

Battle of the Little Big Horn

by Joe Sills, Jr.

On May 17, 1876, the 7th United States Cavalry Regiment under Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer left Fort Abraham Lincoln, Dakota Territory, as part of a column commanded by Brigadier General Alfred H. Terry. This column, with two others already in the field led by Brigadier General George Crook and Colonel John Gibbon, was to participate in the effort to force all Sioux and Northern Cheyenne in the unceded territory back to their reservations.

When the 7th Cavalry left on the expedition, it did so divided into two wings, the right under Major Marcus A. Reno and the left under Captain Frederick W. Benteen. Within the right wing were the battalions of Captain Myles W. Keogh (Companies B, C and I) and Captain George W. Yates (Companies E, F and L). The left wing was comprised of battalions under Captain Thomas B. Weir (Companies A, D and H) and Captain Thomas H. French (Companies G, K and M). The regiment consisted of approximately 750 officers and enlisted men, although the exact number is open to question, and was accompanied by a contingent of about forty Arikara Indian scouts. Also in the column were three companies of infantry and a Gatling gun platoon, all supported by wagons carrying supplies.

On June 7, Terry's column reached the confluence of the Powder and Yellowstone Rivers from which point he left to confer with Gibbon on June 9, and then returned. The right wing of the 7th Cavalry, along with one Gatling gun, was then ordered on a scout intended to take the unit up the Powder River, then over to the Tongue River, and back to the Yellowstone. Reno exceeded, or disobeyed, those orders by proceeding further west to Rosebud Creek where he found an Indian trail. He followed the trail upstream for perhaps 45 miles before returning to the Yellowstone.

On June 21, the remainder of the 7th Cavalry joined Reno below the mouth of the Rosebud and the whole regiment moved to the junction of that stream and the Yellowstone. On the same day, Terry, Gibbon, Custer and Major James Brisbin held a conference on board the steamer *Far West*. The decision reached was that Gibbon's infantry and Brisbin's 2nd Cavalry would proceed up the Yellowstone, cross and go south up the Big Horn. Custer and the 7th Cavalry were to move south along the Rosebud, then cross to the Little Big Horn, and return along that stream. The obvious hope was that the Indians would be found in the area of the Little Big Horn and be trapped between the two columns. During the course of the meeting, Custer declined the offer of the Gatling gun battery on the grounds that it could hinder his progress. He also refused the four companies of the 2nd Cavalry under Brisbin, saying that the 7th Cavalry could handle anything it met. To assist Custer, six Crow scouts from Gibbon's command were assigned along with the famous civilian guide and scout Mitch Bouyer. George Herendeen was attached to Custer for the purpose of

scouting the upper reaches of Tulloch's Fork and carrying the results of that scout to Terry. The conference resulted in the now famous "Orders" dated June 22, to Custer from Terry. The verbal and written battles waged over the meaning, force and effect of these orders began soon after the actual battle ended, and persist even today. That debate is too extensive to be included here but is something which the serious student must deal with and resolve apart from this work.

At noon on June 22, the 7th Cavalry proceeded up the Rosebud about 12 miles. While at the Yellowstone, Custer had abolished the wing/battalion assignments for reasons unknown, informing Reno that command assignments would be made on the march. That evening, Custer told his assembled officers that he expected they might face a warrior force of up to 1500, and if he got on their trail he would pursue, even if beyond the fifteen days for which they were rationed. The regimental supplies were carried by a make-shift mule train of twelve mules per company with some additional animals to transport headquarters and miscellaneous equipment. Twelve mules each carried two 1000-round ammunition boxes, or 2000 rounds per company. Each soldier was armed with the single-shot, .45 caliber, Model 1873 Springfield carbine, and was ordered to carry 100 rounds of 45-55 carbine ammunition of which fifty rounds was to be on his person. The troopers also carried the Model 1873 Colt .45 caliber, single-action revolver with twenty-four rounds of ammunition. Despite artwork to the contrary, no sabres were carried after the expedition left the Powder River camp. It further appears from recent archeological surveys that some of the soldiers may have carried weapons other than those mentioned, and that some men and officers had "personal" weapons with them.

