield fight.” Burnett also believed that the former Union Captain shot one thousand rounds against the Indians that day.

The man who took command was a realist, and he tried to inspire his men to fight well by

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183 Lockwood, 187.
185 David, *Finn Burnett*, 170 and Burnett in Hebard and Brininstool, 162-3.
186 David, *Finn Burnett*, 173 and Burnett in Hebard and Brininstool, 165.
187 Burnett in Hebard and Brininstool, 165.
telling them what was a stake in the battle. “The probabilities are,” he stated, “that we will never
get out of here alive, but let’s make these Indians remember this day as long as there is a Sioux
alive.” 188 Colvin added instructions for fighting, “Keep down out of sight. Save your ammunition;
don’t waste a shot. Fight to the last and save the last shot for yourself. . . . None of us must be
taken alive to be hacked and tortured by these devils.” 189 His logic was that their situation was
hopeless, and surrender was impossible, so the men should fight as hard as possible.

Al Colvin’s brother, Selick “Zeke” Colvin, was also a former officer in the Civil War. Consistent with many American families during that conflict, the Colvins had divided loyalties. While Al served for the Union, Zeke fought for the Confederacy. Zeke was given credit for killing the first warrior in the battle. Early in the fight, a warrior came riding toward the barricade with a torch obviously with the intent of starting the stockade on fire. Colvin shot the warrior’s horse, and the Indian was so close to the corral that he almost fell against it. The animal nearly pinned his rider beneath it, but the warrior crawled away and started to run, when “Colvin brought him down with another quick shot.” 190

James Norton’s wound in the shoulder caused him great pain, and the others took the
sergeant to a tent to keep him out of the hot sun, but he returned to his position at the barricade
when the Indians pressed their attack. Other men kept his two revolvers loaded, and he continued
to fire the weapons when his assistance in battle was needed. The civilian, J. G. Hollister had a
double-barreled shotgun, and he crawled to Finn Burnett to ask the more experienced man how to
load the weapon. A bullet then smashed through the “bark of one of the fence posts, filling Finn’s
eyes with splinters,” but the ball also continued and “hit Hollister in the stomach.” 191 The man had
been shot through the bowels, and he suffered terribly. He was in such pain that he begged Al
Colvin to kill him. With great reluctance, Colvin said he would kill him if it became necessary to do
so. Al and Zeke Colvin pledged to each other that they would not be taken alive. Rather, they
would kill each other, so that could not happen. 192

The Indians changed tactics and tried to burn out their adversaries. Several times the
warriors advanced shooting burning arrows into the woven willows a the top of the stockade.
While the willows were dry enough to burn, the defenders put out the fires each time. The next
ttempt to burn out the soldiers and civilians came when the Indians set the grass on fire. At one
time, they set the grass ablaze on three sides of the walls of the barricade. As the witness, James D.
Lockwood described, “The fire came in rolling in billows, like the waves of the ocean, the Indians
whooping behind it.” The whites feared that the fire would engulf the stockade. Then the blaze
stopped twenty feet (6 meters) away as though by a miracle. The flames arose to a “perpendicular

188David, Finn Burnett, 173.
189McDermott, 2: 391.
190Burnett in Hebard and Brininstool, 165-6.
191David, Finn Burnett, 174-5.
192McDermott, 2: 390.
height of at least forty feet [12 meters], made one or two undulating movements, and were extinguished with a spanking slap.” The wind had changed directions abruptly which “providentially saved the encampment.” 193

While most of the men fought with strength and courage, some of the whites were unable to come up to the challenge in the fear of battle. Among them was Robert Wheeling, a civilian teamster, who was known as a bragger and a “big bully of whom we were all afraid.” Consistent with many bullies, Wheeling was actually a coward who failed in the test of battle. Even though, he was well armed with a Spencer rifle and plenty of ammunition, he hardly fired a shot all day. When the battle started, he hid from the action, and he finally crawled into a hole that the dogs had dug the day before. “There he was lying, crying like a baby.” He was also praying, talking about his mother, and throwing up. He finally became so annoying that Zeke Colvin took the frightened man’s gun away, and threatened to kill him to put him out of his misery. Wheeling finally became so quiet that some of the men wondered if he were dead. Another trooper, Private Charles Bradley, never fired a shot in the battle, but he continually prayed, crossed himself and talked about the Virgin Mary. 194

The warriors stopped attempting to overwhelm the whites by charging on horseback. They soon showed more caution, and they then “encircled the corral and poured upon it a raking fire.” It seemed that “every bank and boulder, every thicket and bush, held its deadly menage, and it became absolute suicide for a defender to raise his head.” 195 Finn Burnett told about Indians who crept close to the stockade. Before the battle, the camp cook had laid out cups and plates for breakfast. In the confusion of battle, no one thought about them until Burnett noticed that an Indian had crept to the stockade through a thicket of willows and was using a coup stick to snag the cups by their handles. This was an unusual means of counting coup, but the warrior was clearly demonstrating his skill and courage. Finally, Albert Stevenson, another civilian, directed Burnett’s attention to the Indian souvenir hunter. When the warrior exposed his arm to steal another cup, Burnett fired, and his “shot had almost cut the cup-fisherman in two, and the thicket looked like a slaughterhouse.” 196

Another warrior was able to sneak into the camp, and he “had actually crawled up to the wagon-box containing the provisions of the party.” The adventuresome Indian took a pan from the wagon and filled it full of molasses during the battle. One of the wagon drivers saw the warrior and shot him. As was their custom, the Indians took away the bodies of their fallen men whenever possible, but the corpse of the warrior killed while stealing molasses remained in the camp after the battle. 197

193Lockwood, 187-8 and Burnett in Hebard and Brininstool, 166.

194David, Finn Burnett, 181-2; Burnett in Hebard and Brininstool, 166; and McDermott, 2: 391-2.

195David, Finn Burnett, 179.

196Ibid., 180-1.

