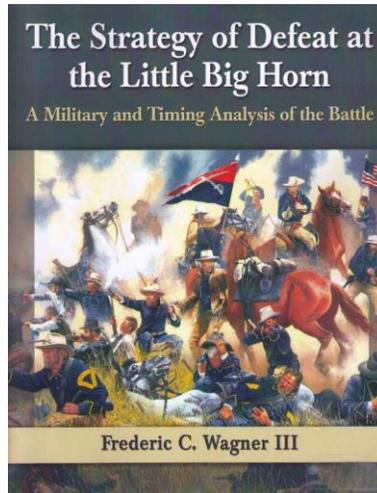


## CBHMA Book Review

by Rev. Vincent A. Heier



### ***The Strategy of Defeat at the Little Big Horn: A Military and Timing Analysis of the Battle***

By Frederic C. Wagner III

***Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2014 Pp. xi, 283, table of contents, acknowledgements, preface, timelines, appendices, notes, bibliography, index, softcover, \$55.00***

An old expression states “Time is of the essence.” This is certainly applicable to the ongoing mystery of the 1876 Battle of the Little Big Horn in Montana and the new book by Frederic C. Wagner. As a decorated army veteran, the author brings a detailed, challenging military analysis of the subject. For him the Little Big Horn must be studied both tactically and chronologically.

Wagner analyzes the “instructions” or orders to Lieut. Colonel George Armstrong Custer issued by his commander, Brigadier General Alfred H. Terry. He claims that Custer did not have free rein because “instructions” meant the same as orders and that “sufficient reason” to depart from them is not as obvious as his defenders have argued. “Custer was bound and determined,” the author emphasizes, “to seek out and attack this village, with or without Terry, and based on the objectives of the campaign and the location of the Indians, we cannot fault the man for assuming this role.”

The book, however, does criticize Custer for repeatedly ignoring signs of the massive number of warriors ahead, though this statement is subject to question given the clear observations of some who marched up Rosebud Creek “in pursuit of the Indians.” Custer also should have observed (*and thus agreed*) that “an enormous number of horses [has] passed” and that “lots of new signs” and “old camps in profusion” were apparent.

Wagner also criticizes Custer for his failure to scout Tullock's Creek (contrary to clear instructions to examine that valley). "Custer was given *no* latitude in their interpretation." If he had dispatched civilian George Herendeen on that mission, the courier would have informed Terry that no "hostiles" were in that valley. "Custer would have doubled Terry's choices," the author assumes, "a commander's dream." Whether this negative report would have changed the outcome of the Little Big Horn is debatable as Terry and Colonel John Gibbon's "Montana column" were late in reaching the battlefield.

The author charts each leg of the 7th Cavalry's road to the Little Big Horn from the Rosebud (near present day Busby, Montana) on the evening of June 24, 1876. Timelines become the "driving force" of his analysis because "without an understanding of the time [that] various events took place, the battle of the Little Big Horn cannot be understood properly and those failing to realize this are doomed to read a recitation of events without understanding why and how these events transpired." Wagner is not the first to focus on time/motion analysis. He cites Dr. John S. Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, whose work, however, is flawed, "rendering his entire analysis problematic at best."

The first and foremost challenge of this methodology is to determine an accurate time standard. No time zones existed in 1876 and army campaigners often observed the time by the movements of the sun than by their watches. Lieut. George D. Wallace, who kept the itinerary of Custer's march, complicated this challenge by setting his watch to *Chicago* instead of local sun time.

To complement his analysis as to when and where each phase of the battle took place, the author notes the varying times estimated by participants and offers detailed time charts for each event. There is, however, a potential problem with this methodology, as we will note.

Time is not the only debatable factor. Place also raises questions. First and foremost is the location of the high point where Custer's scouts observed the Lakota village in the Little Big Horn Valley about 15 miles away on the morning of June 25. The author joins others in suggesting that what is known as the traditional "Crow's Nest" might not have been that site.

Regardless of the location of the lookout, the apparent discovery of the regiment that morning forced Custer to abandon his plan to hide his command that day, locate the village and attack on June 26. "At the Little Big Horn, Custer was presented with a serious dilemma," Wagner writes, "one of scattering, running Indians, *ergo* the collapse of an entire campaign." Such was the essence and objective of Terry's Little Big Horn strategy, to prevent the escape of the Indians. Custer would thus immediately march against the Lakota.

In deciding to attack a day early, Custer (as we know) separated the regiment into battalions after crossing the divide between the Rosebud and Little Big Horn valleys, tactical dispositions that the author commends. "All had legitimate, complementary, and supporting missions critical to the success of the attack," he argues. "Custer's plan was a flexible one. By dividing the regiment into three fighting battalions, Custer could send any one of them wherever he wanted, *providing* he maintained a modicum of control." Inability to control these units and to communicate with them would influence the outcome of the battle. *And* (as the author notes) Custer not only underestimated the strength of the Indians but he (and others) also miscalculated that they would flee, not fight.