On June 23, the regiment marched about thirty-three miles and camped about 5 p.m.

Saturday, June 24, found the regiment on the march by 5 a.m. Indian campsites were passed and examined and, after a march of some 28 miles, the command went into camp. That evening Custer called First Lieutenant Charles A. Varnum to him and stated that the Crow scouts believed the Sioux were in the Little Big Horn valley. Custer wanted someone to accompany the Crows scouts to a spot, later to become famous as the "Crow's Nest," from which the scouts said they could see the Sioux and Northern Cheyenne camp fires when started in the early morning. Custer wanted a messenger to be sent back with information as soon as possible. Varnum was to leave about 9 p.m. and Custer would follow with the regiment at 11 p.m. and thought he could be at the base of the divide between the Rosebud and Little Big Horn before morning. Varnum along with Charlie Reynolds, a white scout, some Crow and Arikara scouts left as ordered.

Custer turned the regiment westward toward the divide and marched about four hours until the weary unit halted. At this point, a message was received from Varnum stating that the scouts had seen camp fire smoke and a pony herd in the valley, and the regiment again moved out about 8 a.m. Later that morning Custer arrived at the Crow's Nest, looked through field glasses at the indicated site but, like Varnum earlier, was unable to see what the Crow scouts had seen. Although Benteen later claimed Custer did not believe the

scouts' report, Custer's subsequent actions were those of a commander taking his command toward a scene of action.

Upon his return to the regiment, Custer was told that a detail of troopers, led by Sergeant William A. Curtis of F Company, had come upon an Indian trying to open a lost box or bundle of clothing. There were other reports from Herendeen and Bouyer of sightings of Indians who, it was assumed, had also discovered the regiment. Since it was the Indians' custom to scatter in the presence of troops, Custer decided to strike immediately, rather than lay concealed during June 25 and attack on the morning of the 26th.

At about noon on June 25, at the Rosebud-Little Big Horn divide, Custer halted the regiment and proceeded to assign commands. Reno received Companies A, G and M, and Benteen, Companies D, H and K. It is probable that Captain Keogh was given Companies I, L and C, and Captain Yates, Companies E and F. Captain Thomas McDougall's Company B was assigned as packtrain guard. Furthermore, a noncommissioned officer and six privates were detailed from each company to help with company pack mules.

Benteen was ordered to scout toward a line of hills to the left front. After his departure, two messengers were sent directing him to go beyond the line of hills in view. This scout is sometimes characterized as Custer's way of appearing to comply with Terry's directive that he feel "... constantly to your left ...," but more likely represents Custer's reaction to his experience at the Washita, when he found that Indian villages camped separately along the same stream.

The balance of the regiment proceeded down Reno (or Sundance, or Ash) Creek toward the Little Big Horn, Reno's command on the left bank and Custer's two battalions on the right, with the pack train bringing up the rear. Around 2 p.m. Reno's battalion crossed over the creek to join Custer's command on the right bank. Shortly after, the combined columns arrived in the vicinity of the Lone Tepee, the location of which is still a matter of dispute.

Near this point, Fred Girard, civilian interpreter for the Arikara scouts, spotted a group of Indians fleeing toward the river, and heavy dust clouds were seen in the valley. Riding to the top of a small knoll, Girard called out to Custer, "Here are your Indians, running like devils."

Custer sent his adjutant, First Lieutenant William W. Cooke, to Reno with the order, "Custer says to move at as rapid a gait as you think prudent and to charge afterwards, and you will be supported by the whole outfit." This was the last and only order Reno ever received and, in fact, was the last communication from Custer's command.

In obedience to the order, Reno proceeded to the Little Big Horn River at a fast trot, crossed and halted on the far side of some timber to gather the companies which had lost formation in the crossing. Meanwhile, Girard still on the right bank had heard the Crow and Arikara call out that the Sioux, in large numbers, were coming up to meet Reno, an observation also made by the scout Herendeen. Thinking that Custer should know of this development, he turned back and quickly came upon Cooke who was riding toward the

river. After Girard relayed his information, Cooke stated he would report to Custer and turned back immediately.