197Lockwood, 188.
The day was hot, and the battle raged for hours. The defenders finally ran out of water, and the wounded men were begging for something to drink. Al Colvin then asked for volunteers to run to the stream and bring back water. Some of the men grabbed pots, pans, and anything that could rapidly be filled with water. They crawled out from under the wagon at the gate of the compound and made a mad dash for the stream while the remainder of the camp provided cover by laying down a heavy rate of fire to protect them. Apparently, the Indians were caught off guard by this unforeseen and rapid movement, and the warriors did little to stop the men. Soon the courageous whites returned with the much-needed water.198

Luckily for the defenders, Albert Howard had learned enough of the Sioux language to understand what they were saying and to insult them. Al Corvin ordered Howard to taunt their adversaries. “Come on in and bring your squaws,” Howard shouted to the Indians, “You cannot fight.” The warriors often discussed their next moves close enough to the camp that their conversation could be heard by the men inside. Howard would listen intently to what the Indians were saying, and the white interpreter would then tell his fellow defenders what attacks and maneuvers their adversaries were planning, so they would be ready.199

Relief from Fort Smith

The battle at the hayfield lasted for hours, and the din of battle could be clearly heard from Fort C. F. Smith. In addition, the smoke from the grass fires was also visible in the sky. At the outset of the battle, Captain Edward L. Hartz and his company of soldiers were gathering wood, but they had been near enough to the barricade under siege at the hayfield that they could see the early attacks made by the Indians. These men rode directly to the fort where they reported to the commander, Colonel Luther P. Bradley, but he organized no relief party. In fact when he heard the news, he closed the gates of the fort to keep anyone from getting in or out.200

As the battle raged, the men in the stockade kept waiting for the help from Fort Smith that never arrived, which was a complete mystery to the defenders desperately fighting for their lives. Many men came to Al Colvin throughout the day suggesting that a messenger be sent to ask Colonel Bradley for reinforcements and some badly needed support. Colvin finally realized that someone had to report to the fort, or no help would come at all. He realized that the courier would have to ride past the Indians, which would be a very dangerous assignment. Two men stepped forward and drew straws to see who would risk his life to carry the message. James Brogen drew the short straw, but he then lost his courage, so Private Charles Bradley, who had been begging Colvin all day to make the trip, said he would go.201

Private Bradley asked Colvin what message he should carry to Colonel Bradley. The leader

198McDermott, 2: 392 and David, Finn Burnett, 183.

199McDermott, 2: 392. Al Corvin interview in Camp Papers at Brigham Young University Special Collections Provo, Utah.

200David, Finn Burnett, 183.

201McDermott, 397; Al Colvin “Interview,” Feb. 20, 1914 Camp Papers, BYU; and David, Finn Burnett, 189.
of the men at the barricade stated that the courier should tell the commander at Fort Smith that the
lieutenant was dead, and the men in the stockade were in desperate straights. However, they could
probably survive with the help of reinforcements. Colvin then realized he should also send a written
message with the courier for additional emphasis. He took a page from a small notebook, but he
had no writing implement. He then took a .44 cartridge used in his Henry rifle, and he sharpened
the lead of the bullet. He used the pointed instrument for a pencil. He started by saying, “We have
ten three dead and five wounded.” Then overcome by anger, he wrote as an accusation as well as a call
for aid, “We will be unable to defend the corral after dark; if you are a man send us relief, if you are
a Devil Go to Hell where you ought to be.”

Almost all the horses and mules within the stockade had been wounded, so Private Bradley
took one of the animals that was in the best shape and looked liked it could run fast. Seven men
accompanied the Private to a nearby ravine, but they left him there, and after that, he was on his
own. Some of the civilians in the barricade watched Bradley’s ride cheering as though it were an
athletic event. The Private gave Finn Burnett the impression that he knew little about riding a
horse, and the courier soon fell off his mount, but he also got back on. The rider’s lack of skill
cau sed Burnett to comment, “There is a divine providence which seems to undertake the special
care of fools and innocents, and in this case the fact was most apparent.” Perhaps Burnett was
unkind and denigrated Bradley skills unnecessarily because another eyewitness, James Lockwood,
assessed the messenger’s ability to ride differently. Lockwood stated that the courier was “an
excellent horseman.”

As Bradley rode away, a group of about thirty warriors on horseback soon arrived, and the
chase was on. One Indian got so close to the messenger that he struck him on the back with his
bow. Luckily for Bradley, the warrior was more interested in counting coup than in killing him.
The Indians pursued the courier all the way to Fort Smith when the hapless messenger fell off his
horse about one hundred yards (90 meters) from the post. The men at the fort kept up a heavy fire
on the pursuing Indians, but the soldiers were forbidden to come out and help him. Colonel Bradley
had ordered the gates of the fort closed earlier in the day, and he still refused to let the men open
gates to rescue the Private. In defiance of orders, some men jumped over the walls of the fortress,
rann out, and saved Bradley’s life.

The Private’s arrival at Fort Smith with his message from the battle at the hayfield finally
spurred Colonel Bradley into action. He immediately sent two companies under the command of
Captain Thomas Burrowes and Lieutenant Reuben F. Fenton. These companies comprised about
eighty men, and they brought a mountain howitzer with them. When these soldiers approached the
camp, the officers sent out skirmishers to engage the Indians. Likely by that late hour in the battle,
the warriors were nearly fought out, and all their attacks on the barricade had failed. After the

202 David, Finn Burnett, 189 and Colvin as cited in McDermott, 2: 398

203 David, Finn Burnett, 190 and Lockwood, 189.

204 David, Finn Burnett, 190; Don A. Colvin Interview Feb. 20, 1914; Edward Haloran
Interview; and Alvin C. Leighton Statement in Camp Papers BYU. As cited in McDermott, 2:
398.
howitzer went into action and a few shots had been fired from the cannon, the Indians pulled back. Fenton’s men advanced to skirmish with several hundred warriors at a distance, but the cannon shots kept the warriors at far away, and they eventually scattered. The battle was over. 

**Assessing the Damage**

Since the danger had past, the defenders were able to look around and see the damage the Indians inflicted. There had been twenty mules in the corral at the barricade. Two of them had been killed and seventeen had been wounded. Most of the animals had been hit by arrows and some of them had as many as nine shafts protruding from their bodies. Al Colven said that they looked much like porcupines. The warriors had also killed the two dogs owned by William Hains. The young man cried when he saw the bodies of his beloved animals.

The logs and wagon used for defense at the stockade had been shot to pieces, and in places it was hard to place a hand between the bullet holes. According to a witness, “The wagon boxes along the west side of the corral had been riddled to splinters, and the soldiers’ tents were in ribbons. Armfuls of arrows were scattered about the enclosure, and the ground was covered with cartridge shells around the little dug-out positions that the men had defended throughout the day.” There was evidence that the Indians had suffered heavy casualties, and some of the grass was smeared with blood. However, the warriors were successful in taking away their dead. At least one Indian body remained near the corral. It was probably the corpse of Bear That Grabs, and the soldiers dismembered and scalped it probably in some act of revenge against their enemies.

Captain Burrowes ordered the wounded men placed in wagons. The soldiers also loaded the wagons with what could be carried, but the Captain also had everything else burned rather than allow it to fall into the hands of the Indians. He did no explain what he thought the warriors would do with machinery designed to cut grass. Burrowes led the column back to Fort Smith where they arrived at about 8:30 PM (20:30) roughly four hours after they had left.

