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The Battle of the Rosebud
by
Albert Winkler

The Battle of the Rosebud, which took place on 17 June 1876, was the largest single engagement between the United States cavalry and Indian forces in the entire history of the American West. It was a fierce encounter that lasted about six hours and involved all together several thousand cavalymen and Indian warriors. The outcome of the contest was highly significant because it turned back a major invasion of Indian territories and freed many warriors to engage another invading force under the command of George Armstrong Custer. This led to the destruction of Custer’s command at the Battle of the Little Bighorn by a much superior enemy on 25 June 1876. One of the participants in the Rosebud encounter, Lieutenant Charles Morton, stated, with perhaps some exaggeration relating to the numbers of Indians engaged, that the conflict “was probably the greatest Indian battle in our history—some 1400 soldiers and friendly Indians against some 5000 hostiles.”¹ Because Custer’s defeat took place only eight days after the Battle of the Rosebud, the earlier engagement has been largely overlooked and has not been given the attention it deserves.²

Background to the War

The Battle of the Rosebud was a major engagement of the Great Sioux War of 1876-7, which was caused by the dishonest and often callous policies of he United States government toward the native peoples of North America. In 1868, Red Cloud of the Oglala Sioux (also known as the Oglala Lakota) negotiated the Treaty of Fort Laramie with the United States. The treaty ended two years of war between the Sioux and the white Americans and was designed to assure peaceful relations between the two adversaries. The agreement specified that many lands in the modern states of Nebraska, Wyoming, Montana, and South Dakota would remain in the hands of the indigenous peoples. This included the Black Hills of South Dakota, which were the most sacred lands of the all the Sioux groups and were considered to be the center of their universe. Not only did all military posts in these areas have to be abandoned, but the treaty clearly stated that no unauthorized white person “shall ever be permitted to pass over, settle upon, or reside in the territory.” This issue was so important that it was repeated again in the document, “It also stipulates and agrees that no white person or persons shall be permitted to settle upon or occupy any portion of [the lands or] to pass through [them].”³

The United States had little interest in keeping the treaty for long, and the federal government soon broke the agreement. A glaring example of a treaty violation came in 1874


when George Armstrong Custer took the Seventh Cavalry into the area on the Black Hills Expedition. The reasons for the incursion seemed to be innocent because Custer's men were supposedly on Sioux lands to explore, to survey a new route near Fort Laramie, and to find a good site for a fort. But the expedition was illegal because it violated the treaty agreements stipulating that no unauthorized entry into Sioux lands was allowed. Also, the search for a location of a fort would be a further breach of the agreement if such a post was established. Technically speaking, the undertaking was a military invasion and an act of war. Many civilians who accompanied the expedition came looking for gold as well. When these prospectors found gold, the news spread rapidly and set off a gold rush in which many white men rushed into the sacred Black Hills.

As many white prospectors rushed into Sioux lands, and the federal government made feeble if any efforts to restrain them, the Treaty of Fort Laramie was becoming a dead letter. War was likely to ensue, and the United States government tried diplomatic initiatives to stave off hostilities. The government brought a delegation of prominent Sioux, including Red Cloud and Spotted Tail, to Washington, DC, in late spring 1875 to negotiate with them. The bureaucrats in Washington brought the leaders by train giving them the opportunity to see the vastness of the country and to be impressed with the size of the white population and their extensive resources. The Sioux met with President Ulysses S. Grant, the “Great White Father,” on 26 May, and “the old general lost no time in laying down the law of might makes right.” Grant told the chiefs that the white people outnumbered them by 200 to 1, and the disparity in numbers would only continue to grow. The Sioux’s condition was hopeless. They could not restrain their adversaries, and the native peoples would have to leave their lands and be resettled elsewhere.

Many officials of the government thought that no further concessions should be made to the Sioux and that the protection of the white people was the most important consideration. General George Crook, who later led the United States forces at the Battle of the Rosebud, believed that the federal forces should be used to support the settlers and miners who were illegally invading Sioux lands. He said that they should be under the nation’s protection.

On the next day, the delegation met with Columbus Delano, the Secretary of the Interior, and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Edwin P. Smith, who continued the effort of intimidation. Delano said that the Sioux were receiving funds from the government, and he told the chiefs, “Now if you don’t do what’s right, Congress will refuse to give you any more aid.” The government offered them only $25,000 for their lands, and they would have to move to the

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4For more on the expedition, see Ernest Grafe and Paul Horsted, Exploring with Custer: The 1874 Black Hills Expedition (Custer, South Dakota: Golden Valley, 2005).


7Delano as cited in Diaries of John Hunton, p. 68.
Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma. This amount of money was a tiny sum for the tens of thousands of square miles the Sioux would have to surrender, and Spotted Tail treated this cheap bribe with contempt. He said he still wanted to abide by the Treaty of Fort Laramie, but the white men did not. The chief clearly wanted to stay on the lands that belonged to him and his people, and he commented wryly, “If it [the other land] is such a good country, you ought to send the white men now in our country there, and leave us alone.” The wrangling over an agreement to steal land from the Sioux went on for weeks but failed to reach the desired goals of the government, and no new treaty was negotiated. The chiefs left on 4 July.

The federal government made another attempt to negotiate a favorable settlement. Special commissioners, which included Commissioner Smith and United States Senator William B. Allison, met the Sioux at Fort Robinson, Nebraska, on 20 Sept. 1875. Many of the native people refused to negotiate in the post fearing that they would be forced to make a treaty under duress, so they finally met at White River, eight miles away. The meeting included a huge number of Sioux and other native peoples. Anson Mills, a cavalry officer who was at the conference, estimated that 20,000 Indians were present. He thought the natives at the meeting represented “probably 40,000 to 45,000 [people] of various tribes.” Perhaps three quarters of the adult males of these peoples were at the conference. No doubt, thousands of these men were potential warriors.

Senator Allison opened the remarks, and he began to make a speech about the surrender of the Sioux lands. The federal government offered the Indians $6 million for their lands, but the Native peoples were long used to the many lies told to them by the white men. Red Cloud was in no mood to negotiate with government officials he could not trust, and he made impossible demands. He required that the United States give clothing and food to the Sioux for seventy generations and pay then the astronomical sum of $600 million.

The negotiations continued for two weeks with heated debates among the various Sioux groups that led to some fights among them. It was expected that Red Cloud and Spotted Tail would support giving up the areas if the price was right, but the entire idea of surrendering sacred lands infuriated many of the warriors. Even before Red Cloud spoke, Little Big Man “rode between the commission and the seated Indian chiefs” on his horse. He wore war headgear, and he had two revolvers attached to a cord around his waist. He was obviously agitated, and he threatened, “I will kill the first Indian chief who speaks favorably to the selling of the Black Hills.” Anson Mills estimated that “at least half the men warriors pressed about us threatening to kill some member of the commission.” Fearing for their lives, the members of the delegation retreated back to the fort. Clearly, there was no chance for a negotiated settlement at that point.

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8Spotted Tail as cited in the Diaries of John Hunton, p. 69.


and Mills believed war would break out in the spring.  

Others agreed with this sad assessment of the situation, and the government set in motion plans that led to hostilities. On 3 Nov. 1875, President Grant met in Washington, DC, with his important military and civilian leaders who were responsible for controlling Indians in the West. These men agreed that the miners must have access to the Black Hills, and the native peoples would have to leave, by the use of military force if necessary. This meant that the Indians had to leave the disputed lands and, in effect, surrender them to the government without compensation. The Department of the Interior sent instructions to its Indian agents on 6 Dec. 1875 to tell all the Sioux, and other tribes associated with agencies in the Nebraska and Dakota areas, to report to their reservations by 31 Jan. 1876. If the Indians failed to do so, they would be considered hostile, which meant they were subject to military action that would force them to go to the agencies.

These orders were totally impractical. Many of the Indian agents did not receive the letters until the end of December, and, frequently, the information was not forwarded to the Indians until days or weeks later. Few of the natives were able to come to the agencies within the time limit because of severe winter weather, and the government had insufficient resources to feed them even if they arrived on time. Out of necessity, many of the hungry Indians soon left the posts in search of food. The fact that the Indians either could not come to the posts, or were forced to suffer when they arrived, meant that they could not meet the orders that restricted them to the agencies. In effect, this call for the native peoples to come to the posts was a cruel trick and a virtual declaration of war against them.

Ben Arnold, who fought in the war as a scout and was a keen observer, assessed the situation well. He realized that the federal government tried to justify its actions of taking the land by going to war, and he stated that "the smoke of battle has screened many a high-handed territory seizure." In the face of the invasion, the "fighting the Indians did was in self-defense." He added succinctly, "Of all the wars in which the United States has been engaged, the least justification is found in the Sioux War of 1876. The Interior Department can never wash its hands of this crime." The largest Indian war in the history of the American West, which cost many hundreds of lives, was set in motion because the government stole the land that had been granted to the Sioux forever.

General Philip Sheridan was in command over the Department of the Missouri, and was, therefore, responsible for planning the upcoming campaign. Short in stature "Little Phil," who was 5 feet 5 inches tall, was known as a brutal commander during the American Civil War especially when he oversaw the destruction of the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia in 1864. He

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12Robinson, General Crook, pp. 162-3.

13Robinson, The Great Sioux War, pp. 43-5.

soon brought his callous policies of dealing with his enemies to the West. Sheridan probably popularized the most cruel of all statements regarding the American Indians when he was speaking with Toch-a-way (Turtle Dove) of the Comanches in 1869. According to Captain Charles Nordstrom, who was an eyewitness, the chief assured the General of his peaceful intentions. He struck himself on the chest and stated, “Me, Toch-a-way; me good Injun.” In an observation that set the whites at the scene roaring with laughter, Sheridan responded, “The only good Indians I ever saw were dead.”15 This comment was soon shortened to “The only good Indian is a dead Indian.” Sheridan later denied making the remark, but these words clearly represented his well-known hatred for native peoples and his desire to see them treated harshly.16 No doubt, this callous sentiment had long been held by many whites, and the phrase “a good Indian,” meant a dead Native American.

Phil Sheridan believed that the army should strike the Indians as soon as possible in the harsh winter conditions when they would be more vulnerable to attacks because they could only move with difficulty in the challenging weather. He chose General George Crook to lead part of the operation to subdue the Sioux.17 Crook has often been considered the most experienced and most effective Indian fighter in the history of the American West, but his performance was frequently uneven. Sometimes, he showed great competency and at other times inexplicable foolishness, frequently on the same campaign. Sheridan and Crook had known each other since childhood and had roomed together at the US Military Academy at West Point. The two men’s early friendship degenerated into hatred and jealousy by 1876 largely because Crook was envious of Sheridan’s greater success. Crook, at more than 6 feet tall, was a much more domineering figure than “Little Phil,” and he often made fun of the shorter man’s appearance and denigrated his leadership. While Sheridan returned the ill will, he still thought Crook an able commander and gave him important assignments.18

The Indians who left the reservations had little choice but to go to the only place in the West where they could find large herds of buffalo (North American Bison) because the animal was their main source of food. The buffalo had recently roamed the Great Plains in America in their tens of millions, but hunters converged on the animals in the 1870s and slaughtered them in huge numbers.19 The federal authorities realized that the destruction of the bison would solve the


18Robinson, Great Sioux War, pp. 56-7.

19The classic account of the destruction of the bison is Edward Douglas Branch, The Hunting of the Buffalo (New York: Appleton, 1929).
Indian problem, and government officials often gave hunters free ammunition for their task. In 1875 Sheridan praised the hunters, “These men have done in the last two years, and will do more in the next year, to settle the vexed Indian question than the entire regular army has done in the last thirty years. ... Send them powder and lead, if you will, but for the sake of a lasting peace let them kill, skin, and sell until the buffaloes are exterminated.”\(^{20}\) Once these animals were gone, the Indians had little choice but live on the meager food supplies the government would give them. By 1876, there were only a few thousand buffalo left, and most of these were found in the area near the borders of the modern states of Wyoming, Montana, and North and South Dakota. This was the last year when the Indians could hope to live in their native environment and enjoy their culture because the bison would soon be gone.\(^{21}\)

On 7 Feb. 1876, General Sheridan received orders to move against the Sioux who were not on the reservations. Sheridan planned a three-pronged attack on these areas to catch the Indians in a vice and to crush them between various columns of soldiers. Alfred Terry, John Gibbon, and George Crook led the expeditions. The eastern column under General Alfred Terry, which included the Seventh Cavalry led by George Armstrong Custer, was ordered to leave Fort Abraham Lincoln in North Dakota and march west. But Terry stated he could not get Custer’s unit ready to march before spring, and severe weather also delayed his departure until May. Sheridan ordered Colonel John Gibbon to advance from Fort Ellis in the western areas of modern Montana in an easterly direction, and the column left on 17 March. The men marched through deep snow down the Yellowstone River and established a post at the mouth of the Bighorn River, but the advance had little impact on the military situation because the soldiers found no Indians. Only the southern column under General George Crook, who took the field in March, located an Indian village.\(^{22}\)

**The Big Horn Expedition**

General Crook’s troops left Fort Fetterman on 1 March 1876 and marched north. Crook planned to reach the Big Horn River and attack any Indians he might encounter. His command included ten companies of cavalry and two of infantry, which numbered all together about nine hundred men. The General asked the opinion of his scouts on the location of the Indians, and Frank Grouard told him that a Sioux encampment was most likely to be found on the Powder River. Crook asked the guide what made him so certain. Grouard stated, “from my knowledge of the Indians and their mode of living in the winter time. I knew where they ranged in the winter time.” The next morning the General sent Grouard and other scouts to reconnoiter the trail to the

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Tongue River, a short distance from the Powder River, to see if any Indian camps were there.23

Shortly after the expedition left Fort Fetterman Robert E. Strahorn, a newspaper man who accompanied the troops, stated, “Some of our half-breed scouts say that Crazy Horse ... is only about seventy miles ahead of us with a large number of warriors.” This war chief was famous for advocating resisting the incursions of the whites onto Indian lands, and he had “rode stark naked and armed to the teeth through the grounds of the peace commission last summer and lifted up his voice for war.”24 Clearly, this man and his village were very tempting targets, and the desire to attack them inspired the army to press forward even in the harshest conditions and in the face of harassment from the enemy.

The General clearly believed that winter campaigns gave advantages to the soldiers. When the snows were deep, the Indian adversaries were less mobile meaning they could not easily flee, and they could more often be attacked in their villages. The Indian ponies were smaller animals than the larger cavalry mounts and walked through deep snow with greater difficulty. While the army brought oats for its animals to eat on campaigns, the ponies had to use their hooves to scrape away enough snow to eat some grass. This made the Indian’s horses weak in the winter time, which meant they could not be used in vigorous campaigns. These weakened ponies removed the Indians’ biggest advantage, their ability to run and to maneuver. When the cavalry found and attacked an Indian village in the winter time, the soldiers had a distinct advantage in combat because they had much better fire discipline and coordination than did their adversaries. As Crook admitted, “The worse it [the weather] gets the better; always hunt Indians in bad weather.”25

The Indians cleverly realized that attacking and seizing the army’s food supply was a good means to slow its advance. The column brought a herd of cattle with it to be slaughtered for food, and a few warriors struck the bovines early in the campaign. On 2 March, a guard was watching the heard of cattle at night when one of the troopers, Jim Wright, saw “two or three Indians creeping toward him through the sagebrush.” Several shots were fired and the warriors gave out “a number of unearthly yells.” Even though the entire command was ordered to assemble for battle, the Indians successfully took fifty cattle, and they left Jim Wright mortally wounded. He had been shot through the lungs.26

In the evening of 5 March, the Indians struck again. A group of warriors tried to sneak to the soldier’s camp in an unsuccessful attempt to stampede the horses. When the Indians were spotted, the troopers opened fire, and both sides exchanged shots for nearly an hour. Initially, the


25Crook as quoted by Strahorn, Eyewitnesses, p. 207.