Reno advanced down the valley toward the Indian village which was about two miles from the river crossing. During this movement Reno sent two separate messages, carried by Privates Archibald McIlhargey and John Mitchell, to Custer, each with the same information that the Indians were in force in front of him.

Indians poured across Reno's front, many moving to the bluffs on his left. Reno halted and dismounted his command of 124 soldiers to fight in a skirmish line formation, with his right resting on the timber near the river, and extending to his left toward the bluffs. The line advanced about 100 yards toward the village, but no further. Reno sent the horses and G Company into the timber. Out on the valley floor the battle continued, and as the Indians moved to Reno's left, he withdrew the skirmish line to the edge of the timber. The length of the fight until the line withdrew is a matter of argument with opinions ranging from five minutes to a half-hour.

Once in the timber, the fight continued until Reno, not receiving the promised support of "the whole outfit," and concerned about the expenditure of non-replaceable ammunition, decided to withdraw to the bluffs on the east side of the river. Varnum, Lieutenant Charles C. DeRudio, and the scout Girard, all saw Custer and/or his command moving north along the bluffs to the east of the Little Big Horn, but no one informed Reno of Custer's movements. Reno was able to mount most, but clearly not all, of his command in a clearing in the timber. A volley of shots rang out and the Arikara scout, Bloody Knife, at Reno's side, died from a bullet in the head, spattering blood and brains over Reno. Orders to dismount, then mount were given, and the command left the timber for the eastern heights. No organized resistance to the onslaught of the warriors took place either during the retreat or at the river crossing. This retreat, called a charge by Reno, resulted in the reported loss of three officers, 30 enlisted men, three civilians and two Arikara scouts. It terminated on the bluffs near the current Reno-Benteen battle site, and the result at the time must have appeared even worse, for in addition to those ultimately found dead, there were an officer, three civilians and fifteen soldiers missing, all but four of whom rejoined later that afternoon.

Shortly after reaching the bluffs, Reno was joined by Benteen's battalion which had returned to the trail some distance above the Lone Tepee. On his way to the river, Benteen was passed by Sergeant Daniel Kanipe of Company C who carried a message to the pack train. The message was for the train to come on across country and, in essence, not to worry about the loss of packs unless they contained ammunition. Benteen was next met by Trumpeter John Martin of Benteen's own Company H with the now famous, and disputed, message, "Benteen, Come on. Big village, Be quick. Bring packs. W.W. Cooke. P.S. Bring Packs." The dispute over this latter message is whether or not its intent was to have Benteen bring forward only the twelve mules with all the reserve ammunition. Proponents of the "ammunition packs" theory assert that Custer intended to make a stand and would need the

reserve ammunition. Opponents point out that the word “ammunition” is not used, that Custer had not yet even become engaged, and that to sequester all the ammunition implies an indifference to the fate of Reno and the pack train.

In any event, Benteen reached the river in time to see the last of Reno’s “charge” to the bluffs. He joined the shattered unit and Lieutenant Luther Hare was swiftly dispatched to the pack train to bring up several mules with ammunition. At about the same time, firing down river was heard indicating that Custer was engaged. In response to this, Weir, on his own, started down river perhaps thirty-five minutes after arrival at Reno’s position. Lieutenant Winfield S. Edgerly, believing Weir had permission to advance, ordered Company D to mount and follow. This precipitated the disjointed movement by Reno’s command. Upon arrival of McDougall and the pack train, Companies H, K and M followed D to a prominent point along the bluffs (today known as Weir Point) and the remainder of the command started in that direction but made little progress. The units on Weir Point abandoned that position and, again in a rather uncontrolled manner, moved back to the area occupied during the siege. The movement was prevented from becoming a disaster by Lieutenant Edward S. Godfrey, who on his own authority, dismounted K Company and covered the retreat. Reno’s command was quickly surrounded and came under heavy fire.