Finn Burnett was among the men who condemned Colonel Bradley’s leadership in the battle stating that the commander of Fort Smith, “disgraced himself that day.” When the men arrived at the fort, some of them let loose with hours of pent-up fear, frustration, and rage that had build up during the battle. When Burrowes walked into the room, Alvin C. Leighton, who was one of the civilians at the hayfield, accosted the officer for his supposed cowardice and poor judgment. Al Colvin was even more furious, and he attempted to take out his anger against Burrowes and Colonel Bradley for their failures in leadership. He was in such a rage that Leighton and others had to restrain Colvin physically from assaulting the other men. Leighton finally calmed his friend by

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205 McDermott, 2: 399-400.

206 Ibid.

207 David, *Finn Burnett*, 191.

208 McDermott, 2: 399-400.

209 Ibid., 400.

210 Burnett in Hebard and Brininstool, 167.
saying that he would accomplish nothing by confronting the leaders, and he would just be sent to
the guard house for such activities.\footnote{McDermott, 2: 401.}

On the next day, August 2, Lieutenant Sternberg and Private Navin were buried with full
military honors. John Hollister also died of his wounds, and he was buried three days later. Even
though Sergeant Norton had been severely wounded, he eventually recovered as did Private Francis
M. Law, and Private Henry C. Vinson, who had been shot through both legs. The Indian losses
were harder to assess. Captain Burrowes estimated that 18 to 23 warriors had been killed. Other
reports placed the number at 25. Some Crow Indians provided a higher estimate saying that 30
warriors had been killed in the battle, but an additional 17 had been so badly hurt that they died later
from their wounds.\footnote{Ibid., 2: 402.}

However, other Crows gave even larger figures. Finn Burnett stated that an attempt was
made to find out if the reports of many Indian dead were accurate. A few days after the battle two
companies of cavalry accompanied by several citizens including Burnett, Al Colvin, and Alvin
Leighton went in search of bodies. About two miles (3.2 kilometers) from the hayfield, the
expedition “found over fifty bodies.” The Crows invited the whites to go with them an additional
two miles claiming that many more bodies were to be found at that distance, but the officers were
concerned about going that far from Fort Smith, and decided it was safer to return.\footnote{Burnett in Hebard and Brininstool, 169.} In any event,
the Indians suffered heavy losses, and there were reports that so many warriors died that the Indian
women mourned their dead so frequently that they were “keeping up a hideous howling and
lamentation.”\footnote{David, Finn Burnett, 193.}

The small force of soldiers and civilians at the hayfield battle had won a remarkable battle.
By their perseverance and the use of better rifles, they had held their own against heavy odds, and
the army had won its first major engagement on the Bozeman Trail. On August 2, only one day
after the Hayfield fight, the soldiers would again be tested at the Wagon Box Battle.

\textbf{Wagon Box Battle}

Hundreds of Sioux warriors and their Cheyenne allies approached Fort Phil Kearny on
August 1, 1867. Most of the Indians still wielded bows and arrows, but many also had firearms
which they got through trade, raids on white wagon trains on the Bozeman Trail, or because they
took them from the men killed in Fetterman’s command. The warriors wanted to take and destroy
the fort, but they decided it would be wiser to pick off any groups of soldiers outside the post
before they attacked the fortress itself, and convenient targets were readily available. They decided
to strike the civilians hired to cut wood for the garrison of the fort, and the soldiers sent to protect
them. These groups were approximately six miles (9.7 kilometers) from the post, and they could be
attacked successfully before the soldiers in the fort could bring them aid. The Indians did not know
that the garrison at the fort had just received a shipment of seven hundred new Springfield breech-
loading rifles and 100,000 rounds of ammunition, which greatly increasing the rate of fire and accuracy of the weapons used by the soldiers.215

The wood cutters and the soldiers had built two corrals for defense and to protect their horses, cattle, and mules from being stolen by any Indians that might be nearby. Each stockade was protected by wagon boxes which formed the perimeter of the position. The wagons had been brought to those locations, and their wagon boxes had been removed, so more wood could be loaded onto the chassis or “running gear” and taken to the fort. The wagon boxes were about 10 feet (3 meters) long, 4.5 feet (1.4 meters) wide, and 2.5 feet (.76 meters) high. The walls of the wagon boxes were made of thin wood that was no more than one inch (2.54 cm) thick, which was enough to conceal the men in it, but it provided little protection. Private Frederic Claus was a German who came to the United States when he was twenty-six years old. He was a participant in the battle, and he stated that the wood was “no more than an inch thick, through which bullets whizzed as easily as if we had no protection at all.”216

The wagon boxes were placed in an oval or in an elongated-circle shape around a central area where the animals were held at night. The largest of these enclosures had fourteen wagon boxes on the perimeter, and it was about 60 to 70 feet (18 to 21 meters) long and about 25 to 30 feet (7.6 to 9 meters) at its widest point. The men pitched their tents outside the corral, so they would not have to sleep with the manure from the animals.217

Captain James Powell was the army commander over fifty-one men who were assigned to protect the men who chopped wood and the teamsters who drove the wagons back to the fort. Powell was an experienced soldier, and he had joined the army in 1848. He had fought bravely in the Civil War and been promoted to the officer’s ranks for lieutenant, captain, and eventually to the temporary rank of major. The Captain’s second-in-command was Lieutenant John C. Jennes, who was also an experienced soldier and had also risen through the ranks during the Civil War. Powell realized that he must divide his forces to meet the requirements placed on him. Thirteen men were given the assignment of escorting the wood train to and from the fort, while an additional twelve men were stationed to guard the smaller wood cutting camp or “side camp” located about one mile (1.6 kilometers) from the larger corral. This meant that about half of the original fifty-one soldiers, officers and men, remained at the main camp.218

In his official report of the Wagon Box Fight, Captain Powell wrote that his command consisted of 28 men and 4 civilians for a total of 32 men.219 These numbers might not be completely accurate. Samuel S. Gibson, who was present at the Wagon Box Battle, listed the

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216 Frederic Claus, “My Experience in the Wagon Box Fight” in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 84-5.

217 Keenan, Wagon Box Fight, 21-2.

218 Keenan, 25.

names of 28 soldiers who participated in the fight, but the monument at the site of the battle lists 27 men.220 Researchers later interviewed men in the battle presented an additional 3 names of troopers to the tally, meaning that 30 soldiers may have been present. The names of 6 civilians have also been located bringing the total of 36 possible defenders at the corral. The soldiers wielded the breech-loading Springfield rifles, and seven thousand rounds of ammunition had been placed in the corral. The civilians had even more modern, rapid-fire weapons including the Spencer and Henry Rifles.221

The Indians Approach

Private Samuel S. Gibson was with the men guarding the civilians chopping wood on August 1, 1867. The men were nervous about the possible presence of Indians. When Sergeant John McQuery asked if they had seen any Indians, the men stated that they had not seen any but that they could smell them. The sergeant was indignant and stated, “Smell, hell?” That night Gibson’s detail stood guard a the corral. Captain Powell was anxious and told the men to shoot at anything that might approach or at anything that might look like Indians. The ability of Gibson and the other troopers to smell Indians might be questionable, but the dog, “Jess” was a different matter. The hound was “around with the sentinels all night, and although we could not see or hear anything suspicious, the animal would run furiously down the hill... every few minutes, barking and snapping furiously.”222 The dog correctly sensed great danger nearby.