26Ibid., p. 208.
situation appeared to be dangerous for the soldiers because they were standing near their camp fires when the first shots rang out, and they were illuminated by the flames. But the men soon ran away from the light and kept up a high rate of fire. The soldiers had difficulty seeing their targets in the darkness, and “the way of returning their [the Indians’] fire was to watch the flashes of their guns and send a bullet after the flash.” The warriors seemed to fire accurately despite the darkness, and “bullets [were] whizzing about our heads and sometimes lower, in a manner that was a little more interesting than agreeable, especially to those of us who had never been under fire until then.” Despite this relatively accurate fire, only one trooper, Corporal Slavey, was wounded when a bullet went through his cheek.27

Lieutenant John Bourke did not fear these petty engagements, and he thought these skirmishes benefitted the army’s readiness. Most of the men were new recruits and had little military expertise because “many of them [were] as yet imperfectly drilled.” Bourke believed that, “these little night attacks were excellent things,” and they turned “the raw recruit into a veteran” very rapidly. This campaign was making the troopers into able and disciplined soldiers.28

The severe weather of late winter made the campaign very challenging. The temperatures were cold, and the men suffered “without tents or adequate bedding.”29 The troopers were forced to sleep as best they could. Some men threw blankets over trees to create a crude shelter while others made beds out of twigs and grass. General Crook and Col. Thaddeus H. Stanton were even more resourceful when they used an abandoned beaver lodge as a place to sleep. Snow started falling on the morning of 8 March, and it continued all day. The heavy snowfall put out camp fires and kept the cooks from fixing a hot meal for the soldiers that morning. The men had no recourse but to eat “frozen bacon, frozen beans and frozen coffee.” The ice was so thick on the nearby stream that the men had to hack through eighteen inches of ice to find the water.30

A storm continued to hit the soldiers on 9 March, and it snowed the entire day with “the bitter North wind blowing in our faces.” That afternoon a thermometer went to minus 6 degrees Fahrenheit. The severe weather continued on 10 March, and, once again, it snowed all day. The clouds parted that night and temperatures fell dramatically. When the men awoke on 11 March the thermometer registered minus 22 degrees Fahrenheit. This was the lowest the mercury in the instrument could measure, and the soldiers believed that the actual temperature was as low as minus 39 degrees or perhaps between 40 and 50 degrees below zero Fahrenheit. Mercifully, the wind stopped that day, and the wind chill factor did not increase the men’s misery.31

The men were forced to chop off pieces of bacon with axes, and the few loaves of soft

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29Strahorn, “March 15, 1876,” in Eyewitness, p. 213.

30Bourke, Diaries, pp. 232-3.

31Ibid., pp. 234-5.
bread that were still in the camp "were frozen solid as so many rocks." While the men remarkably, "complained but little," a few of them commented on their condition. Many of the men in the army were immigrants from foreign countries, and Americans often found their accents and antics amusing, especially those of the Irish and Germans. Pat, the Irishman, and Hans, the German, tried to stay warm by sleeping under the same blanket. In his misery, Pat observed, "It's damned cold, ain't it?" Hans responded, "Ve has peen damt fools, ain't we?" He was probably referring to their decision to join the army. Hans had written on his knapsack at the beginning of the campaign, "Big Horn [River] or Hell." After facing the bitter cold, he scratched out those words and wrote, "Hell Froze Over!"32

The scouts pressed forward trying to locate an Indian camp. Frank Grouard finally found the tracks of two warriors. He caught up with them, and he watched their progress for hours. From their activities, he believed there was an Indian village within striking distance of the army. He convinced General Crook that the camp could be surprised by a forced march through the night. The General took him at his word, and he ordered his second-in-command, Colonel Joseph J. Reynolds, to take six companies of cavalry to travel rapidly overnight and to attack the position. The detachment was 370 strong. Perhaps a dozen or more scouts were with them, meaning that the entire command was nearly 400 men. For maximum flexibility on the operation, these forces were divided into three battalions of two companies each.33

Crook stayed with the remaining four companies of cavalry and two of infantry to protect the slower baggage train. He also remained in camp at Otter Creek all night meaning that the two columns would be widely separated.34 Logically, the General should have followed Reynolds as rapidly as possible to be in a position to offer support if it became necessary. However, the General chose to advance to the Powder River by another route planning to rendezvous with Reynolds at the river after the Colonel's detachment had the opportunity to strike at the Indian encampment. Dividing forces in the face of an enemy was a dangerous tactic, and the fact that Crook was far away from Reynolds meant that the Colonel lacked the manpower he needed to accomplish his assigned tasks. Late in the afternoon of 16 March, the men in Reynolds' detachment took enough rations for two days and left the remainder of the command.35 Grouard, who had accompanied Reynolds, admitted "that the night was the coldest one I ever experienced in the northern country."36 The temperature was very low, and a "wind blowing keenly all the time" made the wind chill even more severe. The troopers rode until about 3 AM when they finally came to a halt. The men took their places in line in a dry ravine "enduring great


35Vaughn, Powder River, pp. 58-64.

36Grouard, Adventures, pp. 92-5.
suffering from the intense frigidity of the atmosphere.” Some of the soldiers appeared to be on the brink of dying from the cold as Lt. Bourke admitted, “Men in this ravine became drowsy from excessive cold: officers had to kick and shake them to keep them awake and save them from freezing to death.” 37 Strahorn, a newspaperman, accompanied the expedition, and he found the cold “almost unbearable.” Some of the men stated that they would sleep “just for a minute, you know,” but such a slumber was very dangerous. When their concerned friends shook them awake, these men would “make all sorts of excuses to be allowed to enter that sleep which, if undisturbed, would have known no waking.” 38

The Battle of Powder River

Grouard scouted ahead and reported that a large village was close by, and the soldiers pushed forward to strike it before the Indians knew they were coming. As they approached the camp, the troopers saw the young warriors walking around the Indian lodges in the valley below them. Horses and mules grazed on the banks of the Powder River nearby. Even though the sun was already up, Reynolds had time to get his men in order for battle because the Indians had not yet detected them.

The Colonel ordered his units to attack the enemy position from different directions. Company I, under control of Captain Henry Noyes, would advance mounted and strike the herd of Indian ponies that were grazing nearby. At the same time, Company K, under the command of Captain James Egan, was ordered to charge directly into the encampment on horseback firing their pistols as they struck. Reynolds ordered two other companies under Captain Alexander Moore to dismount, advance on foot, and take up a position as close to the village as possible and “hold themselves in readiness to promptly and vigorously follow up the charge.” 39 Reynolds explained his plan to Lieutenant Bourke. “I am sending Noyes’ Battalion to charge the village, because we can give them [the Indians] Egan’s pistols.” The commander continued, “when they start [to run] from the village Moore will catch them from the top of the ridge [with his rifles].” 40

Many of the soldiers believed, and continued to believe for many years, that they were striking a Sioux village, and that its warriors were led by Crazy Horse. Actually, it was a Cheyenne camp under Chief Old Bear, and this tribe had little to do with the disputes between the U.S. government and the Sioux. The Cheyenne just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The cavalry made no effort to identify whom they were attacking, and they cared little whose village they would soon attempt to destroy. The army knew simply that there was an Indian village nearby, and that was reason enough to burn it and kill its inhabitants if they could. There were over 100 lodges in the encampment, which included perhaps 700 people. Among these were about 250 warriors. When the cavalry struck, the Cheyenne were surprised and badly

37 Bourke, Diaries, pp. 245-6.

38 Strahorn, as cited in Eyewitness, p. 219.

39 Reynolds as cited in Powder River, p. 208. See also Bourke, Diaries, pp. 245-6.

40 Bourke, Diaries, p. 249.
outnumbered, but they soon gave a good account of themselves.\footnote{Battles and Skirmishes of the Great Sioux War, 1876-1877: The Military View, Jerome A. Greene, ed. (Norman: U. of Oklahoma, 1993), p. 3. Hereafter cited as Military View. The men attacking the village believed it included 100 lodges or more.}

Lieutenant John Bourke was proud of the skillful deployment of the troops. When Captain Egan gave the orders for the soldiers to form lines for battle, “the little company of forty-seven men formed a beautiful line in less time than it takes to narrate the movement.” Egan told his men to keep their horses at a walk until they were spotted by the enemy. They were then “to charge at a slow trot, ... and upon approaching closely to fire our pistols and storm the village.” Bourke saw that “an Indian boy, herding his ponies, was standing within ten feet of me.” The Lieutenant leveled his revolver at the child perhaps contemplating killing the boy, so he could not alarm the village of the army’s approach. But Captain Egan intervened and told Bourke, “let him alone John.” The child retained his composure “maintaining silence until we had passed and then shouting the war-whoop to alarm the village.”\footnote{Bourke, Diary, p. 250.}

Hunters from the Cheyenne village had seen the troopers camped at Otter Creek, and the warriors rode back to the village as fast as possible. Some of their ponies fell from exhaustion, and their riders were forced to reach the encampment on foot. Many young men went out that night to watch for the soldiers including ten young men with specific orders from the council of old men. The Indians in the village slept securely that night believing that the sentinels would warn them if the troopers approached, but the young men on lookout failed to see the soldiers in time to give an adequate warning. That morning an old man went to the top of a hill to pray when he saw the cavalry. He started shouting, “the soldiers are right here! The soldiers are right here!” When the army attacked, many of the Indians panicked. “Women screamed. Children cried for their mothers. Old people tottered and hobbled away to get out of reach of the bullets singing among the lodges. Braves seized whatever weapons they had and tried to meet the attack.”\footnote{Wooden Leg, A Warrior who fought Custer, Interpreted by Thomas B. Marquis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2003), pp. 164-5.} The battle had begun.

The newspaperman, Robert Strahorn, fought with Company K when it attacked. He wrote that the men were ordered to draw their revolvers, place their “steeds to the full gallop, dash into the village with as much force and with as terrific yells as possible, and when once among the savages, to empty our six-shooters ‘where they would do the most good.’” When the men were less than two hundred yards from the nearest lodge, the order was given, “Charge, my boys!” The men spurred their horses, and the troopers attacked, “yelling like so many demons.” The Cheyenne ran out of their tepees and scattered as fast as they could. The soldiers “fired right and left at their retreating forms.” The troopers’ mounts seemed to be invigorated by the din of battle, and “they fairly flew over the ground.” The Indians were only briefly confused, and they began to resist effectively. “A majority of the Redskins snatched their arms as they ran, dropped as though shot, behind a log or stump, in the tall grass, or took temporary refuge in the thickets of
willow and plum [trees].” The warriors began firing back and inflicting casualties on the attackers. The cavalrymen were riding gray horses, and the color of the animals made them more visible to the defenders, so the Indians found them to be good targets. Five of the animals were wounded, including the horse rode by Captain Egan, and two were killed. 

According to Frank Grouard, one of these horses was killed in a heroic fashion. During the attack, the hospital steward, Will Bryan, was riding next to Captain Egan. When the men rode among the lodges, a Indian ran out of one of them and aimed his weapon at the Captain. Bryan could see that Egan could be killed in an instant, and he ran his horse forward to protect the Captain. The Indian fired and the bullet went straight into the head of the mount killing it instantly. Bryan was then on foot, and he attempted to run down the Indian. The soldier ran after him chasing him past the groups of lodges. Even though the steward was known as a good runner, he failed to catch the warrior. Robert Strahorn gave a less dramatic and a less heroic account of the incident. He wrote that Bryan saw a young warrior firing revolvers at him from behind a tree stump. The steward ducked behind his horse’s head to avoid being hit, “and the poor animal received the bullet in his brain.” According to this account, the animal died saving Bryan not Egan.

During the charge into the village, a bullet went through a soldier’s cap. The ball just grazed the man’s head, but he and a couple of other men dashed forward “to wreak their vengeance on the Redskin who had fired.” When they rushed into a lodge, they were very surprised to see three or four women armed with revolvers, “in the act of slipping through the opposite side of the wigwam by way of a hole they had just carved with butcher knives.” Strahorn was clearly impressed with the courage and resourcefulness of his adversaries, and he admitted, “These Indians may be cowardly, but they have a queer way of showing it.”

The soldiers were still wielding their pistols. They kept pressing forward, and they forced the warriors to abandon “the first line of trees,” and take “refuge farther to the rear.” While Lieutenant Bourke stated the men had “behaved very gallantly” in the “3 or 4 minutes this little affair lasted,” they had taken casualties. Three men were wounded, including John Droege. One was shot in the lungs, another had been struck in the elbow, and yet another was hit in the collar bone. Private George Schneider, “a very brave soldier,” was shot through the neck and soon died. There were also many close misses. Bourke’s “bridle rein was cut in two by a bullet and a number of men were shot through their clothing.”

When Wooden Leg ran out of his lodge, he grabbed what weapons he could. He had an

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44 Strahorn, as cited in Eyewitness, p. 221.

45 Grouard, p. 97.

46 Strahorn, as cited in Eyewitness, p. 224.


48 Bourke, Diary, pp. 250-1.
old muzzle-loading rifle, but he had no bullets for it. He also owned an old six-shooter pistol, but he had recently loaned it to Star, a cousin, who gave him a bow and some arrows in return. Wooden Leg shot the arrows at the soldiers, but these antiquated weapons were ineffective. Fortunately, he got to the horse herd in time to grab an animal, and the warrior tried to return to the village where he met people trying to escape. “Women were struggling along with packs of precious belongings. Some were dragging or carrying their children. All were shrieking with fright.” He put a young girl and a small boy on his mount and brought them to safety, but his day’s work was not done. “Then I went back to help in the fight.”49

The Indians kept up a heavy fire by “pouring bullets from behind every convenient cover in the shape of rocks, trees, thickets, etc.” The soldiers had lost the momentum they had used in the charge on the village, and their pistols had insufficient range to threaten the warriors. The troopers were ordered to dismount, to give their horses to every fourth man to hold them, and to continue the battle by the use of their carbines, which were short rifles. The situation became critical as the Cheyenne occupied more defensible positions than did the cavalry. Captain Moore was supposed to take an advantageous position overlooking the village that potentially could have trapped the Indians, but his troopers were detained and the flank of Company K was exposed. Strahorn feared the warriors “must have thought it an easy matter to annihilate us in a very short course of events.” Captain Egan clearly thought that aggressive action could have kept his adversaries at a distance and regained the initiative for the cavalry, so he “soon ordered a charge through the brush on foot.” Even though the Indians continued to fight, they were pushed back by this unexpected advance. During the charge, a small detachment of “half a dozen men” came down the hill to aid the hard-pressed soldiers. Soon after, Company M and E finally arrived, and the cavalry was then in complete control of the village.50

Captain Noyes brought up Company I and swung around Egan’s command on the right to strike at the Indian horse herd, which his men easily captured. There were about 700 to 800 ponies, which “did not include more than half the number seen by us.” But the loss of these animals was a severe blow to the Indians’ ability to fight and to move. The warriors were still on the high ground outside the village, and they continued to fire at the troopers. Reynolds believed that he had too few soldiers to drive his adversaries away completely, so he ordered his men to form a skirmish line to keep the warriors at a distance. He stated, “The Indians fled from the village and assumed positions behind rocks, trees etc and opened fire upon our line making it necessary that our position just taken should be strongly held by our troops to prevent the Indians from recapturing the village.”51

Reynolds then ordered the complete destruction of the village. He was hampered in this effort because most of his men were deployed in the line of battle, and Reynolds assigned only Company E under Lieutenant John Johnson with the task. Many of the materials to be destroyed were works of art. Bourke said that there were buffalo robes and skins of beavers and bears, and

49Wooden Leg, Warrior, pp. 165-7.

50Strahorn, as cited in Eyewitness, p. 221-2.