Earlier that afternoon, when Custer gave his last order to Reno, he probably had no plan for an enveloping maneuver. However, as he approached the river he was met by Adjutant Cooke bringing Girard’s information that the Indians were coming up to meet Reno. This was almost immediately reinforced by the arrival of the first of the soldiers sent by Reno with a message to the same effect. The arrival of the second soldier added emphasis to the fact that a large number of Indians were in the valley. The dust in the valley probably indicated to Custer that the noncombatants were fleeing north. A flanking maneuver to get to the women and children and, at the same time, placing the warriors between him and Reno must have seemed appropriate. In any event, Custer turned north.

From this point on, there are few absolutes about Custer’s action except its outcome. Theories abound. The last soldiers to see him were Kanipe, sent back when Custer first reached a bluff overlooking the river, and Trumpeter Martin, whose point of departure is disputed. Some writers place it in Cedar Coulee and others at the junction of Custer’s northward approach and Medicine Tail Coulee, for Martin himself said they had reached a ravine which ran toward the river. There is controversy whether Custer moved along the bluffs next to the river or behind Sharpshooter’s Ridge, a prominence north of the Reno-Benteen defense site. Likewise, there are differences of opinion about whether or not Custer personally went to Weir Point, the highest point nearest the river. This would have afforded Custer an unlimited view of the village had he gone there. In opposition, there is the unquestioned fact that at least four Crow scouts were definitely on Weir Point and not one of them places Custer, or any other soldier, there at any time. Additionally, Martin testified that only the Crow scouts went to Weir Point and that Custer was never there.

No matter the route, from there we know, with reasonable certainty, the location of the dead, though the theories of Custer's final actions are numerous.

Passing Sharpshooter's Ridge and proceeding down Cedar Coulee, Custer and his men arrived and halted at the junction of Cedar and South Medicine Tail Coulees. One part of Custer's command, probably Keogh's battalion, with three companies, moved north and occupied areas on what is known as Nye-Cartwright Ridge. This ridge divides South Medicine Tail Coulee and North Medicine Tail Coulee, sometimes called Deep Coulee. The latter is the deep ravine at the base of the ridge which runs from Calhoun Hill toward the Little Big Horn where it joins the mouth of South Medicine Tail. Cartridge casing finds clearly indicate troops firing from that point, and any concept of Custer's final battle must include that action if it is to have any validity.

One theory has the second part of Custer's command, probably Yates' battalion with two companies, advanced down Medicine Tail Coulee, and was either met by overwhelming force and driven to Battle Ridge, or was recalled by the firing from Keogh's battalion on Nye-Cartwright Ridge. The two battalions rejoined near Battle Ridge, continued north into the present area of the national cemetery, and were finally driven back to Battle Ridge. On the ridge, Lieutenant James Calhoun with Company L, was positioned in an area on the south end of the ridge (now called Calhoun Hill) where that company died, according to contemporary evidence, in skirmish line formation. Keogh and Company I were found on the eastern slope of the Ridge somewhat "in a bunch" which is in accord with some Indian accounts. This theory further places Companies E and C in skirmish line below the Last Stand area and Company F generally surrounding Custer and the headquarters unit on Last Stand Hill. The markers below the Calhoun position allegedly represent troopers shot down, or cut off, as the battalion made its way to its final destruction.

Another theory has Yates' battalion reconnoitering the ford at the mouth of Medicine Tail while Keogh's battalion positioned themselves on Nye-Cartwright Ridge, presumptively waiting for Benteen and the packs. Both commands then rejoined on Calhoun Hill. From there Yates' battalion moved northward as far as the flat land north and west of the Battle Ridge while Keogh's battalion remained on Calhoun Hill to await the arrival of Benteen and to cover the Medicine Tail approaches. These two battalions were then separately engaged by large numbers of Sioux and Cheyenne. Keogh's battalion died first: Company C on the lower slopes of the ridge in the Greasy Grass Ridge area; Company L on Calhoun Hill; and Company I on the eastern slope. The battalion with Custer attained the final stand position where it succumbed to the fire power of the Indian force. Modifications and combinations of both approaches exists, and the scholar will have to arrive at an independent conclusion about any of them.