The command’s cook, Private Brown, was up early in the morning preparing breakfast. Just before daybreak, he called “Chuck! [food]” and the men came to eat. After the meal, Private Gibson was sent out again to stand picket and watch for Indians. Then John Garrett yelled, “Indians!” Gibson sprang to his feet, and he counted seven warriors on horseback advancing at a dead run. Even though Gibson had never shot his Springfield Rifle before, he set the sights at seven hundred yards (640 meters) and fired. His bullet missed the mark, but it hit a rock in front of a warrior knocking him off his horse.223 The battle had begun.

The Sioux and their Cheyenne allies remembered that they had lured Fetterman’s command into an ambush by the use of decoys. The warriors decided to try the same tactic with the soldiers at the corral, hoping that they would come out and give chase where they could be easily killed. Seven Indians were given the assignment to advance on the soldiers as decoys. White Bull and many other Sioux were waiting for the return of their scouts, but they sprung into action when they heard the first shot. Many hundreds of them then went into the attack.224

The Warriors Attack

Nolan Deming was standing with Gibson when the Indians came into view, and he shouted,
“Look at the Indians!” He soon added, “My God! There are thousands of them!” Gibson realized that he, Deming, and John Garrett were far away from the camp and in danger of being surrounded and killed. Gibson saw one warrior, Paints-Yellow, advancing in front of the others. The soldier “pulled down” on him and fired. He and the Indian shot at the same time. The warrior’s bullet whizzed past Gibson’s head, while the soldier’s shot went through Paints-Yellow’s chest, knocking him off his horse. His companions soon rescued the wounded man and carried him off the field. Gibson’s shot that wounded the warrior probably kept other Indians from riding closer to the soldiers as they fled.\textsuperscript{225}

The three soldiers planned to fall back and alternately fire two or three shots to cover their own retreat. They started at a brisk walk, but soon the men were at a dead run. The men’s fear was enhanced by their terrible memories of the Fetterman Massacre, because they had been involved in retrieving the horribly mutilated bodies in that ill-fated command, and the fleeing troopers did not want to end up the same way. The men “kept on running and shooting, expecting every minute to feel a bullet or an arrow in our backs.”\textsuperscript{226}

The appearance of the warriors also struck fear into the other soldiers. The Indians rose out of the “ground like a flock of birds.” They were all “naked, with the exception of the regulation ‘gee-string’ around their waists.” Some of the Indians wore “gorgeous war bonnets” while others had only a single feather in their hair. Their naked “bodies were painted white, green and yellow, which made them look hideous in the extreme.”\textsuperscript{227}

The warriors attempted to cut off the fleeing men to keep them from reaching the camp by circling their horses, so the Indians could get between the soldiers and the stockade. A soldier from Germany, Max Littmann, came to their rescue, “who by his courage and thoughtfulness in coming out to meet us, and the rapidity and effectiveness of his fire, saved us from being surrounded and cut off by the red devils.” Littmann had run forward about one hundred yards (91 meters), dropped to one knee to steady his rifle, and kept up such a rapid fire that the warriors were unable to apprehend the fleeing men. Finally, the exhausted troopers reached the wagon box corral.\textsuperscript{228}

Max Littmann came from Germany in 1866 when he was twenty-one years old, and he joined the army a short time later despite the fact he could speak no English at all. He wanted to see something of the country before he settled down to an occupation, so he joined the army which would give him free transportation and a salary besides. Even though he “had not by any means mastered the language,” he was made a sergeant seven months after he enlisted. Littmann was a very brave soldier who conducted himself well in battle.\textsuperscript{229} As a modest man, Littmann never mentioned in his account of the battle that he had risked his life to come out of the corral and fire at the Indians to save Gibson and the other men who were running back to the stockade.

\textsuperscript{225}Ibid., 74 and Gibson in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 49.

\textsuperscript{226}Gibson in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 49.

\textsuperscript{227}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{228}Ibid., 2:49-50.

\textsuperscript{229}Littmann in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 73.
The German Sergeant was lounging in the tents with some other soldiers early in the morning when they heard the cry of "Indians!" They rushed to their posts in the wagon corral. Littmann then saw Captain Powell running back to the camp. The officer had gone to the stream nearby to take a bath early in the morning. When he heard the first shots, Powell came running back holding his pants over one arm. He as soon dressed and in command of the garrison when Gibson and the other men got safely back to the stockade.230

Gibson was concerned about being criticized because the three men had left their post without permission. The Private was still trying to catch his breath when he reported to Captain Powell that they had to run away from their post because they faced such overwhelming odds. The Captain soon calmed his fears by saying, "You have done nobly, my boy! You could not have done better!" The officer then addressed the three soldiers who just arrived at the stockade, "Men, find a place in the wagon boxes. You'll have to fight for your lives today!" The three men filled their hats with cartridges and took various positions in the stockade.231

Other white men were scattered on the morning of August 2, and they also had to run for their lives. R. J. Smyth, a civilian, and a friend had left Fort Kearny before daylight hoping to hunt deer that morning, and they rode into the hills to look for the animals. Soon after the break of dawn, they saw many Indian smoke signals on various hills. Being aware there were probably large numbers of Indians nearby, the men attempted to make their way back to the fort, but their route was blocked by many warriors. They then tried to reach the wood train that was coming to the fort that morning. Again, that direction seemed to be too dangerous. Finally in desperation, they went to the wagon box corral, where they arrived just in time to save their lives and to aid in the defense of the stockade.232

Some of the other men in the smaller "side camp" were not so fortunate. This smaller corral probably only had seven wagon boxes for defense, and there were also too few men available to make a determined defense. Most of these men successfully fled into the trees in the hills where they remained hidden for the rest of the day. They probably owed their survival to their quick thinking, their rapid flight, and to the fact that the Indians were more interested in assaulting the larger wagon box stockade than in pursuing them into the trees. However, three of the men in the smaller camp were killed before they could get to safety. When White Bull reached the tents of these wood cutters, he found two white men dead and shot full of arrows. Sadly, for the warrior he was too late to count coup on these fallen men. After the Indians took the time to ransack and burn the camp, White Bull soon joined the attack on the larger wagon box corral.233

A Desperate Battle

Private Gibson soon crawled into a wagon bed with two other men. Gibson, at eighteen

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230Ibid., 2: 73-4.

231Gibson in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 50.