“many [were] of extra-fine quality.” Some of the robes “were wondrously embroidered with porcupine quills, paint and trimmings.” Much of the leather was also “embroidered with beadwork.” The Indians had many belongings. “In each lodge, knives and forks, spoons, tin-cups, platters, mess-pans, frying-pans, pots and kettles of all kinds, axes, hatchets, hunting knives, water-kegs, blankets, pillows and every imaginable kind of truck [small miscellaneous items] was seen in profusion.” The soldiers also found tons of venison and dried buffalo meat. The troopers set the lodges on fire, and the men heard the pop and puff of ammunition and powder exploding from the flames.52

The lodges did not burn as rapidly as was expected because of “the dampness of the material lodge skin and cloth [and the] danger from powder explosions in the lodges,” which likely kept the men from being more thorough in their work.53 Reynolds later came under severe criticism from Bourke and others for destroying much of what the army badly needed. “General Reynolds ordered everything destroyed and with a command undergoing every hardship, suffering from intense cold and hunger. Tons of first-class meat and provisions were destroyed and many things of positive necessity to the men [were] wantonly burned up.”54 Indeed many of the men were more interested in plundering the village for items they needed than in burning the camp. Reynolds was frustrated by the men trying to retrieve what they badly needed because he thought this effort wasted time and kept the troopers from following their orders as rapidly as he desired. “I found great difficulty in preventing the men from pilfering. They delayed the firing of the lodges to bring out robes and meat. I required them to throw these things down where they were and ordered the destruction of the village be promptly made.”55

The guides found an elderly woman in one of the lodges laying on a couch, and the men interviewed her. Apparently, she cleverly told them what they wanted to hear. According to the old lady, the main chief of the encampment belonged to Crazy Horse, and most of the Indians in the village were Sioux.56 The village was clearly Cheyenne, and Crazy Horse was far away at the time, so this was false information, but the guides believed it anyway. Perhaps in consideration of her age and the fact she told them useful lies, the men did not molest her or destroy her lodge. When the Indians retook the village after the battle, they found only one lodge still standing. They went inside to find the “old blind woman” entirely unharmed. The warriors talked about this “all agreeing that the act showed the soldiers had good hearts.”57

The battle with the Cheyenne continued, but the army probably inflicted few casualties on

52Bourke, Diary, p. 253 and Strahorn, as cited in Eyewitness, p. 222.
53J. B. Johnson as cited in Powder River, p. 222.
54Bourke, Diary, p. 253.
56Bourke, Diary, p. 255.
57Wooden Leg, p. 168.
the warriors. No one in the army knew how many Indians had been killed as Lieutenant Bourke admitted, “We captured no bodies [but] we had excellent reasons for believing we had killed and wounded many in the enemy’s ranks.”58 This was little more than wishful thinking, and Wooden Leg reported that only, “One Cheyenne was killed by the soldiers. Another had his forearm badly shattered. Braided Locks . . . had the skin of one cheek furrowed by a bullet.” Most of the Indians fired on the soldiers at a distance and did little damage, but Two Moons, Bear Walks on a Ridge, and Wooden Leg “centered an attack upon one certain soldier.” Two Moons wielded a repeating rifle. He “passed his hands up and down the barrel, not touching it, while making medicine.” He finally said, “My medicine is good; watch me kill that soldier.” He shot, but he missed his target. Then Bear Walks on a Ridge aimed and fired his muzzle-loading rifle. Apparently, the bullet hit the trooper in the back of the head. The warriors then “rushed upon the man and beat him to death.”59 The trooper they had killed was probably Private Michael McCannon, whose body was never found, but Wooden Leg’s account of the man’s demise also has some similarities to the death of Private Lorenzo Ayers.

Private Jeremiah Murphy reported that the Indians shot Private Ayers through the hand and the leg before he died. The wounded man’s thigh bone was broken, so he was unable to walk. Murphy and the blacksmith, Albert Glavinski, stayed with the Ayers until the Indians came close, and Murphy had decided to flee. But the wounded man pleaded to his friend in a heart-rending voice, “Oh Murphy, for Mercy’s sake, do not leave me in their hands.” Murphy bravely returned and “lifted the groaning man to his shoulders and tried to make his way through the advancing savages, who poured a rain of bullets at him.” Ayers was shot yet again, and “Murphy’s carbine stock [was] smashed by a rifle-ball.” Murphy drew his revolver, and he fired until it was empty. He then had no choice but abandon his friend and run for his life. “His uniform was pierced by several bullets, but the brave man escaped unscathed.” Murphy fled into some bushes for cover. When he noticed that the warriors had stopped firing at him, he looked back, and he “saw them [the warriors] circling around the wounded man—ten or fifteen of them.” The Indians killed Ayers, and Murphy saw him scalped. For his courage, Murphy was later awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest commendation given to United States military personnel for bravery in combat.60

Four soldiers were killed in battle that day including Private Peter Dowdy, who “was shot through the head and instantly killed.” Six men were also wounded. The troopers retrieved two of the bodies of the fallen, George Schneider and Peter Dowdy. Reynolds reported that there was no means of taking the bodies with the army or burying them. This was a weak excuse because the soldiers certainly could have tied the corpses onto horses and carried the them away, but the army left them. The bodies of the two other fatalities, Michael McCannon and Lorenzo Ayers,

58Bourke, Diary, p. 256.

59Wooden Leg, p. 167.

were left with the Indians and never retrieved. The wounded men who could not ride were placed on travois which were two poles connected by hides or blankets upon which the wounded men could lay. Horses then dragged the devices.\footnote{Reynolds as cited in \textit{Powder River}, pp. 212-13.}

The battle continued for five hours while Reynolds became increasingly concerned about his weak position, the aggressiveness of his adversaries, and the accuracy of their marksmanship. “There was danger that the Indians now becoming bolder and stronger by creeping among the logs, trees, sage brush, rocks and willows which were found from one end of our line to the other, would pick off our men from concealed positions and where our return fire would not be as effective as theirs.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 210.} Clearly, the battle was going badly for the army. The men had fired more than sixty rounds of ammunition each and had still been unable to keep their adversaries away. Lieutenant Johnson reported that the position occupied by Captain Moore’s two companies was becoming increasingly threatened, and the command fell back. When they did so, the Indians followed them and “boldly appeared and danced on the sage brush bench which he had occupied.” Moore’s men were in a position that was soon becoming untenable because “our line received the Indians fire from the right, front and left.” Twice Johnson came to Reynolds stating that the threatened troopers must have reinforcements or fall back yet again. Initially, the Colonel seemed to misunderstand the urgency of the message and disagreed with the report stating, “that isn’t so” or “can’t be so.” Finally, Reynolds saw the gravity of the situation. He realized that after the army had destroyed the village, little more could be accomplished by holding the encampment, and the Colonel ordered his hard-pressed command to withdraw from the village. The warriors were quick to reoccupy the encampment. When the army was leaving the village from one side, the Indians was entering it on the other.\footnote{Johnson as cited in \textit{Powder River}, pp. 221-2.}

The soldiers marched up the Powder River for twenty miles to the mouth of Lodge Pole Creek where they were supposed to meet General Crook’s command. Bourke stated that the men “were very uncomfortable from want of adequate clothing.” They were also out of food. “[We] have no rations, not even for our poor wounded men.” A few of the officers had some crackers in their saddle bags, and a few soldiers only had a small piece or two buffalo meat. This made a “miserable apology for supper.” Once the meat was cooked in some ashes, it was divided among five or six troopers “each getting a mouthful only.” Many of the men were also suffering from the effects of the cold, and there were “a great number of cases of frosted and frozen feet, noses and fingers” as well. Lieutenant Bourke suffered from “frozen toes,” and the doctors painted them with Iodine as a treatment.\footnote{Bourke, \textit{Diary}, pp. 254-6.}

Colonel Reynolds was concerned about his ability to control the herd of Indian ponies he had captured. They were far too valuable to abandon to his adversaries, but there was no best option of what to do with them. He considered shooting the animals, but he “feared that [he]
might require the ammunition for other purposes,” meaning that he was concerned that the warriors would again attack his command. The Colonel worried that the use of hundreds of bullets to kill the horses potentially left him at a disadvantage. Many of his men had fired more than sixty rounds that day, and the troopers probably had insufficient ammunition left to engage the Indians again in a lengthy battle.65

Reynolds hoped that his problems would be solved when he met General Crook at the mouth of Lodge Pole Creek, but the Colonel was disappointed when he arrived at the location at sundown to find that the General had not yet arrived. Crook was supposed to be waiting with “pack trains and fresh troops to guard our stock and give us relief,” but Reynolds’s men would have to fend for themselves that night. The General and his command could have been on hand, but Crook had advanced slowly that day. Early in the morning, it took his men four hours to ride ten miles. When the command was within a half mile of the Powder River, Crook thought an Indian village might be nearby, and he fell back a mile and a half, so the Indians would not see him. This tardiness did nothing to help Reynolds, and his men and their horses were completely exhausted as the Colonel explained, “We had marched fifty four miles and fought four hours during the last 26 hours, had no sleep during the previous night, and in fact no rest during the previous 36 hours, and [we had] marched ... 73 miles from the camp on the Tongue River.”66

That night too few guards were placed over the captured horse herd, and the exhausted troopers, who had gone two days without sleep, were in no position to watch the animals carefully. Wooden Leg and other warriors followed the soldiers and approached their camp at night. “We crept toward the herd.” One of the men would whisper, “I see my horse.” Then another man said, “There is mine.” Most of the warriors could not see their animals, so they took any horse that was nearby. Wooden Leg was pleased, “I got my own favorite animal.” After retrieving many Indian ponies, the men tried to take some of the soldiers’ mounts, but the troopers shot at them, and the warriors concentrated on taking their own animals. The horses helped the Indians a great deal because they “let the women and some of the old people ride.”67

By morning the rest of the Indian ponies had strayed far enough from the camp that a small group of Indians were able to retrieve them. When the animals were still in view, going over a ridge only three or four miles away, Reynolds “to the surprise of all” refused to make any attempt to recapture them. While the army still had about one hundred Indian ponies, which meant that most of the horses were lost, some of the men severely criticized this decision. “Great dissatisfaction now arose among all, several of the officers venting their ill-feelings in splenetic [i.e. bitter] criticism, and openly charging Reynolds with incapacity.”68 The Colonel later defended his decision not to pursue the horses, “I deemed it inadvisable in the condition of our horses to attempt a long and doubtful chase after the ponies.” He further argued that he must

65 Reynolds as cited in Powder River, p. 211.
66 Ibid.
67 Wooden Leg, p. 169.
68 Bourke, Diary, pp. 256-7.
keep his mounts from breaking down because they would be needed in the summer months for additional campaigning.69 This excuse had little merit because the army could easily buy more horses for future operations.

Some of Reynolds’ men also bitterly criticized his leadership in the battle. Strahorn stated that abandoning the bodies of two men to the Indians was “utterly inexcusable.”70 Lieutenant Bourke was critical of almost every aspect of the Colonel’s leadership. Bourke wrote that leaving the bodies of the dead were “errors” that showed “Reynolds’ imbecility.” The Lieutenant further stated that the refusal of his leader to allow his men to take buffalo robes and food from the Indian camp showed “bad management.” Only grudgingly did Bourke admit that Reynolds was “very cool under fire, discharging duties, at least as far as he understood them, efficiently and coolly.” 71

The attack on the village was costly to its inhabitants, and Wooden Leg stated that, “the Cheyennes were rendered very poor.” The warrior had little left but the clothes on his back, and everything else was gone. The victims of the attack trudged to the north and east, and they had to sleep in the open for three nights. They were hungry because only a small number of women had “little chunks of dry meat in the small packs.” Few of them had buffalo robes to protect them from the cold, and “there was hard freezing at night and there was mud and water by day.” On the fourth day, they arrived at the camp of the Ogallala Sioux who “received us hospitably, as we knew they would.” Many of the Indians called to their friends, “Cheyennes, come and eat here,” and the refugees were soon fed, housed, and clothed. The main leader of the Sioux was the famous warrior chief Crazy Horse. Soon the Cheyenne and various groups of Sioux met and decided that they should join their forces to resist the army.72

Crook’s campaign and irresponsible attack on the village had done little to hurt the military abilities of the Indians but had done much to expand the war. The warriors had suffered few casualties, and they were soon able to replenish their losses of supplies and lodges. Before this unprovoked attack, the Northern Cheyenne had little interest in the issues that brought the Sioux to war. After the battle of Powder River, the Cheyenne became allies of the Sioux, and they would participate in many of the campaigns during the rest of the year. Additionally, the army thought they had attacked the village of Crazy Horse and damaged the ability of the Sioux to fight. But their error in striking the Cheyenne village had the opposite effect because the army had given the famous war chief and many of his Sioux allies additional manpower to use against the soldiers.

Retreat and Accusations

General Crook’s command finally met with Colonel Reynolds’ column of troopers at noon on 18 March 1876 to the great relief of the Colonel’s men. The General “was much pleased to learn of our having encountered the Sioux and taken their village.” A few Indians were still


70 Strahorn in Eyewitness, p. 225.

71 Bourke, Diary, pp. 253-4.

72 Wooden Leg, pp. 168-70.
following the soldiers perhaps hoping to seize some of the ponies still held by the cavalry. One warrior, "wearing a war bonnet" made the mistake of coming within range of the General’s rifle. Known as an excellent marksman, Crook took aim and apparently hit the man who fell from his saddle. His comrades took the wounded man away, but the troopers captured the man’s horse, saddle, buffalo robe, blanket, and war bonnet.73

The warriors followed the army and occasionally took shots into the soldiers’ camp fires. The Indians were probably looking for an opportunity to retrieve the remaining horses. Crook feared that the warriors would continue to cause trouble as long as the cavalry still had some of their mounts, so he ordered the animals killed. The troopers shot some of the horses, but they also slit some of their throats as well. When the animals were in their death pain, they made “a dismal trumpeting,” and the Indians knew what the sound meant. “With one yell of defiance and a parting volley, they left us alone for the rest of the night.” The soldiers were so hungry that they cut large chunks of meat from the dead ponies, which they cooked in the ashes of their campfires. Even though some of the men had misgivings about eating horse flesh, they were desperate for food, and they found the meat “sweet and nourishing.”74

The hungry and fatigued men rode for days until they reached Fort Reno on 21 March. After resting there for a couple of days, the command resumed its march. Fortunately, the weather was getting warmer. While the men still faced heavy snow, there was also much rain, and the soldiers had to deal with sticky mud. During this march, fifty-eight horses and thirty-two mules were either shot or abandoned because they could not longer walk. The men also continued to suffer from fatigue and hunger. “First we were put on half rations and then on quarter rations and were very fortunate to get back ... before running out of rations entirely.”75

The soldiers arrived back at Fort Fetterman on 25 March 1876. The campaign was over, but the recriminations were just about to begin.

Crook was clearly pleased with the outcome of the campaign during the return journey, and he sent two telegrams to his superiors from Fort Reno on 22 and 23 March bragging about the success in the battle. He boasted that Reynolds had “attacked and destroyed” the Indian encampment. The General further stated with clear exaggeration, “We succeeded in breaking up Crazy Horse’s band ... killing more than one hundred Indians and burning their village on the Little Powder River. An immense quantity of ammunition, arms and dried meats were stored in their lodges, all of which we destroyed.”76 His statement that “we succeeded” and “we destroyed” were efforts for Crook to share in Reynolds’ victory. But two days after he sent the second telegram, the General arrived at Fort Fetterman and immediately charged Colonel Reynolds with dereliction of duty. Much had changed since Crook had praised the Colonel’s

73Bourke, Diary, pp. 257-8.


75Private Phineas S. Towne as cited in Powder River, p. 158.

76Crook as cited in Powder River, p. 180.
efforts, and the victory at the Battle of Powder River was then called a failure.

The tired, cold, and hungry soldiers had complained for days about their discomfort on the campaign, and they found much to blame in the conduct of Reynolds, many of their officers, and anyone else on the expedition. Lieutenant Morton probably provoked the recriminations when he had taken out some of his misery by aiming "ill-judged criticisms" toward Robert Strahorn, the correspondent for the Daily Rocky Mountain News. Strahorn had conducted himself admirably in the battle and had fought bravely with Lieutenant Bourke’s men in the village, and the newspaperman refused to take Morton’s unfair criticism and threatened to retaliate and "publish the truth" of the campaign by printing its failures. Bourke stated that Crook had "no other remedy left but to probe the matter to the quick by a General Court Martial." The General decided to defray any possible criticisms that could be leveled against him by finding someone else to blame.

Colonel Reynolds later claimed that Crook stated that he would drop the charges against him if the Colonel would file charges against Captain Noyes and Captain Moore. Dutifully, Reynolds brought an accusation against Noyes stating that he had neglected his duty by halting his men for lunch when they were so badly needed in the fight for the village. While the court found Noyes guilty, Crook stated that the Captain had only "committed an error in judgment," and he was immediately released from arrest. This trial was practically a farce probably staged to make it appear that the army was dealing with its problems, but the trial of Reynolds had a much more serious purpose.

This court martial was held in January 1877, several months after the summer and fall campaigns against the Sioux had been concluded. The Battle of Powder River had long been overshadowed by General Crook’s further campaigns that resulted in the battles of the Rosebud in June 1876 and Slim Buttes in September of 1876. The conduct at Powder River was largely forgotten by then, and the court martial of Colonel Reynolds was little more than Crook’s vindictiveness.

Reynolds was charged with disobedience to orders, mismanaging the battle, leaving the dead and wounded on the battlefield, and allowing the Indian ponies to be recaptured. The General testified that he had given verbal orders to Reynolds, which the subordinate did not follow. The Colonel argued that he followed the instructions given to him. Reynolds further defended himself by saying that Crook was pleased with the campaign until the threat that criticisms might appear in the newspapers. The Colonel testified that the General even "congratulated" him and his men for their success in battle. Reynolds further criticized his Crook’s decisions, "There was no reason whatsoever for dividing the command" which left the Colonel with too few men to accomplish all their tasks. Reynolds claimed he had done his best under the circumstances.

The Colonel had little chance for real justice in a court convened to condemn him and to

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77 Bourke, Diary, p. 262.

