

CBHMA Book Review

by Rev. Vincent A. Heier

Great Sioux War Orders of Battle: How the United States Army Waged War on the Northern Plains, 1876-1877

By Paul L. Hedren

Norman, OK: Arthur H. Clark Company (an imprint of the University of Oklahoma Press), 2010 Pp. 240, contents, preface, acknowledgements, appendices, bibliography, index, map, hardcover, \$40.00

Although much of the literary and historical focus on the Indian wars has been on the Battle of the Little Big Horn, it was but only one conflict in the “Great Sioux War” of 1876-1877. Noted frontier military historian Paul Hedren provides a remarkable new contextual analysis of that war in ***Great Sioux War Orders of Battle*** (volume 31 in the “Frontier Military Series” of the Arthur H. Clark Company).

Hedren undercuts “pre-conceived” notions regarding the U.S. Army that went into the field in 1876. He contends that for the most part the troops were led by seasoned and educated officers whose service in the Civil War and the Indian wars of the 1860s and 1870s made them ready and able. This was true as well of a majority of non-commissioned officers who served as the “backbone” of every regiment.

The author further claims that most regiments were composed of soldiers who had at least some training and experience on the Plains. Scrupulous study does not bear out the myth that the army fielded too many recruits.

The author argues that no Indian policy had proved effective. In addition the Army had a limited strategic or tactical understanding of how to fight the tribes.

Despite the controversial reasons for starting the Great Sioux War of 1876 General Philip Sheridan’s plan, as supported by the War Department and Indian Bureau, adopted the concept of “total war” using converging columns and Indian scouts and frontiersmen as guides.

Hedren clearly shows that after the military’s initial failures at the Rosebud and Little Big Horn, Sheridan needed to reenergize and reinforce the commands of Generals Alfred H. Terry and George Crook. Also the “Rule of 1876” was established that called for the disarming and unhorsing the Lakota. This was the special responsibility of the 7th Cavalry commanded by Col. Samuel D. Sturgis and reinforced by recent recruits.

The Great Sioux War included 28 troop deployments from Fort Pease in February 1876 to the Big Horn Post (later Fort Custer) July 1876-September 1877. The author does a fine job describing with his characteristic scholarship.

Hedren’s conclusions are striking. Countering the presuppositions of earlier authors, he states that the Great Sioux War demonstrated the capacity of the Army to wage and adapt to “unconventional” conflict. Although this experience was codified early in American and especially English military education, the lessons learned never became ingrained in our military theory.

The author stresses that the early failures at the Powder River, Rosebud and especially Little Big Horn were due not so much to the lack of military leadership as to the determination of the non-reservation Lakota and Cheyenne to fight and defend their nomadic way of life. If there is a weakness in analyzing the later success of the military, it is the fact that the “hostiles” were now suffering from disunity and starvation after Custer’s defeat.

With an excellent map and appendices listing of all regiments, staff and field officers, company grade officers, medical officers and especially engagements with casualties, this book is a remarkable reassessment of how the U.S. Army fought in 1876-1877—and how well it did so.

For some, John Ford’s romantic portrait of the cavalry in film captured the aura of the times. For others, the politically correct notions of brutality and ineptness in the frontier army seem to dominate. Both images are wrong and certainly inadequate. Paul Hedren demonstrates such inadequacies by shattering past and present misconceptions by offering a new understanding of the Great Sioux War of 1876-1877.

Considering that the Little Big Horn has overshadowed the Sioux War, this is an excellent study that contextualizes Custer’s defeat. Even if one disputes the author’s conclusions, one cannot easily dismiss his recognized scholarship.

This book should be essential reading for all students of the Indian Wars and military history.

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