233Vestal, Warpath, 74.
years of age, was the youngest man in the command, and his fellow troopers often called him “the kid.” When the young man took his position, Private John Grady told him, “You’ll have to fight like hell today, kid, if you expect to get out of this alive.”

The white men tried to improve their defenses. In the spaces between the wagons, the men packed the open areas with such items as “logs, bales of blankets, clothing [and] sacks of corn.” The men realized that the wagon boxes provided little protection from bullets, and they tried to improve them, so one of the civilians, R. J. Smyth, “had gunny sacks of corn placed on edge two deep on the inside of the box.” In addition, he apparently bored a hole in the side of the box, so he could lay between sacks of grain and fire through the hole. This was an unusual means of defense, and other soldiers claimed they fired over the tops of the wagons and not through any holes in them.

The German, Max Littmann, realized that the wagon boxes provided inadequate protection, so he rolled a half-full barrel of salt into position. He did his fighting “flat on my stomach behind this barrel of salt.” Right next to him, another soldier, Jim Condon, laid behind a barrel of beans. Private Thomas Doyle was equally resourceful, and he piled up some neck yokes used by the oxen to form a breastwork.

Another soldier, Corporal Francis Robertson, an old and experienced soldier, took the shoestrings out of his shoes. He tied them together to form a longer cord with a loop at either end. The larger loop was for his foot and the smaller one was for the trigger of his rifle. He clearly feared that he would be tortured if he were captured, and he would rather end his life quickly that to suffer. He could place the muzzle of his rifle under his chin and discharge the weapon by pressing on the cord on his right foot. Perhaps following his lead, other soldiers did the same thing.

Sergeant John McQuiery and Private John Grady also prepared to kill themselves with the use of their shoestrings to discharge their rifles. Gibson followed their example, and “I had just taken off my own shoes and made loops in the strings when the fighting began.”

Private Gibson was a pious man, and he sought Divine intervention to protect his life in the coming battle by praying. With some understatement, he reported, “I was a wee bit [a little] frightened when the arrows and bullets began to fill the air.” He then “started to say the Lord’s Prayer and had just reached the part ‘Deliver us from evil’ when . . . the man next to me in the box hit me with his rifle. ‘Quit praying and shoot,’ he ordered. I did.”

Gibson clearly understood that God would not protect him unless he tried to save himself.

The warriors massed in large numbers for the attack. As Gibson reported, “There seemed to be hundreds of Indians, all mounted on their finest and handsomest war ponies, riding here and

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234 Gibson in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 52.

235 Smyth in Brady, 66.

236 Littmann in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 2: 74 and Gibson also in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 52.

237 Gibson in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 53.

238 Gibson in Franklin Campbell Smith, Early Religious Services in Wyoming (Laramie: Laramie Printing, 1926), 62.
there, chanting their war and death songs." The warriors assembled on the various sides of the camp. Lieutenant Jenness tried to understand the nature of the forces arrayed against the soldiers. The officer looked through his binoculars at his adversaries. Scanning the hill to the east of the corral, Jenness stated to Powell, "Captain, I believe the Red Cloud is on top of that hill." The question of Red Cloud's participation in the battle has been a point of debate among historians, and Jenness probably could not identify the old chief at such a long distance. 239

When Powell saw the Indians begin their attack on the south side of the stockade, he called to his defenders, "Men, here they come! Take your places and shoot to kill." Gibson rested his rifle on the top of the wagon box and began firing with the others. They had many targets, "The whole plain was alive with Indians, all mounted and visible from every direction." The warriors did not ride directly on the corral. If they had done so these hundreds of men could have overwhelmed the position rapidly, but the Indians put on a brilliant display of horsemanship and came closer and closer to the stockade. "They were riding madly about, and shooting at us with guns, bows and arrows, first on one side and then on the other (side) of the corral. They would then circle, and each time come in closer, uttering the most piercing and unearthly war cries." Some of the more courageous "would ride in close and throw spears at us. Others would brandish their war-clubs and tomahawks." Others rode close the whites and then hang off the side of their horses. "All we could see would be an arm or a leg sticking above the pony’s back, and ‘whizz!’ would come the arrows." 240

After their initial advance on horseback, many of the warriors dismounted and attacked on foot. They came in a large group, perhaps three hundred strong. First they walked slowly, but after the first volley from they whites, they came at a run. The Indians probably thought that the soldiers were still using the slow-loading muzzle-loading rifles, and the warriors believed that they could close with their enemies before they could get off another shot. Fire Thunder stated in bewilderment. The whites "were lying behind the boxes and they shot faster than they ever shot at us before. We thought it was some new medicine of great power that they had, for they shot so fast that it was like tearing a blanket." Fire Thunder learned later that the increase rate of fire "was because they had new guns that they loaded from behind" rather than through the muzzle. 241

Even after the second volley the "Indians still came on with wild cries and shrill warwhoops, thinking, no doubt, that once our guns were empty they could break over the corral and score an easy victory." But a third volley stopped them in their tracks, and they began to flee and to scatter to avoid another burst of fire. Apparently, they could not understand how the whites could continue to fire so rapidly. 242

While the Sioux warrior, White Bull, was watching, Hairy Hand was shot and fell from his

239 Gibson in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 52-3.

240 Ibid., 2: 53-4.


242 Littmann in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 76-7.
horse. The badly wounded man lay motionless on the ground. White Bull was armed only with a lance, but he immediately ran forward on foot to his wounded friend. Hairy Hand had been shot in the chest, and the bullet had gone completely through him. He was bleeding from his nose and mouth. The wounded man was still under fire, and While Bull grabbed his friend by the wrists and dragged him to a low place where he was out of danger. Despite his severe wound, Harry Hand survived and lived for many years.\footnote{Vestal, Warpath, 75.}

Another Indian casualty was Crazy Horse. Even though he shared the same name with the famous war chief who led the Sioux against Custer at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876, he was a different man. This Crazy Horse was shot off his horse in one of the charges. He was hit just above the knee, but his wound was not serious, and two friends ran to him and helped him get away. The warrior later recovered from his injury.\footnote{Vestal, Warpath, 76.}

The fire from the whites had been very effective, and the ground in front of the stockade was “strewn with dead and dying Indians and ponies.” Private Gibson even made apologies for inflicting heavy casualties on their enemies. “We were not fiends, gloating over the suffering of their wounded,” but the soldiers remembered the Fetterman Massacre, and they were willing to hurt the Indians as much as possible stating, “It was not revenge but retribution.”\footnote{Gibson in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 56-7.}