78 Crook as cited in Powder River, p. 169.

79 Reynolds as cited in Powder River, p. 176.
vindicate the General, and Reynolds was found guilty on all charges. His punishment was to be suspended from service for one year without pay. The Colonel realized that his military career was over, and he soon retired from the army. With the exception of abandoning his dead on the battlefield, Reynolds had managed the battle competently. Perhaps he made a number of mistakes, but each decision seemed logical considering his insufficient manpower and his exhausted troops. He might have done as well as anyone else in the same situation, and a prominent historian of the Indian campaigns has called the decision of the court, “cruelly unjust.”

The Battle of Powder River should be placed in context of other similar campaigns against the Indians. At the battles of the Washita in November 1868, Slim Buttes in September 1876, and Dull Knife’s village on the Red Fork in November of 1876, the army fought similar engagements. In each case, the soldiers took an Indian village and burned it, but the army later withdrew when faced with determined counter attacks by Indian warriors. But these battle were viewed as great accomplishments. While these outcomes were almost identical to that at Powder River, this engagement was considered a failure because General Crook wanted to defray any criticism by ruining the career of a competent subordinate. Perhaps the most important aspect of the campaign that culminated in the Battle of Powder River was what it showed about Crook’s character and quality of leadership. The General clearly underestimated the fighting ability of his adversaries at Powder River, and he would do so again at the Battle of the Rosebud. To a certain extent, Crook was the victim of his own propaganda. In condemning Reynolds for his actions at Powder River, the General had declared that the campaign and battle were failures. Crook now needed a victory to salvage his reputation and that of his command.

**The Big Horn and Yellowstone Expedition**

The attempts to deal crippling blows on the Sioux in the early spring of 1876 had been failures. When the weather improved, the army took the field again. General John Gibbon left Fort Ellis with 450 men to march southeast. General Alfred Terry advanced from Fort Abraham Lincoln with 950 men, and he was joined by George Armstrong Custer with 650 men in the Seventh Cavalry. General Crook’s command had received reinforcements, and it was then a formidable force comprised of 10 companies from the 3rd Cavalry, 5 companies from the 2nd Cavalry, 2 companies from the 4th Infantry regiment, and 3 companies from the 9th Infantry regiment. This forced numbered 1002 men and 47 officers. They marched from Fort Fetterman on 29 May 1876.

The advance was much easier than the trying campaign two months earlier. Initially, the biggest challenge for the men had been fording streams, but tragedy struck on 30 May when a

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man, Private Francis Tierney, accidentally shot himself while chopping wood. He died on 7 June, and the troopers were forced to bury the first casualty of the expedition. Lieutenant Bourke thought the campaign was quite dull, and he was pleased when "the monotony of camp life was agreeably broken by an attack upon our lines made in a most energetic manner by the Sioux and Cheyennes" on 9 June. The army heard reports that Crazy Horse had threatened that he would attack any soldiers who crossed the Tongue River. When the column reached that stream, the troopers were extra vigilant, and they placed a line of men at the top of the nearby hills to warn of any enemy advance. These sentinels soon saw Indians, and the troopers started to ride "their horses around in a circle, a warning that they had seen something dangerous." The Indians advanced in good order, and they forced the soldiers in forward positions to withdraw. The warriors soon hid among the rocks from which they began to fire on the army camp. Fortunately for the troopers, the Indians' shots inflicted few casualties. The warriors directed much of their fire on the tents that were unoccupied at that time, but "bullets ripped through the canvas, split the ridge poles, smashed the pipes of the ... stoves, and imbedded themselves in the tail boards of the wagons." Only two troopers were slightly wounded by glancing bullets.

Even though the shots from the warriors did little serious damage, General Crook had to remove this threat. He ordered his men to mount and advance on the Indian positions. In a fine show of discipline, the command mounted and charged across the Tongue River. They soon saw their "assailants scampering like deer." The cavalry "rushed forward with a yell," and their adversaries fired a few more shots at them before they retreated into the hills. The situation was potentially serious because the Indians might return in larger numbers, but Lieutenant Bourke seemed little concerned, and he thought that such attacks did the army much good as he had while marching to the Powder River three months earlier. "It is to be hoped the Indians may make attacks of this kind every night." He explained that "no greater advantage can accrue to young troops than to keep them constantly under fire." In reacting to this threat, the new men in the army would learn their tasks well, become veterans, and learn "the importance of implicit obedience to authority." Also, the officers would also become more efficient in their duties.

Little Hawk described an attack on the cavalry when the army was near the Tongue River. Some of the warriors decided to strike at night because they thought they could stampede the cavalry's horses. The Indians crept close to the army camp and charged. To their surprise, the soldiers appeared to be waiting for them. They "must have been sitting up with guns in their hands for a rain of bullets" met the attackers. The warriors fired for a while, but there were no casualties, as far as Little Hawk knew, on either side. The attackers then drew off and returned to

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83Bourke, Crook, p. 294.

84John F. Finerty, War -Path and Bivouac: The Big Horn and Yellowstone Expedition (Chicago: Donnelley, 1955), pp. 92-6. Finerty, a newspaperman, accompanied the expedition.

85Bourke, Diary, p. 305.
their camp. 86

As Crook’s command improved in competency, it also increased in size. The Crow Indians had long hated the Sioux and Cheyenne, and they were eager to assist the army in fighting their old enemies. On 14 June, 175 Crow warriors arrived in camp. These warriors impressed Lt. Bourke who said that they would be very helpful to the command because they could “follow the trails of the hostile Sioux and discover their villages.” This was a needed skill which the soldiers did not have. In addition, the Crows would also spare the soldiers the tiresome duty of scouting in advance of the cavalry column. Also, these warriors were well armed with breech-loading rifles, many of which were the same weapons used by the army. In addition, eighty-six Shoshone warriors soon arrived. They also shared a hatred for the Sioux and wanted to fight against their old adversaries. 87 Including the infantry, the cavalry, and the Indian allies, Crook’s column numbered at least 1,325 men, which was indeed a formidable force. 88

Frank Grouard and many of the scouts also arrived on 14 June, and many of the troopers celebrated their return. Crook and his men continued to gain confidence, and they believed they could deal with any threat from their adversaries. As Lt. Bourke observed, “No one now doubts we shall be victorious. ... [and] It was evident the General meant business.” 89 Finerty also noted, “Crook was bristling for a fight.” 90 The General was soon to get the battle he wanted.

The Crow Indians told Crook that they believed that Crazy Horse’s camp was located farther down the Tongue River or on one of its small tributaries. Most importantly they, “were quite positive we should be able to surprise it” by a forced march. Crook believed this to be a good opportunity, and he “considered it worthwhile to make the attempt.” He resolved to mount a decisive attack by breaking away from his slow supply train and hitting the camp before the Indians knew of his approach. 91 He ordered his men to be ready to march on the morning of 16 June. The General stated that each man would carry food for four days in his saddle bags. “No tents were taken, and neither wagons or ambulances. ... Many officers as well as the soldiers [took] a good sized piece of dried elk meat, some hard bread, sugar, coffee, and at least one hundred rounds of ammunition.” 92

Crook wanted to move as rapidly as possible, but he also wanted to bring as many soldiers

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87 Bourke, Diary, pp. 310-3.

88 Vaughn, Rosebud, pp. 31-2.

89 Bourke, Diary, pp. 310-3.

90 Finerty, War-Path, p. 105

91 Crook as cited in Rosebud, p. 215.

as he could with him. His infantry could certainly bring greater numbers and firepower to bear in
any engagement, but they had to be present to have any impact on a battle. These men on foot,
often called “Walk-a-heaps” by the Indians, frequently walked impressive distances, but they were
incapable of keeping up with the cavalry on rapid marches. Crook’s solution was to place 175
foot soldiers on mules, the only mounts available. The animals were taken from the supply train.
The mules had a reputation for being headstrong, and they were not used to being ridden.
Similarly, many of the infantrymen had no experience or skill on horseback.

On 15 June, these men tried to learn to ride to the great amusement of the experienced
horsemen. Frank Grouard claimed, “I never saw so much fun in all my life. The valley for a mile
in every direction was filled with bucking mules, frightened infantrymen, broken saddles and
applauding spectators.” He further saw, “some of the most ludicrous mishaps imaginable.”93 Lt.
Bourke also enjoyed the scene, “Amusing incidents there were in plenty and many scenes of grand
and lofty tumbling occurred when the improvised dragoons attempted for the first time to mount
their charges.” The mules clearly gave a good account of themselves in resisting the foot soldiers,
but the infantry was finally able to master their mounts.94

Finerty found much to praise in the young men who soon marched into battle. They were
“careless, courageous and eminently light hearted,” and the “majority were of either Irish or
German birth or parentage.” The command was “a fine organization” in which four fifths of the
officers had graduated from West Point, the United States Army military academy, and were
professional and able leaders. The men arose early on the morning of 16 June. Every man was
mounted, and the “splendid” column began its march to the northwest.95

While Finerty laughed at the infantrymen trying to learn to ride their mules as had
everyone else, he still had much to learn about taking proper care of his equipment and weapons.
After a brief rest, Finerty got back on his horse, and the muzzle of his rifle accidentally struck the
hammer of his revolver. The hammer was resting on the primer in the cartridge, and the sudden
jolt discharged the weapon. The shock of “explosion” made the newspaperman think that
someone had “hit me a vigorous blow with a stick on the right rear of my pantaloons,” and his
horse recoiled from the shock of the bullet. The ball blew off the back of the saddle but did no
further damage. A trooper rode to Finerty and assured him, “You were not made to be killed by
bullets, or that would have fixed you.” The reporter was so shaken that he could not respond
clearly when Captain Guy Henry asked him “Is the bullet in your person?” In confusion Finerty
stated, “I don’t know.” The officer was quite amused by a man who could not tell if he had been
shot and said, “Then by Jove it is about time you found out.” He rode away laughing.96

Crook had wanted to approach the Sioux camp and strike it before his adversaries had
time to react, but his march was hardly stealthy. The column soon came upon a large herd of

93Grouard, pp. 115-6.
94Bourke, Diary, p. 316.
95Finerty, pp. 115-6.
96Ibid., p. 118.
buffalo. While the General's disciplined troopers stayed in ranks, the Crow and Shoshone scouts swept into action and killed many of the large animals. This big and noisy hunting foray certainly meant that the Sioux would learn of their advance. Crook was "annoyed" by this action, "which could not help alarming the wary foe with whom he had to contend; but nothing could check the Indians."  

After the buffalo hunt, the men continued their march. Lt. Bourke commented on the beauty of the landscape stating that the grass was "emerald green." There were few trees in the region, "but wild-roses by the thousand laid their delicate beauties at our feet." These large numbers of rose bushes in the area gave the Rosebud River its name. After a lengthy march of 35 or 40 miles, the troopers finally made came on the banks of "the extreme head-waters of the Rosebud." The tired men dined on buffalo meat and made camp. Believing that there were hostile Sioux Indians nearby, the army took proper precautions that night. They established their lines in a hollow square with the horse inside, so they could not be stolen. Each man slept with his saddle for a pillow and kept his rifle nearby in case it would be needed on short notice. Late in the night, the Indian scouts returned stating that they had surprised a small band of Sioux hunters. These warriors ran away so rapidly that they left their meat that they were cooking on the fire. The soldiers were concerned as Bourke explained, "we are now right in among the hostiles and [they] may strike ... at any hour."  

The location of the army camp was probably known to any Sioux who happened to be in the area. The Shoshone and Crow warriors celebrated their hunt long into the night. These "boastful, howling Indians" lit fires and made much noise, while the soldiers were under strict orders not to light any campfires and to remain quiet. When Captain Alexander Sutorius wrapped himself in a blanket before he went to sleep, he commented to Finerty, "We will have a fight tomorrow, mark my words—I feel it in the air."  

The Indian Warriors  

When the winter weather ended in 1876, the Sioux and Cheyenne began to assemble in the area of the Yellowstone River including its tributary, the Rosebud. They arrived for weeks. Some of them came from various government reservations, while others had been away from the white man's influence the previous winter. The Sioux groups included the Miniconjou, Hunkpapa, Oglala, Brule, Sans Arc, Sihasapa, and a few Santee, who had long been impoverished after fighting the whites in the Great Sioux Uprising in Minnesota in 1862. In addition, groups of Northern Cheyenne and even Southern Cheyenne, who came long distances, also converged on the area. The combined numbers of warriors was large by any standard. One prominent study has estimated that the number of Indian lodges was at least 461, but it would have been much

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97Ibid., pp. 119-20.

98Bourke, Diary, p. 325.

99Finerty, p. 122.
larger.100

The Indian ponies had become weak because in the winter when the grass was covered with snow, and the animals were unable to eat it. But when the weather improved in the late spring, the grass began to grow, and the horses became stronger and able to sustain lengthy and rapid marches. This meant that the warriors were then capable of traveling long distances and striking at their enemies. As Wooden Leg stated, many of the young men were anxious to find and fight the soldiers, “but the chiefs and old men all urged us to keep away from the white men.”101 This changed after the optimistic vision from Sitting Bull because he stated that the Indians would be victorious in an upcoming fight. This made many more Sioux and Cheyenne willing to risk battle.

Sitting Bull was a respected leader of the Hunkpapa Sioux, and he believed his people should live far away from white people and get nothing from them. He believed his followers were wealthy in everything they needed, and many Indians respected him because he was “a man whose medicine was good.” The chief had a “kind heart and good judgment as to the best course of conduct,” and he was considered “brave, but peaceable.”102

The Hunkpapa and the other Sioux groups came together in their annual Sun Dance from 7 to 10 June. This was an elaborate ceremony that was to assure that the buffalo would be fertile, and that the men would have success in the hunt. As part of the ceremony, Sitting Bull sought a vision what would help his people understand the future. Jumping Bull used an awl, which was used to punch small holes in leather, and cut one hundred pieces of skin out of Sitting Bull’s arms. The chief then danced around a pole for hours. He finally stopped and stood looking just below the sun up, and he saw a vision. The chief saw soldiers and horses as numerous as locust falling upside down into an Indian village. A few Indians also feel upside down. Sitting Bull also heard a voice that said, “These soldiers do not possess ears. They are to die, but you are not supposed to take their spoils [plunder their bodies].”103 The upside-down Indians meant that warriors would die as well, but the vision clearly showed that the Sioux and their allies were going to win a great victory. This prophecy came true twice before the end of the month because the Indians would win the battles of the Rosebud and the Little Bighorn within a few weeks.

The prominent war chief of the Oglala Sioux was Crazy Horse who enjoyed a fine reputation among his people and the admiration of his adversaries. Lieutenant Bourke met Crazy Horse after the campaigns of 1876 and described how the Sioux regarded him. “All Indians gave him a high reputation for courage and generosity. In advancing upon an enemy, none of his warriors were allowed to pass him.” In addition, “He had made hundreds of friends by his charity


101 Wooden Leg, pp. 177-84.

102 Ibid., p. 178.

towards the poor, as it was point of honor with him never to keep anything for himself, excepting weapons of war. I never heard an Indian mention his name save in terms of respect.\footnote{Bourke, Crook, p. 415.}

While he was not a medicine man, he clearly led a charmed life, and, reportedly, nine horses had been killed out from under him when he was riding them. He had a impressive reputation, and his example of bravery made the other warriors more courageous. Crazy Horse said he had once seen a vision of a man who came out of a lake on horseback. The apparition told the leader neither to wear a war bonnet nor braid the tale of his pony, and the vision told him that no bullet would ever kill him. This prophecy proved to be accurate because the war chief was killed by a bayonet thrust, not by a bullet, in 1877. Following the advice of the vision, Crazy Horse never wore a war bonnet and never braided the tale of his horse. He was not involved in tribal councils, and he never took part in treaty negotiations. Above all, he was a warrior, and he was among the best military leaders in the Sioux nation.\footnote{“Ricker Interviews” as cited in Vaughn, Rosebud, p. 41.}

Late in the day of 16 June Cheyenne scouts rode into the main Indian camp making wolf howls which signified danger. The warriors had found their adversaries on the Rosebud, and the banks of the stream were black with soldiers and their Indian allies. Enthusiastically, the young Sioux and Cheyenne men called for action and looked to Crazy Horse for leadership, but the elders of the tribes were cautious. They reminded the warriors that the women, the aged, and the young still needed to be protected in camp. But the aggressive young men argued that they should attack the soldiers before the army could strike the camp. Crazy Horse finally suggested that the older men stay and protect the camp while most of the young men should attack and drive the soldiers away. This council seemed sound, and the warriors prepared to attack. The Indians divided themselves into war parties comprised of men from the various groups. They put on their war paint and special clothing for combat. They probably rode twenty-five miles throughout much of the night, and they arrive at the army’s camp early in the morning, at the right time to surprise the soldiers.\footnote{Marie Sandoz, Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2008), pp. 313-17.}

Before he left for battle that evening, Spotted Wolf, the father of White Shield, gave his son some good advice. The older man told White Shield that he should not allow his pony to graze before the battle. “If a horse’s stomach is not full, he can run a long way; if his stomach is full, he soon gets tired.” Spotted Wolf also told his son that he should drink plenty of water before the battle because he would have little chance to drink during combat. In addition, Spotted Wolf said, “I will put some medicine on you.” He placed a whistle around his son’s neck made of bone from an eagle’s wing and said, “If anyone runs up to you to shoot you, make this noise [blowing on the whistle] and the bullet will not hurt you.”\footnote{George Bird Grinnel, The Fighting Cheyennes, (Norman: University of Oklahoma), pp. 337-8.} Apparently, Spotted Wolf’s
medicine was good because White Shield survived the battle, and he also fought bravely.