The recent archaeological studies have made clear that although the Sioux and Cheyenne were not uniformly armed with rifles and pistols, there were far more firearms present than previously believed. The cartridge casings provided the evidence of a far larger

number of repeating rifles among the Indian weaponry. These casings also indicate that the flow of battle moved from the Calhoun position to the Last Stand area. Furthermore, the Indian armament would have steadily improved as carbines, pistols and ammunition were taken from the dead.

A caveat to the serious student: Although the geographical references have been the traditional ones, north (Last Stand), south (Calhoun Hill), east (Keogh's slope) and west (riverside), the Indian geography is different and Indian accounts must be perused carefully to determine which is being used. To the Indian, north is Keogh's slope; south (riverside), east (Calhoun Hill) and west (Last Stand).

Once the Custer fight was finished, the Indians surrounded Reno on the evening of June 25. Reno's companies were formed in a rough horseshoe position with the open end upriver. The fire from around 7 p.m. until darkness was heavy and some eleven soldiers were killed on the bluff. A hospital was established in a swale, and the horses and mules positioned at the open side of the swale to protect the wounded.

During the night some entrenchments were dug. Packs, boxes and dead animals were dragged into position to protect the troops, particularly in Company A's area at the end of the horseshoe on the eastern side of the siege area.

On June 26, the battle commenced around 2:30 in the morning. The troops were under constant long range fire, particularly Benteen's Co. H in which there were a large number of wounded. The warriors approached Benteen closely from the river side, but a charge drove them from the surrounding knolls and ravines. This opened the way for water carrier parties to obtain some water from the Little Big Horn which then was distributed to the wounded. Late that afternoon, the troops saw a welcome sight as the entire village withdrew in an upstream direction.

It was not until the morning of June 27 that the reason for the withdrawal was clear. The Montana column led by Terry and Gibbon had camped about two miles downstream of the Indian camp the night before, and reached the valley site the next day. On June 26, on their way to the juncture with the 7th Cavalry, three of Custer's Crow scouts had met Lieutenant James Bradley's detachment of Crow scouts and mounted infantry. The fleeing Crows told a story of disaster to Custer which was met with skepticism by the white officers but which led all of Bradley's Crows to leave immediately.

On the morning of June 27, Bradley reported to Terry and Gibbon who were then on the site of the Indian camp. He stated that he had found 197 bodies on the hills to the east. What the Gibbon men thought were dead buffalo, were the mingled bodies of dead horses and soldiers stripped of their clothing .

The two commands then moved into the river bottom, and the soldiers spent most of the day bringing the wounded down from the bluffs. Some investigation of the field was made that day, principally by Benteen, and the next day the 7th Cavalry turned to the gruesome task of burying its dead. The burials were anything but complete, consisting for the most part, of a little dirt and sagebrush thrown over the corpse.

Although the figures vary somewhat, 208 bodies were found and buried, with identification difficult, if not impossible in many cases. Many bodies had been subjected to extensive mutilation immediately after death, and all had been exposed to the hot Montana sun for three days.

On June 28, an effort was made to move the wounded to the steamer *Far West*, primarily using hand carried litters. The task proved impossible. The next day was given over to creating mule-borne litters with which all of the wounded were successfully carried to the waiting steamer in an all night march. There the wounded were placed on the boat for transport to Fort Abraham Lincoln. The rest of the expedition awaited reinforcements before continuing the campaign.

The Little Big Horn battle was easily the worst defeat ever sustained by the U.S. Army in Plains Indian warfare with the 7th Cavalry suffering 268 killed or dying of wounds, and 62 wounded.

The news shocked the nation and gave rise to an endless debate about the facts, strategy and tactics of the battle which continues to the present day.

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Note: This version of the Little Big Horn battle was written by Joe in 1995 and is presented here virtually unchanged from that time. Joe was probably one of the most knowledgeable people on this battle. He present a number of papers at the CBHMA annual symposium and there is little doubt in my mind that he possessed the capability to accurately assess the events that occurred on those two fateful days in 1876. Joe passed away in 2003 and he will be sorely missed.

Ron Nichols

[Return to Battle](#)