Many of the dead and wounded warriors laid close to the wagon boxes, and some were less than twenty feet (6 meters) away, but “The wounded Indians did not live long after the charge was over.” Some of the wounded warriors still had fight in them, and “they would watch and try to get a bullet in some of our men” when the opportunity arose. It became necessary to shoot them. As Smyth admitted, “We had to kill them for self-protection.” He also justified the defender’s actions as a matter of revenge, “It was evening up the Fetterman deal.” Additionally, “They never showed mercy to a wounded white man, and should not expect any different treatment.”\footnote{Smyth in Brady, 68.}

The Indians retrieved their dead and wounded whenever possible, and consistent with their culture, the warriors “made heroic attempts to recover their wounded” at the Wagon Box Battle. The whites kept firing at the Indians even though they were not attacking but clearly retrieving their wounded, but the warriors still helped their fallen comrades “at a fearful sacrifice of life.” Their courage and skill won the admiration of the soldiers who were still trying to kill them, and “We witnessed the most magnificent display of horsemanship imaginable.” Two mounted Indians would work together, and they “would ride like the wind among the dead and wounded, and seeing an arm or leg thrust upward, would ride one on each side of the wounded savage, reach over and pick him up on the run, and carry him to a place of safety.” To the amazement of the soldiers, this impressive feat of horsemanship was performed over and over again. “This was done many times, and we could not help but admire their courage and daring.”\footnote{Gibson in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 57.}
The warriors shot the wagon boxes to pieces, and much to the surprise of the whites, those shots never went through and hit anyone. A few Indian marksmen hid in the grass, and they stayed so low that about “all one could see of them would be the two sticks across which they rested their guns” when taking aim. Some of the warriors worked out a clever ruse, and they fell off their horses pretending that they were dead, but they then crawled behind “sagebrush watching for a chance to fire at us.” However, the defenders were not long fooled. “We watched the ground and as soon as we could see the least movement, we blazed away at them.”

These Indian snipers inflicted the only casualties on the soldiers in the battle. Lieutenant John C. Jennes fell early in the encounter, likely during the first Indian attack. Even though he lacked experience in fighting Indians, he courageously stood up on one of the wagon boxes to direct the fight on the west side of the stockade. He was clearly in danger, and Corporal Francis Robertson was concerned for his safety. The soldier called to him, “Lieutenant, I hope you will get better shelter. You had better take care of yourself.” The officer called back angrily, “I know how to fight Indians!” Those were the last words he said because he was shot in the forehead and died instantly.

Sergeant Littmann gave a different version of the Lieutenant’s last words. According to the German soldier, Jennes was calling out a warning when he was shot. “Boys, look out! There are a good many Indians here, but—” He was killed in mid sentence. Some men felt the loss of Jenness keenly. Smyth stated that “He was a grand, good man, and a fearless officer.”

Private Thomas Doyle was killed at the same time. The soldier was fighting from behind some ox yokes when he was shot through the head, but he did not die instantly and suffered from his wound. “He was shot through the head, dying in about two hours after being shot.” Private Henry Haggerty also took a bullet through the left shoulder. His left arm was hanging uselessly from his side, but he courageously remained in the fight. Despite the pain and loss of blood, he kept loading and firing his rifle with his right hand for over two hours. He was finally killed when a bullet struck him on the top of his head.

When the Indians began their second major assault, someone yelled, “Look out! They’re coming again!” The whites had a clear view of the approaching warriors from all sides except on the south where the tents were still standing and blocking their line of sight. One of the soldiers saw the problem and shouted, “The tents!” These canvas shelters were still standing after the first

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249 Claus, “The Wagon Box Fight,” in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 83.

250 McDermott, 2: 425; Frederic Claus in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 84; and Littmann in Hebard and Brininstool 2: 78.

251 Smyth in Brady, 67.

252 Ibid., 67.

253 Gibson in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 61.
charge because no one had thought of pulling them down. Two men ran out and started to pull them down, and Private John Grady called to Samuel Gibson, “Come on, kid!” Grady and Gibson jumped over the wagon boxes and ran to the tents with “bullets zipping about us and the arrows swishing past and striking into the ground on all sides of us.” The men loosened the loops around the tent poles, and the canvas coverings dropped to the ground. The officer’s tent was the only one still standing, but Sergeant John Hoover called to the soldiers, “Come back here! You’ll get hit! Never mind the captain’s tent! Get into your wagon box and shoot!”

The Indians attacked, and they would run toward the stockade armed with spears and tomahawks, “each carrying a big shield made of buffalo hide.” A very tall Indian, Jipala (To Sting Like a Wasp), was among them. He was “stripped for battle, and he led the attack from the east.” He was a very tall man who carried a “big buffalo shield in front of him, brandishing his spear and chanting a war song.” He would “hold his shield on one side and run forward alternating his movement by dodging to one side.”

Private Gibson noticed Jipala. “There was one big giant of an Indian who had thus run out several times . . . and he always managed to escape our fire.” Gibson added in admiration of his foe. “He was a truly magnificent specimen of Indian manhood.” The warrior would “run toward us, jumping into the air and alternating his movement by dodging to one side. The sight was fascinating, and we could not but admire his superb courage.” Several of the soldiers fired at him but missed him every time. Finally, they adjusted their sights carefully, fired at the warrior at the same time, and they hit their mark. “He leaped into the air and came down as limp as a rag, fairly riddled with bullets.”

The Indians tried to coordinate their attacks by rapid communication between the various groups of warriors. The “Indians were signaling with pocket mirrors . . . while couriers were observed riding furiously back and forth at break-neck speed.” This communication seemed to be effective because the Indians often massed together in large groups for their attacks.

Each time a warrior was killed, the fighting would slow down, and the chiefs would advise the young men in great earnestness “to be brave and careful.” The counsel was wise, but the Indians still suffered many casualties. In the third attack, a warrior, Muskrat-Stands-on-His-Lodge was shot and killed. The whites fired so rapidly that no Indian could get to his body and bring it back. Packs-His-Leg (Dog Tongue) attacked and was shot in the leg. His friends tried to get to him, but they were too frightened to come close to the wounded man. The soldiers then took better aim and killed him. His body could also not be retrieved. Young Duck had led the attack, and he was shot. Three of his friends, Bear-Loves, Liar, and Pack-on-Him, ran forward to drag the wounded warrior to safety. They picked him up and started back when each of them was hit at the same time. Bear-Loves was shot above the left knee, Liar’s knee cap was grazed by a bullet; and

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254 Ibid. 2: 60.