The Indians were well armed. Many of them wielded lever-action Spencer, Winchester, and Henry rifles. These weapons were rapid-fire repeaters, which could do considerable damage at close range. In comparison, the soldiers used the single-shot Springfield Model 1873 rifle, which had a slow rate of fire. This weapon was accurate when shooting at a distance of several hundred yards, but it was at a decided disadvantage in close combat when the rate of fire was the most important factor in effectiveness. The fact that the warriors had more efficient weapons than the army was an important reason why they were victorious in both the battles of the Rosebud and the Little Bighorn. The Indians also enjoyed a numerical advantage in both engagements. Crazy Horse later claimed there were 1500 warriors who struck the army camp at the Rosebud River in four war parties. In an impressive feat of movement and coordination, these war groups arrived simultaneously early in the morning and caught the soldiers off guard.

**The Battle of the Rosebud: Initial Attacks**

General Crook ordered the soldiers awakened at 3 AM on the morning of 17 June 1876, and the command was on the march at 6 AM. Crook hoped that his men would soon locate the Indian village, so he could attack it. Henry W. Daly reported that the march was challenging. "The Rosebud is as crooked as a corkscrew, and the country is very rough." The men went "through the narrow, winding valley, unable to see fifty feet ahead." The men were cheerful when they marched that morning. They joked with each other and gave chewing tobacco to their friends. A few of the younger soldiers, showing the skill of experienced cavalrymen, held the pommels of the saddles, leaned forward against their horses, and took brief naps without falling off their mounts. The column was ordered to halt at 8 AM and unsaddle their mounts to allow the animals to graze on the grass nearby. The march the previous day had been challenging, and Crook wanted to give the men and their horses a chance to get their strength back.

Many of the soldiers rested along the banks of the Rosebud. John Finerty commented on the "thick growth of wild roses" along the stream. As the men relaxed, Finerty noticed that the soldiers were surrounded by hills that "seemed to rise on every side, and we were within easy musket shot of those most remote." The army was in a position of a potential trap. Indians on the surrounding hills could fire down upon the soldiers, and the warriors would have a big advantage over their adversaries. Fortunately for the army, Shoshone and Crow warriors were scouting in advance of this position, and they were in a position to warn the soldiers if the Sioux and Cheyenne were nearby.

Finerty was laying in the grass and resting his head on his saddle at 8:30 AM, when he and the soldiers heard a few shots coming from the hills to the north. Captain Alexander Sutorius was from Switzerland, and Lieutenant Adolphus H. Von Luettwitz, who was from Prussia, sat nearby smoking when the shots rang out. Sutorius stated, "They are shooting buffaloes over there."

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109 Henry W. Daly, in *Eyewitnesses*, p. 252.

110 Finerty, p. 125.
perhaps assuming that the Indian scouts were hunting again. The men began to realize that the shots were fired in more than one direction because there was an "alternate rise and fall in the reports [sounds]" of the guns, and they began to worry that something else might be taking place. At that point, the troopers saw twenty or forty of their Indian scouts appear on the crest of the hills to the north riding toward the soldiers "with incredible speed." The Crow and Shoshone scouts were clearly excited, and they were shouting, "Heap [many] Sioux! Heap Sioux!" 111

Captain Anson Mills was the first officer to see the attacking warriors and perceive the danger. Mills did not understand the shouting because of his poor hearing, but he saw the agitated scouts and went to investigate. He rode to the crest of a nearby hill and looked north. "I saw on the crest of the horizon about two miles distant, great numbers of moving objects." He only stared briefly before he knew what they were. "I soon came to the conclusion that they were Indians in great numbers." He ordered his men to mount shouting, "Saddle up, there—saddle up, there, quick!" General Crook was unable to see the approaching Indians because he was nearer to the river, and the hills blocked his view. Mills soon found him playing cards with some of his officers and told the General of the advancing warriors. Crook ordered Mills to report to him with his command as soon as possible. The General began to direct the deployment of his men, and he ordered his subordinate officer to march as rapidly as possible to the "higher ground to take the bluffs and hold them." 112

The cavalry scout, Frank Grouard, was resting when the Crow and Shoshone called the alarm. One of them, an Indian called Humpy, a hunchbacked Crow, was yelling "Sioux" as he approached the camp. At the same time, Grouard heard the Sioux war cry, and he saw the warriors attacking over the hills. Everyone sprang into action. Initially, the soldiers were poorly prepared to meet their charging adversaries, and only the Indian scouts were ready to hold the line and meet the advance. Grouard admitted, "I believe if it had not been for the Crows, the Sioux would have killed half of our command before the soldiers were in a position to meet the attack." 113

The combat was at close quarters and many Crows and Sioux engaged in hand-to-hand fighting. Grouard was in a position from which he could see the entire encounter, and he said it "was the prettiest sight in the way of a fight that I had ever seen." The two sides were engaged at such close quarters that the scout "could hardly distinguish our allies from the hostiles." Only when the soldiers advanced and started firing did the Sioux fall back. The troopers had trouble telling the two groups of Indians from the other, but the Sioux and Crows easily recognized each other, and they knew whom to fight. 114

Many of the Indian scouts faced the fight with grim determination. Grouard saw a wounded Crow warrior sitting on the ground during the battle. He had been shot just above the

111 Ibid., pp. 126-7.
112 Mills, My Story, pp. 404-5.
113 Grouard, p. 117.
114 Ibid.
knee and his leg “was terribly shattered. His horse was lying dead by his side.” The man seemed to have lost interest in his wound, and he would often “yell like a madman” obviously in support of the other scouts engaged in the battle.\footnote{Ibid.}

Captain Sutorius and Lieutenant Von Luettwitz were soon mounted with their troops, and they anxiously awaited permission to engage the enemy. Luettwitz asked impatiently, “Why the devil don’t they order us to charge?” As the officers waited to be employed in battle Sutorius turned to the reporter, John Finerty, and asked him what he thought of the delay. The reporter almost changed the subject when he stated rather absent mindedly, “It is the anniversary of Bunker Hill. ... The day is of good omen.”\footnote{Finerty, p. 127.} The Battle of Bunker hill took place on 17 June 1775 during the American War of Independence. On that day 101 years earlier, the poorly-trained American militia had shown their fighting ability by mowing down more than one thousand of the highly effective British infantry sent against them. While the Americans were eventually forced to retreat, they had fought well, and many Americans considered the battle to be a big success.\footnote{Ibid.} Sutorius was pleased to realize that they were fighting on a date that celebrated the fighting ability of Americans, and he used the news to inspire his men, “It is the anniversary of Bunker Hill. We’re in luck.” The men responded by waving their rifles in acknowledgment.\footnote{Ibid, p. 127.}

A messenger, Lieutenant Henry Lemly, soon arrived with orders from Crook, “Your battalion will charge those bluffs on the center.” Immediately, Sutorius and Luettwitz led their men in support of the attack by Captain Mills.\footnote{Ibid, pp. 127-8} Captain Mills had marched his men on horseback as rapidly as possible through the rough terrain that was littered with broken rocks. As soon as the ground became more level and suitable for an attack, the Captain gave the orders “front into line,” and he told the bugler to sound the charge. Mills could see two prominent rocky ridges, and when his command reached the first one, the warriors on that position began to fall back. The Captain ordered his men to dismount and to continue the attack up the hill on foot. The soldiers engaged their adversaries at the foot of the ridge and charged right through them. The Sioux soon fell back to the top of the ridge.

This engagement allowed Mills the opportunity to have a good look at the enemy warriors. “These Indians were most hideous, every one being painted in the most hideous colors and designs, stark naked, except their moccasins, breech clouts, and head gear, the latter consisting of feathers and horns; some of the horses being also painted.” In fact, “their shouting and personal appearance was so hideous that it terrified the horses more than our men and
rendered them almost uncontrollable before we dismounted and placed them behind the rocks.”

Despite the disgusting appearance of his adversaries, the Captain clearly admired their fighting ability. “The Indians proved then and there that they were the best cavalry soldiers on earth.” This was high praise indeed because Mills was a highly-experienced officer who fought as a cavalry commander for four years in the American Civil War 1861-5, and he knew able fighters when he saw them. The Sioux clearly demonstrated their exceptional skill in the engagement with the troopers. “In charging up towards us they exposed little of their person, hanging on with one arm around the neck and one leg over the horse, firing and lancing from underneath the horse’s necks, so that there was no part of the Indian at which we could aim.” Many years later, Mills lamented the demise of the fighting power of the Sioux. They were “then the best cavalry in the world; their like will never be seen again.”

Captain Mills observed the Sioux as they attacked. “The Indians came not in a line but in flocks or herds like buffalo.” They also advanced in great numbers, “and they piled in upon us until I think there must have been one thousand or fifteen hundred in our immediate front.” When the Captain noticed that the enemy warriors were reluctant to storm the cavalry’s position, he continued to be aggressive and ordered his men to charge another “the second” ridge. This position was taken with little difficulty and Mills again ordered his men to take up positions near the boulders on the hills. The Captain had shown initiative, but his more-advanced location offered few advantages, and he had over-extended his lines leaving some men in danger.

Henry W. Daly saw the approach of the Indians differently than Captain Mills. When the Sioux and Cheyenne advanced in a “solid phalanx,” Daly stated, “There were no handsomer Indians and no better riders.” They were dressed splendidly. “From the forehead to the waistline, each warrior was painted with stripes of black and red. Their gorgeous headdresses fanned the breeze like the tails of a boy’s kite.” The warriors showed discipline and great skill, and “they attacked with great fury and with the precision of trained cavalry.” The Sioux and Cheyenne stated that they only wanted to fight the soldiers, and they shouted to the Crows and Shoshones, “You go home! We want to kill only white men!” But the Indian allies of the troopers were unmoved by this trick and remained loyal to the army.

Daly was one of the “packers” who took care of the horses and mules used to carry supplies. Even though they were not combat troops, they were badly needed in battle. They advanced, were placed in a position on the center of the line, and held a ledge when the Indians attacked. The white men were soon surrounded, and the warriors attempted to overwhelm them by a series of attacks. The Indians made a determined advance and came so close to Daly and the others that “we fired point blank, but on they came.” A few of them reached the top of the ledge, “and one of them came at me with a tomahawk.” The warrior struck Daly with the weapon

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121Ibid., p. 416.


123Henry W. Daly in *Eyewitnesses*, p. 254.
giving the packer “a scar over my right eye,” which was a constant reminder to him of the action that day. The packers were unable to hold their position long and soon had to withdraw.\(^\text{124}\)

When the firing began, Lieutenant Bourke was with General Crook, and the younger officer took the opportunity to lead men into battle. The Lieutenant accompanied his dismounted cavalrmen in their attack on the ridges. The aggressive officer was disappointed that his adversaries fell back when his men came close to their positions. But the Sioux returned fire and inflicted a severe wound on Sergeant Maher, who was hit in the right arm near the elbow. Bourke was very impressed with Elmer A. Snow, a trumpeter with the company, who had gallantly accompanied the Lieutenant in the attack. When orders came to fall back, Bourke and Snow, who were both still on horseback, found themselves isolated far ahead of the other soldiers. A group of “thirty or more” Sioux, seeing their vulnerability, attacked the two men. The Lieutenant fired his rifle and shouted, hoping to distract the warriors. The Sioux halted momentarily allowing Bourke and Snow the chance of racing their horses four hundred yards back to the soldiers. The Lieutenant was lucky. The trumpeter was not. “My usual good fortune attended me, but poor Snow got back to our lines badly shot through both arms, near the wrists.”\(^\text{125}\)

The scout, Frank Grouard, said that Snow was unable to control his horse, and the animal “ran away with him,” straight for the Indians when the order was given to retreat. When the hapless bugler was close to the warriors, he was finally able to turn his horse, but he was shot through both wrists. He had lost the ability to use his hands which were simply “dangling” from his arms. Snow called for help, and Grouard came to his aid. The scout got close to the Snow’s mount, but he could not grab the reins. He finally struck the horse on the head which caused the animal to hesitate, and the wounded man finally threw himself off the mount.\(^\text{126}\) Elmer A. Snow was crippled for the rest of his life, but he won the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions that day. This was the highest award for military courage in the United States. The citation for his honor reads, “Bravery in action; was wounded in both arms.”\(^\text{127}\) While trumpeter Snow was courageous, he might have owed his medal to the nature of his wounds as much as to his valor.

While the soldiers had held their positions, some Indians had advanced unexpectedly through a ravine to the left and rear of the soldiers. They had reached the spring where General Crook was resting when he heard the first shots of the battle. A Shoshone boy had accompanied the command, and when the engagement began, he asked a chief for permission go back to the spring and paint his face to be ready to enter his first battle. The Sioux found him there and “shot him through the back and killed him, taking his scalp from the nape of the neck to the forehead,

\(^{124}\)Ibid.

\(^{125}\)Bourke, *Diary*, pp. 326-7.

\(^{126}\)Grouard, p. 119-20.

\(^{127}\)The *Congressional Medal of Honor: the Names, the Deeds*, (Forest Ranch, Calif.: Sharp & Dunnigan, 1984), p. 693.
leaving his entire skull ghastly and white. 128 A young Sioux boy also died at about the same time. The child followed one of the warriors into the conflict, but he missed a turn in the confusion of battle, and he went too far ahead of the others. He was unable to flee, and the Indian scouts with the army captured and killed him. 129

General Crook saw that his command was under attack by numerous and aggressive adversaries, and he responded with bold tactics. The General could have concentrated his forces in a restricted area to make any assaults against his position hopeless because his troops could concentrate their fire on any attack by the Indians, but he decided to spread his units far apart. He clearly thought that deploying the soldiers on a lengthy front would allow him to hold his positions, while giving him the ability of aiming damaging attacks against the Indians. Crook never fully realized that this was a dangerous tactic. His men were deployed over three miles, which meant that they could not concentrate as much firepower against their adversaries, and they would be slow to support each other in the case of emergencies. Much of the battle was actually separate engagements spread over large distances in which Crooks troops fought with little support from the other groups.

Additionally, General Crook and his men also used tactics that favored their enemies. The Sioux and Cheyenne warriors had no interest in holding positions, and the army’s attempt to take and hold various hills and ridges had little impact in the outcome of the fighting. Thunder Hawk, a warrior with the Sioux, described how the Indians used the aggressiveness of the soldiers to the Indians’ advantage. He stated that groups of warriors would often attack in succession, after luring the cavalry into a dangerous situation. “As the first group attacked the foremost van of the enemy another was held in check, and, as soon as the leading body had become engaged, a second group was dispatched from a right angle. The troops were now being pressed on both sides and with telling blows.” A third group of warriors would then be deployed against the troops. “While these two attacks were being stressed with savage fury, the third, and last group was released, arriving from the left flank, [which] succeeded in almost encircling the detachment.” At that point, the soldiers were in a dangerous position and had to retreat. 130

Crook and many of his officers were experienced Indian fighters who clearly understood the Indian tactics of luring the soldiers into a position where a counterattack would be most effective. But the army waged the entire battle in a manner that gave the warriors the greatest advantage. The army leadership should have known better, and they gave needless advantages to the warriors. The General and his officers were fools who recklessly exposed their men to unnecessary risks that endangered the command and resulted in avoidable casualties.

Wooden Leg, a Cheyenne, assessed the overall nature of the fighting very well, and he stated that the tactics of the warriors were used during the entire battle. “Until the sun went far

128 Bourke, Crook, p. 314.
toward the west there were charges back and forth. Our Indians fought and ran away, fought and ran away. The soldiers and their Indian scouts did the same. Sometimes we chased them, sometimes they chased us."^131

**The Battle of the Rosebud: Intense Fighting on the Left**

The battle soon became fully engaged up and down the line, and Lieutenant James Foster described the din of battle as “a continuous rattle.” Five companies of cavalry under the command of Colonel William B. Royall, Crook’s second in command, rode to secure the left flank. Company I under Captain William H. Andrews was on the far left of Royall’s men, and Lieutenant Foster’s platoon controlled the left side of the company. In this position, Foster’s men were the key to securing that entire section of the line, and they took aggressive action.

