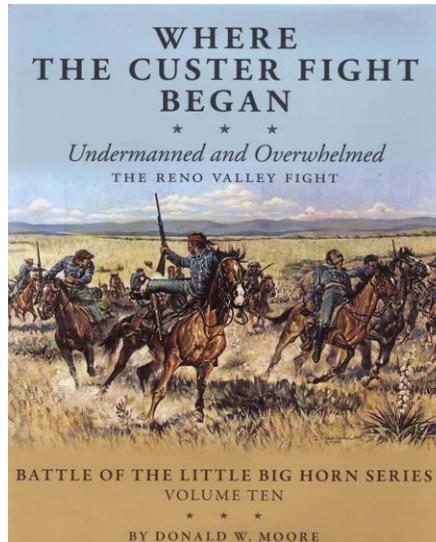


CBHMA BOOK REVIEW

by Rev. Vincent A. Heier



Where the Custer Fight Began:

Undermanned and Overwhelmed, The Reno Valley Fight

By Donald W. Moore

El Segundo, CA: Upton & Sons, 2011 205 pages, contents, illustrations, acknowledgements, introduction, Warren Van Ess sketches, appendices, bibliography, index, hardcover, \$55

Since no man is known to have survived “Custer’s Last Stand” in 1876 we must make educated guesses regarding the movements of Lieut. Col. George A. Custer and his five companies of the 7th Cavalry. There should be less debate, however, as to the actions of Major Marcus A. Reno at the Battle of the Little Big Horn River in view of the many members of his command who survived that dramatic conflict.

Yet that has *never* been the case!

Thus we had hoped that this most recent effort would accurately reconstruct how the battle began in what has been termed the “Valley Fight.”

In this latest volume of the publisher’s “Battle of the Little Big Horn Series,” author Donald Moore has analyzed this engagement from the perspective of the 1879 Reno Court of Inquiry. Although purporting to learn the truth, the Chicago inquest only added to the controversy.

This analysis of Reno's movements in the Valley claims that (despite the varied Inquiry testimony as to the content and intent of Reno's orders) Custer did not communicate "a specific or overall plan of battle" to his officers. Thus Custer presumed that his subordinates would "know" of a planned flank attack similar to the 1868 Washita fight, a fatal mistake.

Moore explores the underlying issues contributing to Custer's defeat. He claims that the 7th Cavalry contained more recruits than other students of the battle assume. He also asserts that the Army's adoption of the single-shot Springfield carbine was a "conservative" decision and that, despite archeological and other contrary evidence, many jammed.

The author also addresses Indian marksmanship. "The problem at the Little Big Horn," he writes, "is that range was not as important as firepower." Muting this important assumption, however, is his remark that "Indian sharpshooters were a real annoyance on the Reno-Benteen Battlefield and in the Valley fight." Archeological (and historical) evidence has established that some of this damage was accomplished from distances of 1000 yards or more.

Also subject to question are the author's undocumented comments as to the condition of the cavalry horses. "The horses," he simply asserts, "were tired. They had been hard ridden for days."

Such allegations of Custer's "forced" marches up Rosebud Creek to the Little Big Horn and the exhausted condition of men and horses at the commencement of the battle are exaggerated at best. His pace complied with what he had advised expedition commander Brigadier Alfred H. Terry: "at first" 30 miles a day. The official three day itinerary (73 miles) confirms that Custer's pace up the Rosebud was less than the regulation "walk" gait of 3¾ miles per hour prescribed by Upton's, *Cavalry Tactics* (1874). Even if he had intended to "push" his command by forced marches, he would have been unable to do so in view of the delays caused by the unmanageable pack train as well as the need for adequate reconnaissance by his scouts, who were in advance of the column.

If Custer's men and horses were exhausted, Reno's battalion would have been unable to charge down the Little Big Horn Valley at a gallop for nearly two miles before halting to fight on foot.

Each phase of the Valley Fight is analyzed in detail noting the variances in the court of inquiry testimony. Of particular note is the author's comparative study of both the number of warriors concealed in a ravine during Reno's advance down the Valley and the population of the Indian encampment.

Moore defends Reno's decision to halt, dismount and form a skirmish line as a "typical" U.S. cavalry tactic. His discussion of the withdrawal of the line to the horses in the woods adjacent to the river and Reno's subsequent decision to retreat from the Valley should have provided more detailed analysis of these controversial issues, including the nature and extent (if any) of the action in the timber. The author concludes that Reno's defeat in the Valley was due not only to Custer's failure to follow General Alfred H. Terry's orders but also to his failure to communicate and reconnoiter.

The author does address other "controversies" such as Reno's alleged cowardice, agreeing with the conclusion of Sgt. Charles Windolph that the major was not deficient in his duty. As to the allegation that Reno was drunk, he repeats much of the Inquiry testimony but does suggest that Reno may have developed a tolerance to alcohol.

Complicating this study are its confusing, contradictory calculations as to the battle strength of the Reno battalion and number of *troopers* on the skirmish line.

The author is essentially correct as to the number (143) of enlisted men present for duty in the three companies (A, G and M) on June 25, 1876 (it was probably 140). His skirmish_line estimate (85) is also reasonable (although this number does not include scouts and civilians).