256 Gibson in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 65.

257 Ibid. 2: 59. See also Littmann in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 81.
Pack-on-Him was hit below his right knee. They dropped Young Duck and ran back to safety. 258

During the battle, the soldiers fired their rifles so rapidly that the weapons became very hot, and they had to let the weapons cool off between attacks. “Our gun barrels were so overheated from the rapidity of our fire that the metal burned our hands, and we were obligated to open the breech-blocks during this lull to allow the barrels to cool off.” 259 R. J. Smyth reported that he started the fight with a canteen of water, but he “used most of it to cool my guns.” The whites fired so rapidly, and the air was so still that “There was a continuous smoke all around.” It was so thick that “Sometimes we could not see 10 feet [3 meters] ahead of us.” 260

The misery of the defenders increased as the battle continued. The day was hot, and the men had taken off their hats to hold ammunition. The sun beat mercilessly on them, and they became plagued with thirst. In addition, the warriors had shot fire arrows into the corral. Some of these fell onto the straw and dried animal manure in the center of the stockade and started it on fire. The smoke choked the men, and the “stench from this was abominable.” Private Littmann agreed, “This terrible stench and smoke nearly strangled us at times.” 261

The soldiers’ canteens had sat in the sun for hours, and some men had difficulty drinking the water because it was too hot. There had been a barrel half full of water just outside the corral when the fighting started, but many bullets had struck the cask during the battle, and nearly all the liquid had leaked out. Luckily for the men, the camp cook had filled some kettles with water, and these pots were nearby. 262

John Grady turned to Samuel Gibson and said, “Kid, let’s go and get one of those kettles.” The younger man responded, “All right.” The two soldiers crawled on their stomachs past the barrel of beans from which Jim Condon was fighting. Others kept up a steady fire to keep the Indians from focusing on the two men. The soldiers got to the kettles outside the corral, took them, and attempted to crawl back, when they were discovered. The Indians opened fire on them. Several shots hit near the men, and Gibson could hear the bullets “Z-zip! P-i-n-g-g-gl” when they hit the kettles. Fortunately, neither man was hit. They retrieved, “dirty, black water,” and much of it had leaked out from the bullet holes in the kettles, but there was enough left for Condon to pass the pots around and give some of the men a large drink. 263

The Indians became frustrated at their failed attempts to overwhelm and wipe out the defenders. As Fire Thunder admitted, “We tried hard, but we could not do it, and there were dead warriors and horses piled all around the boxes and scattered over the plain.” The men decided to

258 Vestal, Warpath, 77-8.
259 Gibson in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 60.
260 Smyth in Brady, 68 and Claus, “Wagon Box Fight,” in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 84.
261 Gibson in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 62-3 and Littmann in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 76.
262 Gibson in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 62-3.
263 Ibid., 2: 63-4.
leave their horses in a gulch for a final attack on foot. They were met by fire that was so heavy that “it was like green grass withering in a fire.”

**The Final Assault**

Late in the battle, there was a lull in the fighting, and the defenders in the stockade waited to see what the warriors would do next. Then the white men heard “a sort of a humming sound, seemingly made by many voices.” Some men thought that it might be the Indian women mourning their dead, but the sound grew louder. The men kept hearing “this strange sound, unlike anything we had ever heard before,” and “that awful humming, chanting sound grew in volume and intensity, coming nearer and nearer.” A shout suddenly came from some of the men, “Here they come!” Everyone looked in that direction and each “saw a sight which none . . . will ever forget to their dying day.” Private Gibson frankly admitted, “It chilled my blood at the time.” Hundreds of Indians were approaching on foot. They were formed into the shape of the letter V or a wedge, and threatened to overwhelm the defenders by their weight of numbers.

The soldiers and civilians opened fire on the mass of warriors. The rate of fire was impressive, but “Nothing daunted, the forces came on slowly, and in great numbers, the places of those who fell under our fire being taken immediately by others.” The “Indian hordes” advanced so close together that “the heavy rifle bullets from our guns must have gone through two or three bodies.” The mass of warriors continued, and they came so close to the stockade that the defenders “could even see the whites of their eyes.”

As the attackers swarmed forward with their “shrill cries and piercing whoops,” not everyone was intimidated. Private Jim Condon jumped to his feet from behind his barrel of beans. The defiant man waved his rifle over his head and shouted defiantly, “Come on, you blathering sons of guns. We can lick the whole damned bunch of you.” Captain Powell was not impressed by the soldier’s bravado and ordered him to lie back down and take cover. The warriors kept advancing, and men in the stockade feared they would soon be overrun and killed. When the warriors heard the sound of cannons being fired at them, they called out “Big Guns! Big Guns!” When the threat to the stockade was most pressing, the Indians turned and fled.

**The Arrival of the Relief Column**

The long-awaited help from Fort Phil Kearny had finally arrived. After hours of fighting, the garrison at the fort finally became aware that the men at the wagon box were in severe danger. Apparently, a sentinel on top of Pilot Hill could see that fighting was taking place, but the officers were slow to act. Finally at 11:00 AM a relief column was organized under the command of Major Benjamin Smith. He took one hundred men with him and a mountain howitzer. The detail left the fort at 11:30 AM. Smith ordered the men to approach cautiously for fear that they could be

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264 Fire Thunder in *Black Elk Speaks*, 17.

265 Gibson in Hebard and Brininstool, 2: 65-6.

266 Ibid., 2: 66-7.

267 Ibid.

268 Claus in *Powder River Country*, 84.
intercepted by Indians. When they were about one and a half miles (2 kilometers) from the wagon boxes, he saw a high hill near the stockade. It was covered with a large group of Indians about five to six hundred, but he speculated that more warriors were hidden nearby. The grass was burning in every direction. To make sure that Captain Powell knew that the relief column was on its way, Major Smith fired a shot from the cannon. That single shot ended the fighting because it “seemed to disconcert them as a number of mounted Indians who were riding rapidly toward my command turned and fled.” The warriors had clearly had enough of this fight, and they all withdrew.269

The men in the stockade were overjoyed at the sound of the cannon. Someone yelled, “Hark! Did you hear that?” The defenders stopped firing to listen more intently. As Smith’s men advanced, a man in the stockade stood up and yelled, “Here they come, boys! Hurrah!” The men believed that the hours of fear, tension, and combat were finally over, and the defenders at the corral were ecstatic to see the relief column approach. “Then we all jumped to our feet and yelled. We threw our caps in the air. We hugged each other in the ecstasy of our joy. We laughed, cried and fairly sobbed like little children in the delirium and delight. The awful strain was over.”270

The Cost of Battle

Captain Powell wrote his report of the battle the following day, and he tried to assess the cost of the encounter. He had lost three men killed at the stockade. They were Lieutenant John C. Jennes and Privates Thomas C. Doyle and Henry Haggerty. An additional, four men had been killed at the smaller wood-cutter’s coral. They were Horace Kittridge, Herman Song, Herman Lang (Lange) and George W. Haines (Harris). In addition, three additional soldiers had been wounded. James Condon had been struck by an arrow below the knee, Nelson V. Deming was shot in the shoulder, and John L. Sommers had been shot in the thigh. The civilian, R. J. Smyth, was slightly wounded in the left hand.271