“So sounding the charge, the gallant fellows dashed forward” driving the Sioux before them. The troopers “pressed on under a galling fire and drove the enemy from a strong position among some rocks.” The warriors, “although superior in force, position, and arms, broke before the gallant little party and were driven pell-mell from the ridge.” The troopers charged firing their pistols, and they advanced over two more ridges.132

At this point, this small group of men were well ahead of their lines, and they were in danger of being surrounded and killed. Foster ordered his men to fall back, but they were still under heavy fire. The Sioux seemed to fire in a “sweeping discharge” or volley that came from the “the left and right” simultaneously. The shots wounded Private Charles Stuart “through the hand and forearm and Private [James] O’Brien in the arm.”133 Private Phineas Towne was very impressed with the size of the Sioux forces. “I never saw so great a body of Indians in one place as I saw at that time, and I have seen a great many Indians in my time.” There were so many that “it seemed that if one Indian was shot five were there to take his place.”134

The situation of the men with Lieutenant Foster became more serious when their horses got loose and “galloped madly away.” This left the “troopers at the mercy of the savage Sioux.” The group of men were unable to retrieve additional bullets because their mounts had run away with the extra cartridge boxes in their saddle pouches, and the soldiers soon ran out of ammunition. The men, led by Sergeant David Marshall had no recourse but to use their rifles as clubs, and they “fought bravely to the last.” Apparently, one young recruit had an “insane idea of surrender.” If so, he was quite foolish because he could expect torture and death if he were captured. He “calmly gave up his carbine, handing it to the nearest Sioux, and was brained instead by a blow from its butt.” In a brief period of time, “five men fell dead and as many more

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131Wooden Leg, p. 200.


133Ibid., p. 278.

were wounded.”

One of these men who fell was Sergeant David Marshall, who had been shot through the face and was seriously wounded. When Private Towne was retreating, he came upon three troopers carrying Marshall, Towne glanced behind him, saw the warriors approaching, and called to the others, “Quick, here they come!” The men dropped the sergeant and ran to their horses to save their lives. Bravely, Marshall told Towne to flee as well, “Save yourself if you can, because I am dying. Don’t stay with me.” Both men were in Company F, and the private refused to abandon his friend. He said, “Dave, old boy, I am going to stay right here with you and will not desert you.” Towne did the best he could, “Grasping him with all my strength, I carried my comrade.” The Private’s effort proved futile because he finally realized, “it was useless to carry him any further, for he was dead.” Despite his best efforts, the Towne had been unable to save his friend. At least, Sergeant Marshall did not have to die alone. Even though the Private never received the Congressional Medal of Honor—an accolade he richly deserved—for risking his life to rescue his friend, his sacrifice was still one of the most courageous and merciful acts of the entire battle.

Seeing he could do nothing further for the dead man, the Private then laid the corpse down and attempted to escape, but he was soon surrounded by the “most murderous looking Indians I ever saw.” The Indians had Towne badly outnumbered, and they soon subdued him. In an instant, they took his rifle and tossed a lasso over his head which fell to his ankles. They soon tightened it around his feet. The Private was helpless, and “I struggled and fought in vain, until I was struck on the head with something which rendered me unconscious and caused me to fall. As I went down a bullet struck me in the body.” Towne had been shot in the abdomen. He soon regained his senses only to realize that he was being dragged over the ground behind an Indian pony. A group of cavalrymen charged the warriors and saved Towne either from being dragged to death or taken away to be tortured.

Private Towne’s fate was far different from Private Richard Bennett who was captured. Private Bennet “was badly wounded and lay hid in the rocks as the Sioux charged by.” The unfortunate soldier mistook these Indians for friendly Crow scouts, and he called out to them for aid. The Sioux “cut him to pieces with their long-handled (eight foot) tomahawks and lances.” According to Private Towne, Bennet was “completely cut to pieces. His remains were buried in a grain sack.” Sergeant Marshall’s corpse was retrieved by a small group of men led by Private Gerold J. O’Grady, who charged through a “shower of bullets” to retrieve the body and keep if

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137 Towne, p. 208.

138 Bourke, *Diary*, p. 331.

139 Towne, p. 208.
White Shield may have been the man who killed Sergeant Marshall. The warrior saw a trooper on horseback, and he fired when the soldier turned his head to give an order. The bullet entered the man's head "just over the eyebrow." The warrior thought he had killed an officer, but no cavalry officer died that day. White Shield might have confused the Sergeant's insignia with that of an officer. The Indian later found the corpse of this soldier he had killed, and he took the revolver from the dead man.\textsuperscript{141}

Other soldiers fell in the battle. Sergeant William W. Allen's horse was shot twice, the animal fell, and he was forced to fight on foot. He was unable to flee and bravely turned to face his enemies rather than run, "determined to sell his life as dearly as possible. He stood firing his rifle until two Sioux came up to him on opposite sides and shot him down." The badly wounded man still tried to resist, and he tried to draw his pistol, but a warrior "struck the poor fellow over the ear, thus ending the unequal contest." Sergeant Groesch was badly wounded, and he lay on the ground nearby, but he was saved from death by the arrival of the friendly Crows and Shoshones who took him back to the aid station.\textsuperscript{142}

When his men reached the other companies on the left flank, Lieutenant Foster estimated that they were assailed by five to seven hundred Indians, and shots were coming from the left and rear, which bothered some of the troopers who started to withdraw. The "officer in charge," explained to his men the severity of the situation and stated, "Men we must hold the hill." "All right, sir," replied one of his soldiers, "if you say so, we'll hold it till hell freezes over." They then returned to the fight and held the ground.\textsuperscript{143}

Foster described the scene, no doubt with some exaggeration, as the "hottest encounter that had ever taken place between Indians and soldiers." The fighting intensified, and "the affair now became serious." The officers realized that the soldiers needed to keep enough ammunition to make sure they had sufficient for any emergency. The leaders told the troopers "to fire only when they had a fair assurance of hitting their man." When the Indians attacked, "the men received them steadily and, pouring in volley after volley, drove them back in confusion." The battle seemed to increase in fury, and "the firing was now terrific, the repeating rifles used by the Indians enabling them to make it one continuous volley."\textsuperscript{144}

The action of the day had reduced the numbers of troopers in the companies considerably. The men had dismounted to fire more accurately at their foes, but one out of four men had to hold the horses. Some soldiers were wounded and others were assigned to bring them to the aid

\textsuperscript{140a}A Thrilling Description of General Crook's brave fight by an Officer of the Command" in Vaughn, \textit{Rosebud}, p. 122. The unidentified author was probably Foster.

\textsuperscript{141}Grinnel, p. 342.

\textsuperscript{142a}"Thrilling Description," in Vaughn, \textit{Rosebud}, p. 122.

\textsuperscript{143}Foster, p. 278.

\textsuperscript{144a}"Thrilling Description" as cited in Vaughn, \textit{Rosebud}, p. 120.
station. At the critical moment, only seventy men were in their position to await the “onslaught of the enemy, who were now pouring in a rolling, continuous fire from rocks, ravines, and cover.” The officers, including Foster and Captain Guy V. Henry, stayed on their horses “rode up and down the line, encouraging the men and cautioning them to waste no ammunition, but wait for the charge.” The warriors yelled what sounded like, “Yip! Yip! Hi-Yah!, Hi-Yah,” and dashed toward the line. The soldiers took a few steps back, then regained their courage, returned to their positions, and “poured a withering volley into the rascals, repulsing them with considerable loss.” But the soldiers were still taking casualties and the “gallant little line already too small, was rapidly thinning.” At this critical point in the battle, Captain Henry was shot in the face and badly wounded.

Henry was an experienced soldier who had a crippled hand because he suffered from frostbite in the winter campaign of 1874-5 in the Black Hills. He was “unable to bend or close my fingers” of his left hand for the rest of his life. In the fighting Captain Henry was hit, “I felt a sharp sting as of being slapped in the face, and a blinding rush of blood to my head and eyes.” He later described the nature of his wound. “A bullet had struck me in the face, under my left eye, passing through the upper part of my mouth, under the nose and out below the right eye.” Finerty stated that the Captain “was struck by a bullet which passed through both cheek bones, broke the bridge of his nose and destroyed the optic nerve in one eye.” One of his men tried to help him, but this trooper was also hit. Henry courageously stood his ground “temporarily blinded as he was and throwing blood from his mouth by the handful.” The Captain managed to remain on his horse for several minutes standing in front of the enemy all the time and calling to his men, “On. On! Charge.” Finally, the brave man collapsed and fell to the ground. The Sioux continued their advance over his prostrate body, but they were driven back by the soldiers, and members of his command were finally able to him bring Henry safely to their lines.

Frank Grouard reported that it was an Indian scout who rescued Captain Henry. According to Grouard, the Captain was laying helpless on the ground as the Sioux pressed forward. One of the Indian scouts, Yute John, ran to the fallen officer. The scout got off his horse and defended the wounded man. All alone, he kept his adversaries at bay until the soldiers started firing and drove the Sioux warriors away. Yute John then picked up Henry on his back and carried him to safety. “If it had not been for the Indian (Yute John), Col. [Captain] Henry would have been killed and scalped where he fell.” The badly wounded man agreed, but he gave another name for the heroic man who saved his life, “had it not been for Washakie, chief of

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145 Foster, pp. 279-80.


147 Guy V. Henry as cited in Collections of the Wyoming Historical Society (Cheyenne: Wyoming historical Society, 1897) 1: 190.

148 Finerty, p. 134.

149 Grouard, p. 120.
the Shoshones, fighting over my body, my scalp would have been lifted,” and he would have been killed.\textsuperscript{150}

While Captain Henry lay in agony behind the lines, the battle for the hill continued. As Lieutenant Foster described, “Again the Sioux advanced.” The warriors charged the right of the army’s line and kept up a “scorching enfilading fire.” The soldiers were waiting for reinforcements that never arrived, “the gallant little band fought on with a desperate courage hardly to be believed if not actually seen.” One trooper thought they could hold out only as long as they had ammunition, and he said to another man, “Jack, it’s only a question of cartridges.” An officer agreed about the gravity of the situation and admonished the soldiers to go down fighting, “Well I guess we’re done for. Better die right here, facing the rascals, than give way an inch, and go down with a lance in the back further to the rear.”\textsuperscript{151}

Sergeant John Henry Shingle had been given command of the detachment holding the horses behind the front. When he saw some of the men in the battle line waver, break ranks, and turn to flee, he mounted a horse and rushed forward to rally the men at this critical juncture in the battle. He yelled in a huge voice, “Face them, men! On them, face them!”\textsuperscript{152} For his valor that day, Shingle was given the Congressional Medal of Honor. His courage and determination rallied the men who returned to the fight and held their positions. Sergeant Joseph Robinson also earned the Medal of Honor in the action. His citation stated he won the award for, “Discharging his duties while in charge of the skirmish line under fire with judgment and great coolness and brought up the lead horses at a critical moment.”\textsuperscript{153}

Despite the courage of the cavalymen on the left in holding their position, an attack by the infantry probably decided this part of the engagement. The foot soldiers had been holding the center of the line for hours, and they finally rushed to help the men on the left. Captain T. B. Burrowes, and Captain Andrew S. Burt led their companies in driving off the Sioux. The men “moved forward at double time and on reaching the ridge stopped the Indians quickly and decisively without loss on our part.” The warriors withdrew and the army held the hills.\textsuperscript{154}

As the battle raged, Captain Henry was taken to the rear area “to have my wound dressed.” Although his wounds were severe, the Captain wanted to return to the fight, but “the Surgeon forbid me doing so.”\textsuperscript{155} Finerty, the news reporter, saw Henry at the aid station, “lying on a blanket, his face covered with a bloody cloth, around which the summer flies were buzzing fiercely.” The men did their best to help the wounded officer. One soldier kept the Captain’s

\textsuperscript{150} Henry, \textit{Collections} 1: 190.

\textsuperscript{151} Foster, p. 280.

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.


horse near him, so the animal blocked the sunlight because there was "no other shade in the neighborhood." When the reporter tried to comfort him, Henry firmly replied, "It is nothing. For this are we soldiers!" The Captain even tried to recruit Finerty to join the service, and he gave the reporter "the honor of advising me to join the army!"156

Captain Anson Mills came behind the lines to visit his wounded men. When Captain Henry heard his voice, the wounded man called to him. Mills did not know his old friend had been hit and was surprised to see Henry with "his breast all covered with clotted blood, his eyes swollen so he could not see." Mills asked, "Henry, are you badly wounded?" The injured man replied, "The doctors have just told me that I must die, but I will not." Mills thought that nine out of ten men would have died from such wounds, but, surprisingly, Henry survived.157 Even though he remained blind in one eye, he continued his military career. He belatedly received the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1893 for his courage at the Battle of Cold Harbor in 1864 during the American Civil War. Henry also fought in the war with Spain in 1898, became a brigadier general, served briefly as military governor of Puerto Rico, and died in 1899.158

Captain Henry was not the only man suffering from wounds who impressed Finerty. The hospital was located under some trees near the stream, and the wounded soldiers and Indian scouts were brought there for treatment. "Most of the injured men bore their sufferings stoically enough, but an occasion groan or half-smothered shriek would tell where the knife, or the probe, had struck an exposed nerve." Finerty was even more impressed with the conduct of the scouts. "The Indian wounded, some of them desperate cases, gave no indication of feeling, but submitted to be operated upon with the grim stolidity of their race."159

The Indians’ Battle

Many of the whites continued to observe the Indian tactics with admiration. Robert E. Strahorn stated that they did much of their fighting from horseback. "Some of the most reckless feats of equestrianism imaginable were performed by them within range of the broadsides of an entire company." Often one or two of the warriors would dash from behind the cover of the rocks. They would nearly tumble down the slope of the hills to take a shot or two at their adversaries and then disappear "like a flash" despite the volleys fired at them. One of the reckless foes pressed too close to the cavalymen and was in danger of being killed. While his pony was running at full speed, the resourceful warrior took out his Bowie knife, cut the strap holding the saddle on his horse, and "thus unencumbered made his escape." These men also "repeatedly courted death by endeavoring to secure the bodies of their own dead."160

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156 Finerty, p. 135.


159 Finerty, p. 145.

160 Strahorn in Vaughn, Rosebud, pp. 102-3.
Ben Arnold was a messenger for the army, and he “was not under strict military discipline and was not expected to fight.” Even though he did not participated in the battle, Arnold was in a position to observe much of the combat. He saw a daring Sioux warrior “who seemed to have a charmed life.” This man would skip back and forth taking advantage of whatever protection the ground allowed him. When the soldiers advanced close to him he kept firing at them. The army skirmishers finally hit the warrior, and he fell wounded, but he kept fighting. “He sat up and kept pouring in his fire, determined to die selling his life dearly.” Finally, when the front rank of the soldiers came within easy shooting distance from him, the orders were given to the troops, “Halt! Take aim! Fire!” The wounded Indian fell dead, riddled with bullets.\(^{161}\)

A group of about a dozen Sioux warriors fell back when they were attacked by larger numbers of Crow scouts. One of the Sioux warriors fired his gun at the advancing Crows until the rifle’s breech broke, and the weapon became useless. Apparently, the hapless warrior tried to inspire his comrades. He stood on a rock, with his arms extended, and began to sing his death chant. He stated his name, “I, Yellow Ear Rings,” and he sang, “I love these hills and valleys, My friends are in the number as grass. But now I am as nothing. My friends, I am leaving you. You may even now count me dead.” His companions were so impressed that they called to him, “Yellow Ear Rings, you are too brave to die. We will not let you die. If you are to die, we shall also die with you.” The Sioux warriors then staged an impressive counterattack, pushed the scouts back, and rescued their friend. The courage of Yellow Ear Rings not only saved his life but also inspired his companions to fight harder.\(^ {162}\)

The battle raged over a such large distance, and there were so many Indians engaged in the fighting, that no one leader could possibly have directed all the action. But Crazy Horse was still a prominent chief, and many of the Sioux near him looked to him for guidance. After the initial charge by the Sioux and Cheyenne, the cavalry and their Indian scouts counterattacked and pushed the warriors back. Many of the warriors were on the verge of running away. At this critical junction, Crazy Horse called to his men, “Hold on, my friends! Be strong! Remember the helpless ones at home!” He led by example. He held his rifle high and rode toward the soldiers shouting, “This is a good day to die!” He also yelled what the famous Sioux war cry, “Hoka hey!” which means “Hurry! Hurry!” or “Let’s go!”\(^ {163}\) Crazy Horse, Bad Heart Bull, Black Deer, Kicking Bear, and Good Weasel “rallied the Sioux, turned the charge, and got the soldiers on the run.” These men had been able to inspire the Indians to stay in the battle and to continue the fight. Short Buffalo gave his opinion of the war chief’s leadership in the battle, “Crazy Horse used good judgment in this Rosebud fight.”\(^ {164}\)

Iron Hawk was a Hunkpapa Sioux, and he was fourteen years old the summer of the

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\(^{161}\)Arnold, *Camp Fires*, pp. 249-50.