However, Moore states that the same 143 enlisted men were also "present for duty in the Valley" (thus ignoring the seven or more troopers assigned from each company to the pack train and other rear guard duties). He further compounds this confusion by stating that the size of the three companies in the Valley Fight was 114 enlisted men, a number that he derived by deducting 29 non-commissioned officers (five of whom "presumably would not be horse holders"?) and further reducing this figure by 29 horse holders to arrive at his skirmish line estimate.

After the battalion crossed the river the total enlisted strength of the three companies was probably 113. Of that number 75 to 80 formed the skirmish line. For an analysis of this statistical issue, please refer to the 2010 CBHMA Symposium paper "Valley Fight Overview."

This contribution to the literature of the Little Big Horn would have benefited from review by a subject matter expert that would have detected and corrected several factual errors.

Even cursory scrutiny would have resulted, for example, in the following corrections:

Jefferson Barracks, the U.S. cavalry's recruit depot, was in St. Louis, Missouri, not Mississippi.

The author states that the strength of the 7th Cavalry was 652 officers and men when it marched from Fort Abraham Lincoln, Dakota Territory. According to the regiment's May 1876 Return, however, 28 commissioned officers and 718 enlisted men were present for duty.

He further states that three military columns took the field against the Lakota in *April* 1876. In fact, Terry's "Dakota Column" left Fort Lincoln on May 17. Prior to its departure, a command from Wyoming Territory under Brigadier General George Crook had unsuccessfully campaigned against the Northern Cheyenne in March. A reorganized expedition again led by Crook took the field in May.

He writes that Terry ordered Reno on his reconnaissance of Powder and Tongue Rivers on *June 2* with "one Gatling *battery*." However, only one piece of Lieut. William H. Low's three gun Gatling battery marched with Reno's column on June 10 pursuant to orders of that date.

As to the number of warriors that Custer might encounter, Moore assumes that it "is generally conceded that he expected 1200." According to Capt. Edward S. Godfrey, Custer informed his officers on the evening of June 22 "that we might meet at least a thousand warriors; there might be enough young men from the agencies . . . to make a total of fifteen hundred."

The author states that the interpreter Fred Gerard shouted "Here are your Indians, running like devils!" *before* the June 25 division of the regiment (p. 32) *and* at the Lone Tepee on Reno Creek before the order to the major "to attack the *village*" (p. 39).

Reno actually received two orders: the first, to move "ahead" (at the Lone Tepee noted above); the second, to pursue the fleeing Indians spotted by Gerard (at a second Lone Tepee closer to the river). The major was not ordered to attack the village, whose location and size had not been confirmed.

During the Valley Fight, the Indian scouts "*took off* reducing his [Reno's] force by 22 men." Of the 18 Indian scouts known to have crossed the Little Big Horn at least 10 participated in this fight, including William Jackson. (His brother Robert was not present, contrary to the author's statement.) Several other scouts attempted to capture Lakota horses.

Custer *ordered four* Crow scouts "to accompany Reno." Only two of these scouts participated in the Valley Fight, their presence the result of miscommunication.

There were *six* trumpeters in Reno's battalion. The two G Company trumpeters were not present for duty with their unit. One was assigned as an orderly to Custer; the other was on detached service in Louisiana.

Skirmish line intervals were "4.5 feet (or 5 yards)." Although Upton's 1874 ***Cavalry Tactics*** prescribed five yard or adjusted equal intervals, two sergeants testified that the intervals during the Valley Fight "were not kept up well" and the men "were all mixed up and huddled together."

The *saber* was the enlisted man's "*primary weapon*." The Model 1873 Springfield carbine was, in fact, the primary weapon. With one or two exceptions, the sabers of 7th Cavalry were left at the Powder River depot. The saber, Capt. Otho E. Michaelis observed, "is an almost unknown weapon in frontier warfare."

Finally, could authors please correctly spell Elizabeth Custer's name as Libbie, not *Libby*!

The real value of this book is Glen Swanson's essay "Locating the Skirmish Line" describing Jason Pitsch's archeological research of the Valley Fight. The discovery of Reno's skirmish lines largely confirms author Charles Kuhlman's detailed sketch of the fight including the area known as the "Timber." The book includes an excellent reproduction of the original sketch published in ***Legend into History*** now in Swanson's extensive collection. (The Kuhlman schematic, however, does not reflect the course of the Little Big Horn in 1876. It is based on the 1891 U.S. Geological Survey map.)

Of special interest is the inclusion of two drafts of Major Reno's official report of July 5, 1876 that were in the archives of Col. W.A. Graham. The Benteen family appears to have loaned the original documents to Graham to transcribe. One of these versions confirms Reno's allegation (in a July 4, 1876 letter to Lieut. General Philip H. Sheridan) that his report criticized Col. John Gibbon (and the "Montana Column") for failing to arrive at the battlefield on time and prevent the failure of the expedition. Needless to say, this criticism did not appear in the major's official published report. (The 1999 Symposium paper "Reno, Terry and a Variation of a Major Theme" addresses this censored document.)

This book might be a good starting point but does not adequately solve the complexities surrounding where the Custer Fight began, including the important aspect of timing and its impact on the Little Big Horn.

*C. Lee Noyes contributed to this review, an abridged version of which appeared in the Fall 2012 **Battlefield Dispatch**. We welcome constructive reader comments, which can be addressed to CLeeNoyes@aol.com.*