The Indian losses were much harder to determine. The whites could only be sure they had killed five warriors because that was the number of bodies left near the stockade. A soldier cut the head off the body of Bear That Grabs and brought it to Dr. Horton at Fort Kearny who later sent the skull to the Army Medical Museum in Washington, DC.272 Captain Powell was among those who gave much larger numbers for Indian losses. He claimed that the defenders in the corral had faced three thousand warriors, and as many as eight hundred Indians were involved in the various attacks. He also estimated that “not less than sixty Indians” had been killed in battle, but an additional “one hundred and twenty [were] severely wounded.” He added that some of his men did not agree with his figures. “The citizens who took part in the action are of the opinion that my estimate is far below the actual figures.”273

Private Gibson stated that he had seen a column of Indians a quarter of a mile long carrying

270 Gibson in Hebard and Brininstool, 68.
272 McDermott, 2: 434.
off their casualties. He also reported that Powell’s numbers were far to low, and the soldiers “estimated that there must have been seven or eight hundred killed and wounded.” Richard Irving Dodge claimed that he met a Sioux chief who visited his military post in Nebraska in the fall of 1867. The man told the officer that over three thousand Indians were involved in the encounter, and their total loss in killed and wounded was 1,137.

The German, Private Claus, scoffed at such high estimates and he said such numbers “sounds to me pretty unreasonable and overdrawn, and I cannot believe their loss was so great as that.” He further stated that he could only remember one wounded Indian that was left behind when the warriors withdrew. “The Indian loss... must have amounted to several score.” The Private also stated that after the battle, the soldiers had pursued the fleeing Indians. “We saw the location of their hospitals and found 50 to 60 places where their dead had lain.” Claus said he talked with an Indian after the battle, and the man told him that Red Cloud said that “he lost the flower of his nation” in the battle. Actually, the Indians took little interest in the encounter, and only a few of them talked about it. White Bull’s account is the most thorough, and he also downplayed the seriousness of the battle. He stated that only “six Indians had been killed and six had been wounded” in the fight.

No matter what the actual Indian losses were, the soldiers and civilians at the Wagon Box fight had achieved a stunning victory. They were outnumbered at least 50 to 1 and could have been outnumbered 100 to 1, but they had held off the repeated attacks of their adversaries for hours. Despite this accomplishment, the battle was not decisive, and the victories at the Hayfield and Wagon Box fights had not decided the war. The Indians believed that their losses had been largely insignificant, and the outcome of those battles simply convinced the Indians to go back to their old tactics of hit and run.

For the remainder of the summer and the fall of 1867 and into the spring of 1868, the Indians struck against the parties of soldiers and civilians that were far away from the protection of the forts. The warriors were so successful that the Bozeman Trail could no longer be used by emigrants because it was too dangerous. The Indians were in control of the area, and the federal government realized it had to increase the size of the army in the area substantially, or it had to surrender the region to the Native Peoples by negotiating some kind of peace treaty.

**The Indian Victory and the Capitulation of the United States**

Even though the fighting in Red Cloud’s War had notable victories for either side, the United States government realized that it was facing a stalemate, and it was not able to control and protect travelers on the Bozeman Trail. At the same time, the transcontinental railroad was pushing west under the authority of the Central Pacific Railroad. Even though it would not be completed

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274 Gibson in Hebard and Brininstool, 70.


276 Claus in Hebard and Brininstool, 85-6 and Claus in *Powder River Country*, 84.

277 Vestal, *Warpath*, 78.
until 1869, the rail line had already reached Laramie, Wyoming, by the spring of 1868 and regularly scheduled trains were using it. As the railroad advanced, the distance from the rail lines to the mining areas of Montana got shorter and shorter. Clearly once the railroad reached what is modern western Wyoming or northern Utah, the road to the mines from the rail lines would be much shorter than the Bozeman Trail from Fort Laramie. Additionally, the railroad workers had faced Indian raids in the summer of 1867 in Nebraska, and they needed military protection for them to continue working in 1868. The United States army was too small to reinforce both the Bozeman Trail and protect the men building the railroads.278

Congress had also passed a bill in 1864 for the creation of the Northern Pacific Railway that would eventually go through the mining district of Montana allowing for easy access to the area. The value of the forts on the Bozeman Trail was questionable especially when the military resources were badly needed elsewhere. They were too expensive to maintain, too vulnerable to attack, and soon to be completely unnecessary, but the government was wise enough to know that the forts could be used as bargaining chips in dealing with the Indians.279

The federal government wrote a treaty and special commissioners brought it to Fort Laramie, hoping to get the prominent chiefs included Red Cloud to sign it. Before the war leader would come to the council, he demanded that the forts along the Bozeman Trail be abandoned. In essence, the chief had demanded what amounted to a complete capitulation by the government before the talks could take place. This stipulation could have been reached two years earlier, but the federal government had no intention of leaving the area before 1868. However, the United States had changed its mind and agreed to withdraw from the forts even before Red Cloud came to negotiate.280

On July 29, 1868, the soldiers at Fort C. F. Smith abandoned the post. Early on the next morning, Red Cloud and his warriors burned the fortress to the ground. A few days later the army also marched away from both Fort Phil Kearny and Fort Reno, and the Indians soon burned down Fort Kearny as well. Red Cloud’s conditions for meeting with the federal commission at Fort Laramie had been met, but he was in no hurry to meet with the commissioners. Perhaps the great war chief wanted to savor his victory as long as possible, so he waited for months before he came to the conference, claiming that he could not come right away because he had to gather enough meat for the winter.281

On November 4, 1868 Red Cloud came to the conference accompanied by about 125 leaders of the various groups of Sioux in the area. The negotiations went on for hours as every aspect of the treaty was explained to the chiefs sometime in minor detail. The use of translators slowed the proceedings, and Red Cloud had many questions on the nature of the agreement.


280Ibid., 66-70.

281Ibid., 70-6.
Finally, the great chief washed his hands with the dust on the floor signaling he was ready to sign, and he placed an X on the treaty to signify his name. Many other Indian leaders signed in a similar manner.282

The treaty soon proved to be yet another government ploy to cheat the Indians, and the United States did not long try to follow the stipulations in it. Even though the Indians had been granted almost the entire western area of what is now the state of South Dakota including the sacred lands of the Black Hills, the federal government soon reneged on the agreement and stole much of the area for the use of white settlers. These encroachments helped cause the Great Sioux War of 1876-7 which led to the defeat of George Armstrong Custer at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876.

Despite the victory in Red Cloud’s War, the Indians lost that conflict in the long run and were forced to surrender additional lands. Significantly, the Black Hills were taken away from them in 1877. However, this breach of faith in 1877 by the federal government cannot change the nature of the Indian triumph in 1868. Red Cloud and many warriors had won a significant victory over the United States.

282 Ibid., 76-81.
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