\(^{162}\)Ibid., pp. 251-2.

\(^{163}\)Sandoz, *Crazy Horse*, p. 319.

battle, but he “was a big boy,” so he participated in the fight. He rode to the location of the engagement with a war party of forty men. When they arrived, the battle was raging, and “the Crows were right among us.” The fighting was at close quarters and the two sides were “all mixed up.” There were so many enemy targets nearby that Iron Hawk believed that he must have killed someone. “The way it was you couldn’t keep from killing somebody if you didn’t get killed, and I am still alive.” There was a Sioux warrior named Without-a-Tepee nearby, and a large Crow scout pulled him off his horse. The two men disappeared in the melee. The young warrior saw his friend, Sitting Eagle, fighting hand-to-hand with another Crow scout, and it was the scout who fell. Iron Hawk survived because he fled. “I ran for my life, because we could not fight all those Crows and the soldiers too, and I was scared.” All the warriors ran, but then Iron Hawk heard the rallying cries that the Sioux were using so frequently that day, “Take courage! This is a good day to die! Think of the children and the helpless at home!” The men all yelled “Hoka hey!” and turned on their adversaries. This time the cavalry fled.

During the battle, Iron Hawk saw some smoke and went to investigate. He found three Sioux eating a buffalo which they had killed. They invited him to eat, and the warriors dined for a long time while the battle raged. Finally, a Sioux man came to them who had obviously been involved in the fighting because blood and dirt covered his face. He was angry when he saw the others resting and eating during the engagement. He said, “What are you doing here? We’re fighting! All you think of is to eat! Why don’t you think about the helpless ones at home? Come make haste! We have got to stand our ground!” Iron Hawk was ashamed, and he returned to the battle.165

Lazy White Bull was a Sioux warrior. He cared little for singing war songs, but he composed one and sang it when he was advancing toward the soldiers. “Friends, try your best! I do not wish my father to be ashamed. /Because he is a chief.” In one of the attacks, Lazy White Bull tried to ride in front of the other warriors and led the advance. When he was finally in front, he came face to face with a Shoshone scout who was wielding a repeating rifle. The Indian scout rode directly for Lazy White Bull, and the Shoshone fired his weapon twice, but he missed each time. The Sioux warrior then fired twice and put two bullets in the right shoulder of the scout’s horse. The animal went down, and the Shoshone ran. Lazy White Bull chased the man and shot him in the right leg. The Sioux warrior then retreated. This was long considered one of Lazy White Bull’s bravest deeds. Many years later, in the 1920s, the President of the United States, Calvin Coolidge, visited the Indian reservation in South Dakota. Lazy White Bull gave an address to welcome the President, and the warrior was introduced as, “The Man Who Lamed the Shoshone.”166

Lazy White Bull stated that some of his close friends died that day including Little Crow, Black Bird, Sitting Bear, and Little Wolf. The number of dead would have probably been higher except for Lazy White Bull’s courage in saving two men. When Hawk Soldier’s horse was shot,
Lazy White Bull saved the warrior by carrying him to safety. In another incident, a Indian’s horse was shot out from under him. The animal fell on the rider and pinned him to the ground because his leg was caught under the pony. Lazy White Bull bravely ran forward and protected the defenseless warrior until he could free his leg and escape.\(^{167}\)

There were about two hundred Cheyenne warriors in the battle. While the battle was quite fluid, and many Indians fought against more than one segment of the soldiers’ line, the Cheyenne probably did most of their fighting on the army’s left flank. Wooden Leg was a Northern Cheyenne who was then eighteen years old. When the news of the army’s approach reached his camp, the old men admonished the youths to remain there and allow the more mature men to fight. “Young men, leave the soldiers alone unless they attack us.” But when night fell, the young warriors slipped away. They rode all night long and arrived on the scene of action having slept little and with tired horses, but they were ready to fight. Early in the battle, one young man “charged too far” and got cut off by the Indian scouts with the army. They shot his horse, but Wooden Leg and other Cheyenne drove back his pursuers. Bravely, Wooden Leg pulled up the man onto the back of his horse, and the two men made their escape.\(^{168}\)

A group of Cheyenne advanced too far against their adversaries, and they were nearly cut off from the other warriors. Their situation was dangerous because Indian scouts were shooting down hill at them, and the soldiers were nearly blocking their only avenue of retreat. The warriors decided to flee for safety, but they thought it best to run one at a time. As Two Moons advised, “Don’t all run together—one at a time!” When one ran half the distance to safety, another man would start. Limpy, a crippled man, went last. His horse was shot immediately, and it started kicking and bucking. Soon Limpy fell to the ground. Two Moons rode back, and Limpy jumped onto the back of the horse. The fire was so intense that Two Moons later said he could almost feel the bullets touching his head. Limpy later told John Stands in Timber about the fear and excitement he felt when running for his life. “When you are in a tight pinch like that it seems like you don’t have no feelings. It seems like your feet don’t even touch the ground.”\(^{169}\)

Jack Red Cloud was the son of the Sioux Chief, Red Cloud, and the young man was wearing a war bonnet in battle. His horse was killed, and it was customary for an Indian warrior to take the bridle off the dead horse to demonstrate his courage and “to show how cool he could conduct himself.” But Jack Red Cloud forgot any display of manliness, and he ran for his life. Three Crow scouts on horseback soon overtook him and “lashed him with their pony whips and jerked off and kept his war bonnet.” His pursuers teased him. They told him he was only a boy and should not wear such a headdress. The young man, who was only eighteen years of age, “was crying and asking mercy from the Crows.” The Crows showed him compassion and let him live.\(^{170}\)

\(^{167}\)Lazy White Bull in \textit{Indian Views}, p. 20.

\(^{168}\)Wooden Leg, p. 198-9.


\(^{170}\)Wooden Leg, pp. 199-200.
White Wolf had a lever-action repeating rifle. The rapid-fire weapon was a big advantage in combat, but it was also very dangerous to the man who wielded it, and it had to be handled carefully. He rode into battle with the gun in a scabbard on his left side. When he pulled it out, the rifle accidentally discharged. The bullet went through his left leg and broke his thigh bone. He survived the accident, but he limped for the rest of his life.\(^{171}\)

White Shield saw a soldier who was having trouble getting on his horse. The warrior rode between him and his horse to knock the reins out of the trooper’s hands. The Indian then killed his adversary. Scabby Island saw another soldier fall off his horse. The warrior rode forward and tried to strike the man on the ground with his whip. The trooper caught the whip in his hand and pulled the Indian off his horse. Each man survived unharmed. Two Moon thought that he would die in the battle when he had to “leave his horse and run off on foot.” The situation was very dangerous because “the bullets were flying pretty thick and were knocking up the dirt all about him.” White Shield came to his rescue when he rode to the desperate man and told him to jump on the horse beside him. When this animal became too tired to carry its load, the men had to look for another means of escape. Contrary Belly then came forward riding one horse and leading another. Two Moon jumped on the pony and finally made good his escape.\(^{172}\)

The most celebrated act of courage among the Cheyenne that day was not performed by a warrior but by a woman. Buffalo Calf Road Woman, the sister of Comes in Sight, accompanied her brother when he marched to fight the soldiers. Showing great courage, Comes in Sight had charged the army many times, and, as he rode up and down in front of the enemy, his horse took a bullet and fell. White Elk was going in the wrong direction when Comes in Sight fell, and the warrior was in a poor position to come to the aid of the dismounted man. Then White Elk saw Buffalo Calf Road Woman ride to help her brother. She passed him, so when she returned, she would be riding the animal in the direction of the Indians. Comes in Sight jumped on the back of her horse, and they escaped. This act of courage was so famous among the Cheyenne that they always referred to the battle by the name, “Where the girl saved her brother.”\(^{173}\)

The Cheyenne gave detailed accounts of how one of their warriors died that day. The various sources list his name as either Sunrise, Black Sun, or Scabby. He will be referred to as Sunrise in this account. The warrior took a long time to prepare for battle, and he covered himself with yellow paint. This was very dangerous because the soldiers would clearly notice such a conspicuous man, and the troopers would certainly direct much of their fire at such a tempting target. Apparently, Sunrise had a death wish or a premonition that he was going to die because he sang these words when he went into battle, “I do not wish to be an old man. This day is mine to die.”\(^{174}\) Initially, the warrior seemed to have a charmed life because the soldiers shot at him many times but missed. “Finally one of them got behind him and shot him through the
Sunrise was not killed instantly, but he was unable to move as he lay on the ground. Other Indians brought him off the battlefield, and they attempted to treat his wounds, but he had been shot through the bowls, and his death was only a matter of time. The man was very thirsty, but no one would give him anything to drink because they knew it would kill him. Finally, Sunrise said, “If I don’t drink I will die anyhow. If I drink now and die, the sooner the better.” The others finally gave him some water, and he died soon after.

**Decision on the Right Flank**

While the battle was hotly contended on General Crook’s left, the center of his line held firm. Early in the contest, the General had wisely placed the infantry in this critical position. These men wielded the longer-barreled infantry rifle that had a longer range and greater accuracy than did the cavalry carbines. The infantry laid down on the ground to fire their weapons, making their shots more accurate and providing smaller targets for their enemies. These soldiers kept their adversaries at a distance, and their skill in battle tended to anchor the entire line. The center was also bolstered by Tom Moore and his sharpshooters. These men came from the pack train, and Crook ordered them to advance four hundred yards. In that position, they were supposed to “pick off as many hostile chiefs as possible and also make the best impression upon the flanks of any charging parties which might attempt to pass on either side of that promontory.” These men did good work, and their skill, cheerfulness, and courage impressed Lieutenant Bourke who stated they “had no idea what the word, ‘nerves’ meant.”

The fighting on the right was often intense, and the Sioux and cavalry charged back and forth against each other. In one such encounter Sergeant John van Mall, Company A in Mills battalion, “a brave and gigantic soldier,” ran forward to attack with the cavalry. But he was on foot, and he was left when the men on horseback withdrew. Soon, “A dozen Sioux dashed at him.” While a few cavalymen rode forward to try to save the soldier, who was in grave danger, “one small misshapen Crow warrior mounted on a fleet pony outstripped all others.” The Indian scout, Humpy, “dashed boldly among the Sioux ... seized the big Sergeant by the shoulder and motioned him to jump up behind.” Apparently, the Sioux were too surprised to react rapidly, and the two men made good their escape. The troopers seemed to revel in the deed much like it had been an athletic contest, and “the whole line of our battalion cheered Humpy and van Mall as they passed us on the home stretch.”

General Crook believed he could turn the tide on his adversaries by offensive action. The Sioux and Cheyenne had found his command early in the morning, and the Indians were showing uncommon skill and aggressiveness. He believed that the Indian village must be nearby, and he thought he could distract his enemies by striking at their encampment. When the battle seemed to be less intense, Crook decided to make his move, and he could use the opportunity “to follow the

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177 Bourke, *Crook*, p. 314.
178 Finerty, pp. 131-3.
Indians” and strike at their homes. If indeed there was a lull in the battle at that point, the other accounts failed to mention it. Rather than taking advantage of a break in combat, Crook might have been reacting to his own anxiety. His horse had been shot out from under him during the battle, he had gained no advantage in several hours of combat, and he was probably becoming more desperate to find a way to turn the tide on his enemies.

At about 12:30 PM, the General came to Captain Anson Mills and ordered him to take his battalion which consisted of companies A, E, and M and strike the Indian camp. Crook explained that Mills’ troops would be followed by five more companies under Captain Henry Noyes. In fact, the General was planning to shift his entire command to strike at the target, and Crook informed Mills that “he had been reliably informed” that the village “was about six miles down the canyon.” He said, “it is time to stop this skirmishing. ... You must take your battalion and go for their village away down the canyon.” When the General spoke to the scout, Frank Grouard, he sounded less positive on the location of the village. “I am going to move down Rosebud Canyon and I want you to go, with two battalions, as far as you can handle the defile and find out whether the village is at the other end of the canyon or not.”

This maneuver was based more on wishful thinking than on sound judgement. Crook had no means to knowing where the Indian village was located, and he could not know it was nearby. He probably thought that the encampment must be within easy reach for his Indian adversaries to have found him so rapidly and engaged him so resolutely. In actuality, the camp was perhaps twenty-five miles away and could only be reached by many hours of hard riding even if he knew where it was. Logically, the camp of the Cheyenne and Sioux would be located on a stream, and the General thought it should be on the Rosebud River. Crook did not know the location of the village, and redeploying his forces made no sense. In effect, he was dividing his forces in the face of an aggressive enemy and a numerically superior enemy. Once his forces were divided, the hostile Indians could destroy them one at a time. The maneuver was foolish, and it invited disaster.

When Captain Mills and his men moved away, their Indian adversaries seemed to think they were retreating and became more bold, “and fairly hailed bullets after us wounding several soldiers.” One of these men was a trooper named Harold who received an unusual wound. When he was aiming his rifle, a bullet struck the barrel of the weapon and flew the length of the weapon to lodge beneath the skin in the man’s neck. As the column entered the canyon, Sioux warriors tried to block their entrance, but they were dislodged by a daring charge by Company E.

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180 Bourke, *Crook*, p. 316.


182 Finerty, p. 135.

183 Grouard, p. 120.
under Captain Alexander Sutorius and Lieutenant Adolphus von Leuttwitz.\footnote{Finerty, pp. 136-7.}

The Sioux and Cheyenne watched Captain Mills and his men when they advanced, but they kept their distance. The troopers marched six miles, and Mills was determined to follow the valley until they arrived at the village and “hold it until he [Crook] came to my support with the rest of the command.” The Captain followed his orders until he “reached the vicinity of the village.” But he had not seen or located the village, and the Captain was engaged in wishful thinking. Before the column got even further separated from Crook’s command, Mills heard a “voice calling him to halt.” Captain Azor Nickerson had ridden rapidly with new orders from Crook to return. Mills was very surprised, and he asked the other officer, “Are you sure he wants me to go back?” Nickerson replied that the orders were correct.\footnote{Mills, My Story, pp. 407-8.}

The expedition by Anson Mills and his men down the Rosebud River remains one of the most controversial aspects of the battle because no one knows if the Indians were trying to entrap the army in the canyon. The scout, Frank Grouard, accompanied the movement, and he was convinced that their Indian adversaries had tried to ambush the army. “They wanted to draw the entire command down into this canyon and massacre every soul of it.” He stated that he understood the plan when he rode into the defile. “The canyon rose to a height of one thousand feet on both sides of us. The Indians had all of this fortified.”\footnote{Grouard, p. 121.} The scout exaggerated the height of the sides of the canyon, but the high terrain could have given the Indian adversaries a distinct advantage.

Finerty described the surroundings through which the army marched, “the bluffs on both sides of the ravine were thickly covered with rocks and fir trees, thus affording ample protection to an enemy and making it impossible for our cavalry to act as flankers.” He also had misgivings, and he believed that in any engagement “all the advantage would be on the side of the savages.” He further speculated that an Indian attack in that area could have led to the death of all the soldiers.\footnote{Finerty, p. 137.} According to Grouard, Nickerson’s timely arrival with orders to withdraw saved the entire command.\footnote{Grouard, p. 121.}

Captain Mills ordered his men to return by a different route than the advance. He probably thought that his Indian adversaries might have been waiting for him to retreat back up the canyon, and returning by a different route could fool any attempt to surprise the army. When he came to gentler slope in the canyon, “I found I could climb the rocks and get out.” He led his command by a wide route that brought him upon the flank of the Sioux who were fighting on...
Crook's right side. This caused the warriors to flee. 189

After a ride of two hours, Mills and his men arrived back with the main column at about 2:30 PM. The Captain asked the General for an explanation of why the senior officer had ordered the withdrawal. Mill said, "I never saw a man more dejected," when Crook gave his answer. The General gave an explanation, "I found it a more serious engagement than I thought. We have lost about fifty killed and wounded, and the doctors refused to remain with the wounded unless I left the infantry and one of the squadrons [battalions] with them." In effect, the doctors had requested that at least one third of the command be on hand to protect them and the wounded. Crook admitted, "I knew I could not keep my promise to support you with the remainder of the force." 190

Frank Grouard believed that he had dissuaded Crook from taking his entire command into an ambush in the canyon. When the General stated he was taking his complete force in an effort to find and attack the village, Grouard protested, "You can't go through the canyon. . . . They will kill your whole command if you attempt to go through there." Crook did not believe this, and he "laughed quietly" at the suggestion. Grouard finally tried to convince the General that his command had too little ammunition to support the attack. When Crook learned that his men only had ten cartridges each, he realized that "he would have to wait until he go more ammunition from the wagons before taking the offensive." This saved the command from being destroyed. 191

Crook's attempt to dictate the terms of the battle had failed, and it was the Sioux and Cheyenne who started the engagement and ended it as well. They left at about the same time as the return of Anson Mills and his men, but the arrival of this column was probably not the reason for the Indian withdrawal. Many of the warriors had slept little the night before, and they had gone into battle with little food and on tired horses. After about six hours of combat, the Indians were simply exhausted, and they left.