Custer's rapid advance down Reno Creek demonstrated a determination to intercept the village wherever it was. The author joins the endless debate regarding the nature of the "attack" order to

Major Marcus A. Reno and Custer's "support" of the major's battalion whether from the rear (as Reno presumed) or the flank. Although he admits that the advance was an intelligence gathering mission, he assumes that Custer marched northward along the bluffs east of the river to attack or intercept the fleeing village from the flank while Reno diverted the Indians in the valley.

"Custer's plan, formulated on the fly, was a flexible one. That it did not work is more a tribute to the Indians' sheer brute strength, fighting ability, and numbers—along with poor execution by Custer himself—than to any shortcomings in his tactical *thinking*." Except for the disclaimer, this observation would be difficult to dispute.

Based on Indian testimony, the author conjectures that Custer, the headquarters group and battalion of Captain George F. Yates descended Medicine Tail Coulee towards the Little Big Horn River to observe the village or relieve pressure on Reno. He then rejoined the battalion of Captain Myles W. Keogh on what became known as Calhoun Hill. He further assumes that Custer (still on the offensive) moved further north beyond Last Stand Hill with Yates to intercept non-combatants and thus force the village's surrender. Warrior pressure near Ford "D" caused Custer and Yates to withdraw to Last Stand Hill. Any "last stand" there was short but bloody. This interpretation is not new or inconsistent with recent scholarship although Gordon Richard has argued that long attributed fighting at Medicine Tail Ford "B" occurred, in fact, at Ford "D" to the north.

Wagner concludes that Custer's division of his command was not in itself the cause of defeat. However, "Custer moved too far, too fast, without insuring his battalions were properly supported. He made no contingency for a potential breakdown of the whole." The fatal error was his extended movement to the north and the inability of separate commands to remain in contact. Custer's excursion to Ford D sealed his fate and that of the battalions of Keogh and Yates.

"His plans began to break down when he moved too far north and when Reno was overwhelmed. The sudden break in the action flow, plus the widening gap between the forces (allowing the Indians to fill in) is what broke the textbook's rules."

This book revisits an event that has been studied perhaps more than any other military action in American history. It is the clear product of exhaustive research and reflection that should serve as an example to others who attempt to analyze the Little Big Horn, decipher its sequence of events and explain its outcome.

Frederic Wagner should be commended for his predominant (if not exclusive) use of primary sources. His general observations are sound and few would dispute, for example, his narrative that part of Custer's immediate command advanced beyond Last Stand Hill to Ford "D." His broad conclusions could serve as the basis of a symposium presentation. Such generalizations are *perfect* talking points on strategy!

The author's emphasis on the time for each segment of the 1876 battle will certainly cause debate. The excessive detail devoted to time and space will lose the attention and interest of the reader, if not confuse him or her. A more manageable approach would have been to focus on the respective locations of the battalions during any event based on the preponderance of accounts and other evidence.

Moreover, his basis of time might not be correct. He "determined" that the military's watch time was "that used by Terry at his headquarters in St. Paul, Minnesota," a 57-minute difference from the time at

the Little Big Horn. However, circumstantial evidence in Terry's diary and other sources suggests that the general, in fact, had adjusted his watch to *local* time after meeting Gibbon on the riverboat *Far West* on June 9. If this change occurred, it could controvert Wagner's event times, if not undermine his entire methodology.

This ambitious endeavor would have benefited from an examination of military records in the National Archives to correct data errors such as the strength of the 7th Cavalry and Reno's battalion. Wagner states, for example, that 730 officers and men of the 7th Cavalry left Fort Abraham Lincoln on May 17, 1876. The actual total was 746 (28 commissioned officers and 718 enlisted men, excluding surgeons). As to the Reno battalion, the author's data differ from that compiled in the 2010 CBHMA Symposium paper "Valley Fight Overview," which is based on company muster rolls and regimental returns among other primary sources. The number of Indian scouts also requires revision.

Finally, Wagner's explanation of the battle has been flawed by a less than critical assessment of officers' testimony at the 1879 Reno Court of Inquiry.

This detailed analysis will clearly overwhelm, if not lose, the general reader or the Little Big Horn novice. It was not written for that audience. Given its magnitude and methodology, it might challenge the attention and interest of even the subject matter expert. We do recommend it, however, to devoted students of the battle willing to consider different methods and examine new perspectives whether or not they agree with their conclusions.

Keep an open mind. The time spent digesting this study might be a valuable learning experience!