While the battle had ended, unfortunately, the killing was not yet over, because one more Indian was killed the day after the fight. The Crow scouts were on Crook's right flank, when they heard someone calling in the Sioux language, "Mini! Mini!" This was a cry for water. The Crows found a badly-wounded "Cheyenne whose eyes had been shot out in the beginning of the battle." He had crawled away from the fighting and was hiding among some rocks. He had heard the Crows talking and had mistaken them for Sioux warriors. The scouts were in no mood to be compassionate, and "The Crows cut him limb from limb and ripped off his scalp." 192 In his diary, written shortly after the battle, Bourke was more explicit. "My informant told me they cut off the legs at the knees, the arms at the elbows, broke open the skull and scattered the brains on the

189 Mills, My Story, p. 408.

190 Ibid.

191 Grouard, pp. 121-2.

192 Bourke, Crook, p. 318.
ground. This is the manner of treatment all Indians pursue towards their enemy.”

After the Cheyenne and Sioux had withdrawn that afternoon, Crook decided not to pursue. He had failed to locate the enemy village, and the General knew that he still faced a formidable foe who could renew the battle. His men had lost their optimism for the campaign, confidence was low, and they were exhausted from the fighting. The army had expended much of its ammunition, and Crook believed he could not continue to advance. He needed reinforcements to meet the Indians again, and he also required more supplies in food and ammunition. The General decided he must abandon any offensive operations, and he ordered his men to retreat the following day.

The newspaper reporter, Finerty, summed up the situation well, “General Crook decided that evening to retire on his base of supplies—the wagon train—with his wounded, in view of the fact that his rations were almost used up and that his ammunition had run pretty low. He was also convinced that all chance of surprising the Sioux camp was over for the present, and perhaps he felt that even if it could be surprised his small force would be unequal to the task of carrying it by storm. The Indians had shown themselves good fighters, and he shrewdly calculated that his men had been opposed to only a part of the well-armed warriors actually in the field.” Finerty also confirmed that the soldiers had shot a large number of bullets, and he stated that they “had fired about 25,000 rounds of ammunition.” He observed that “it often takes an immense amount of lead to send even one Indian to the happy hunting grounds.”

The Dead and Wounded

In his official report Crook stated, “Our casualties during the action, were 10 killed including one Indian Scout, and 21 wounded, including Captain Guy V. Henry.” He added that he could not properly estimated the losses suffered by his enemies, but he stated that “thirteen of their dead bodies being left in close proximity to our lines.” Curiously, Crook gave a different number of fatalities in his autobiography. “We lost over a dozen men killed and a good many wounded.” These totals were different from the statement Crook made to Captain Mills because the General said, “We have lost about fifty killed and wounded.” Finerty agreed with this number and stated, “Our losses, including the friendly Indians, amounted to about fifty.” Lieutenant Bourke wrote shortly after the battle, “the number of casualties of all kinds reported is fifty-seven, including (10) killed outright, (4) mortally wounded, and many of no significance.” T. B. MacMillan was a newspaper reporter with the army, and he reported, “We lost 10 killed, 4

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198 Bourke, *Diary*, p. 329
mortal y wounded, 1 officer and 10 men dangerously wounded and about 30 slightly wounded. Lost 16 horses that were shot, and 7 carbines. 199

The army officers may have had good reason to minimize their casualties, so the extent of their losses would not be known. Ben Arnold was a messenger with the army, and he had no motive to falsify reports. He stated that the Sioux “succeeded in killing thirteen soldiers, five Crows, and seven or eight Shoshones.” 200 These numbers appear to be more believable that some of the official reports, which almost always state that only one Indian scout was killed. The Crow and Shoshone were heavily engaged at the most critical juncture of the battle, and they likely suffered the greatest losses.

Frank Grouard also had no military reputation to protect, and he had fewer reasons to falsify reports. His numbers of casualties were much higher than the other reports. “To sum up the battle, there were twenty-eight soldiers killed and fifty-six wounded. One of the Indian scouts was killed and three of them wounded. On the Indian [Sioux and Cheyenne] side, there were thirteen of them killed that I know of.” 201 The most thorough history of the campaign was written by J. W. Vaughn, and he indicated that the government might have destroyed important documents relating to casualties. The official reports for the three companies, which reportedly suffered the most losses in battle, were missing from the U.S. National Archives. Additionally, Vaughn has observed, “It seems incredible that all these men could have fought for six hours with only the small number killed as stated in the official report. The statement of Grouard would appear to be closer to the truth.” 202

The number of Sioux and Cheyenne who were killed in the battle may never be known with accuracy. The soldiers could only be sure that thirteen of the enemy had been killed because the Indian scouts had taken that number of scalps from their dead adversaries. As Finerty described, the Sioux and Cheyenne “picked up their wounded, all but thirteen of their dead, and broke away to the northwest on their fleet ponies, leaving us only the thirteen scalps, 150 dead horses and ponies and a few old blankets and war bonnets as trophies of the fray.” 203 Charles Diehl interviewed a number of Sioux leaders, including Crazy Horse, a year after the battle, and he reported, “The Indians say in the latter fight [Battle of the Rosebud] 36 Indians were killed and 63 wounded.” 204 This meant a total of 99 warriors were casualties.

These numbers have contributed to a study by Dave Grossman on men’s unwillingness to

199Mac [MacMillan], “On the War-Path: Progress of General Crook’s Big Horn Expedition,” *Inter Ocean (Chicago)*, 24 June 1876, p. 5.

200Arnold, p. 250.

201Grouard, p. 122.


203Finerty, p. 140.

204Diehl, “Interview,” p. 228.
kill in battle. Grossman stated, “General Crook’s men fired 25,000 rounds at Rosebud Creek on June 17, 1876, causing 99 casualties among the Indians, or 252 rounds per hit.” The author’s thesis was that the large expenditure of ammunition and the resulting few casualties were caused neither by the soldiers’ nervousness nor their poor marksmanship, but by their innate aversion to killing a human being.\(^{205}\) If accurate, this argument would explain why the army and Indians fought so long, expended so much ammunition, and inflicted so few casualties on each other.

The Shoshone boy, who was killed in the battle, was the subject of much mourning among the members of his tribe. The other Shoshone warriors made noise of “melancholy wailing” during the night, and they called “upon the Great Spirit” for vengeance. The next morning the boy was buried in a grave “dug for the body in the bed of the stream.” After the corpse was covered with earth, “a group of warriors on horseback rode over the site several times, thus making it impossible for the Sioux to find the body.” The corpses of the dead soldiers were hidden in a similar manner. They were “quietly buried within the limits of the camp, and every precaution was taken to obliterate the traces” of the graves.\(^{206}\)

The soldiers dug a deep trench near the bank of the Rosebud creek near the water line. The bodies of the dead were laid in a row, “covered with stones, mud, and earth packed down, and a great fire kindled on top and allowed to burn all night.” The next morning when the soldiers broke camp to march away “the entire command marched over the graves, so as to obliterate every trace and prevent prowling savages from exhuming the corpses and scalping them.”\(^{207}\)

This effort to make sure neither the Sioux nor Cheyenne could locate the corpses and desecrate the bodies of the dead soldiers proved to be futile, because the Indians had no trouble finding them. The morning after the battle about twenty young Sioux warriors, including Standing Bear, went to the location of the battle and then to the area where the army had camped. They noticed a place where the ground was recently dug up and where a large fire had been built. The young men realized something important had been buried there, and they dug immediately with their hands. Soon they found a “blanket and there was a dead soldier in it.” They pulled him out of the ground, and one of the warriors said, “This is my blanket. I have been looking for this blanket. I will have this blanket.” He took it. According to Standing Bear, the bodies were buried one on top of the other, and the Sioux found more corpses under the first. Standing Bear got the blanket from the fifth body in the stack. The dead soldier was a young man, and he had a “ring on his finger with a white stone in it that sparkled.” The warrior cut the finger off the corpse and took the ring. One Sioux took a scalp from a body, but the warriors apparently left the remaining corpses unmolested.\(^{208}\)


\(^{206}\) Finerty, pp. 146, 148.

\(^{207}\) Bourke, *Crook*, p. 317.

\(^{208}\) Standing Bear as cited in Black Elk Speaks, pp. 103-4.
Aftermath and Accusations

The wounded soldiers were treated well, and they were brought away on travois which allowed them to be transported with as much comfort as possible. Additionally, six men were assigned to each wounded man to assure that all his needs were met. The retreat from the Rosebud River was largely uneventful, and Lieutenant Bourke had little to note in his diary other than the nights were very cold. The morning after the battle, 18 June, was surprisingly cold, and the soldiers awoke at 3 AM to a hard frost, “which made everyone shiver.” The following morning was equally cold, “last night was very cold—one of the coldest for a summer night I ever experienced. Frost covered the ground and our sleep was interrupted by the intense cold.” The army marched back to the encampment at Goose Creek on Tongue river and arrived on 19 June. The weather remained worthy of comment. While the weather had been very cold for two nights in a row, the temperature rose to 103 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade on 20 June.

While General Crook awaited five companies as reinforcements, he and his men relaxed for weeks. They bathed, rested, and many of them spent time fishing. The soldiers caught many hundreds if not thousands of trout in the cold streams in the area, and fish became an important part of the men’s diet. Crook was especially pleased to go fishing day after day. Ironically, on 25 June 1876, “Squads of men and officers constantly pass Headquarters en rout to the canyon a couple of miles above. ... Trout are caught there every moment, and some little game of other kinds is shot.”

On that exact day, George Armstrong Custer’s 7th Cavalry, less than seventy miles away, was heavily engaged at the Battle of Little Bighorn in which the command was almost annihilated and about 265 cavalrymen were killed. Custer’s regiment had suffered a severe defeat at the hands of the same Indians Crook and his men had engaged only eight days before at the Battle of the Rosebud. It was immediately apparent that the Sioux and Cheyenne had been encouraged by their victory at the Rosebud and had aggressively engaged the 7th Cavalry a few days later. Crook’s men were still relaxing and fishing on 10 July, seventeen days after the Battle of the Little Bighorn, when word arrived in camp of Custer’s disaster. Before then, some of Crook’s men thought they had won a victory at the Rosebud, but the news of he disaster of the 7th Cavalry caused many men to change their opinion of the earlier engagement.

The fact that no hostile Indians followed the army either to molest or harass the soldiers help make Lieutenant Bourke believe that the troopers had won a big victory at the Battle of the Rosebud. “The absence of hostile demonstrations since our fight of June 17th speaks very plainly of the severe handling the Sioux received that day. Were they victorious or had the day been even undecided, our camp would long since have been beleaguered by the sharpshooters.” Bourke did not realize that the Indians had been able to attack the columns converging on them one at a time. The lack of renewed attacks by the Sioux and Cheyenne on the soldiers demonstrated that they no longer needed to worry about Crook’s command, and they could concentrate their forces

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209 Bourke, Diary, pp. 331-4, 339.


211 Ibid., p. 356.
elsewhere. Anson Mills presented a better summation of the outcome of the battle. “We then all realized for the first time that while we were lucky not to have been entirely vanquished, we had been most humiliatingly defeated.”

General Crook had taken his entire army out of the campaign against the Sioux and Cheyenne by remaining at Goose Creek for weeks. This meant he had failed to follow his orders and he did not participate in the pincer movement that was supposed to crush the Indians between columns of cavalry. Crook’s failure exposed Custer and his command to the force of enemy warriors, which contributed to the disaster at the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

A reporter for The Daily Independent newspaper in Helena, Montana, wrote a scathing report on General Crook. The article was dated 25 June 1876 and was sent from Fort Laramie, Wyoming, long before the men at the post heard of Custer’s defeat. The newspaperman stated the opinion of many men stationed at the fort. “The officers of the post speak in terms of unmeasured condemnation of Gen. Crook’s behavior, and denounce his retreat in the face of the savage enemy as cowardly.” The correspondent further stated that the General had lost the respect of the Crow scouts who had recently served with him. “They call Crook the ‘Squaw Chief’ and say he’s afraid to fight.” Many of the soldiers at Fort Laramie also believed that the battle was “humiliating and disgraceful to the last degree.”

Such strong condemnations of Crook’s conduct was probably unfair, and many others viewed his leadership in the battle more favorably. Many of his superiors, including Generals William T. Sherman and Phil Sheridan, stated they still had faith in him and even President Grant agreed, “General Crook is the best, wiliest Indian fighter in the country.” But these opinions were clearly biased because the military leaders of the nation, who were making Indian policy, were unlikely to criticize those where implementing government strategy.

Crook soon came to his own defense by stating erroneously that he had less than a thousand men in the battle. In reality he had over 1,300 men. He stated that his command was about the same size as Custer’s 7th Cavalry, and, if he had pursued the enemy, he would have suffered a similar fate as had Custer’s men. In reality, Crook’s command had about twice as many men as the 7th Cavalry. The General further said that he won the engagement by driving the Indians away, but he decided not to pursue his victory because he had to care for his wounded men. Crook’s attempt to distort the truth of the situation by changing the numbers of men in his and in Custer’s commands demonstrated, at least, that he was a dishonest man if not an outright liar.

Despite the fact that Crook maintained that he had achieved a victory at the Rosebud, he still blamed some of his subordinates for not achieving a greater triumph. Ten years after the battle Crook confronted Colonel Royall and Captain Nickerson for being slow in following

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212 Mills, My Story, p. 409.

213 “Crook Defeated!” Daily Independent: Helena, 30 June 1867, p. 3 col. 2.


orders. At that time, the two men defended their actions in the battle. 216

One of the means that Crook attempted to defray criticism was to engage in another aggressive campaign late in the summer. In his attempt to regain his reputation, Crook drove his men deep into Montana and South Dakota under very trying weather conditions trying to locate an Indian camp they could attack. Faced with starvation, his men were finally forced to eat their horses. Luckily for Crook's reputation, his command stumbled onto an Indian camp at Slim Buttes in the night of 9 and 10 Sept. 1876. They attacked the settlement. The resulting easy victory against a weak adversary drew attention away from his defeat at the Rosebud. 217

No matter how General Crook tried to blame others for the poor leadership at the Rosebud, distract attention from the loss, or state that a defeat was a victory, he must bear the greatest responsibility for how the battle was fought. On the morning of the engagement, Crook failed to reconnoiter the area, and he was easily surprised by his adversaries. He allowed his men to rest and set their mounts free to graze, meaning that the horses were far away at the moment when they were badly needed. Crook was distracted by playing cards when the fighting started, and he was slow to react to the rapidly developing engagement. Only the quick reaction by his Indian scouts saved the command from heavy losses or a complete route.

During the battle, the General spread his forces over too wide an area to bring proper fire on the attacking Sioux and Cheyenne, but Crook's tactics were most advantageous to the enemy warriors. In attacking on a broad front, he effectively divided his forces into small groups, which allowed his men to be struck in small detachments, meaning that many men were killed or wounded needlessly. Crook's attempt to attack the Indian village, which was nowhere in the area, was the height of foolishness. In doing so, he had divided his command in the face of a superior enemy, which could have been disastrous.

The biggest credit for the success of the Indians in the battle must be given to the Sioux and Cheyenne themselves. These warriors had rode through much of the night to surprise their adversaries. They dictated the terms of the battle, and their timely maneuvers kept the soldiers confused and off balance. The warriors engaged and disengaged the troopers at will, and the battle only ended when the Indians decided to withdraw. The skill of Crazy Horse and his men had brought success in the battle. Unfortunately, the Indian victory at the Battle of the Rosebud was only a temporary accomplishment because the white invaders won the Great Sioux War late in the fall and in the winter of 1876-7. Within a year of the Battle of the Rosebud, the Indians were once again living in humiliating circumstances on federal reservations. The Sioux had lost control of their sacred lands because of the dishonesty and brutality of the U.S. government.


217 Winkler, Slim Buttes.


Bordeaux, William J. trans. *Custer’s Conqueror*. (np: Smith, [1952?]).


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