

Resource Sheet 2

Account A: "Uncle Sam's Crook: Will He Straighten the Sinuous Sioux of the Yellowstone?"

Chicago Times, July 1, 1876

In 1869 the United States concluded a treaty with the Indians...whereby the eastern half of this enormous region we set apart for their occupation and use...and that no white person should be permitted to occupy or settle...or even pass through it without the consent of the Indians...By this treaty the eastern half of this area...was given to the Indians for occupation—agencies, farms, schools, and the like...In the fullest possible sense, the entire area was turned over to the Indians, and guaranteed to them by solemn treaty.

...The public will be prepared to easily comprehend the causes of the present war and its extent. In brief, without any abrogation of the treaty by the Sioux, the Black Hills country was invaded by immigrants in search of gold. The Sioux resented this invasion, and commenced to attack immigrant trains. They in turn were attacked by United States troops...

Now that the war is in progress, it should be fought out, until the hostile Indians are thoroughly subdued. When that shall be done, then it will be in order to debate this truth...that the Indians have the same right to defend their country against invasion that have Americans, or any other nation or community.

Account B: Robert M. Utley, Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier, 1988

The simplest answer...is that the army lost largely because the Indians won. To ascribe the defeat entirely to military failings is to devalue Indian strength and leadership. The Sioux and the Cheyenne's were strong, confident, united, well led, well armed, outraged by the government's war aims, and ready to fight if pressed. Rarely had the army encountered such a mighty combination in an Indian adversary. Perhaps no strategy or tactics could have prevailed against Sitting Bull's power...that the generals had such contempt for the fighting prowess of their foes as to care little for their numbers was but one symptom of society's attitudes toward Indians. The cultural and racial arrogance of the American people found expression in their generals.

Account C: Bruce A. Rosenberg, Custer and the Epic Defeat, 1974

The well known capacity, tenacity, and bravery of General Custer and the officers and men who died with him forbid the supposition of a panic and a rout. There was a desperate and sanguinary [bloodthirsty] struggle in which the Indians must have suffered heavily. From the evidence that has been spread before this court it is manifest that General Custer and his comrades died a death so heroic that it has but few parallels in history. Fighting to the last and against overwhelming odds, they fell on the field of glory. Let no stigma of rout or panic tarnish their blood-bought fame. Their deeds of heroism will ever live in the hearts of the American people, and the painter and the poet will vie with each other in commemorating the world-wide fame of Custer and his men.

Account D: New York Times Articles and Editorials

“An Indian Victory,” July 7, 1876

Sitting Bull's band of Sioux left their reservation with hostile intent. They refused negotiations for peace. They defied power and authority of the United States. They invited war. A force was sent against them. This force became divided, and General Custer with his five companies, coming up to the main body of the Sioux, attacked them impetuously, without waiting for the support of the remainder of the column. The result was that the entire body of men...fell into a death trap; they were overwhelmed by superior numbers and were all slaughtered.

“The Little Big Horn Massacre,” July 1876

An account of the slaughter of Gen. Custer's command, published by The Times of yesterday, are confirmed and supplemented by official reports from Gen. A.H. Terry, commanding the expedition. On June 25 Gen. Custer's command came upon the main camp of Sitting Bull, and at once attacked it, charging the thickest part of it with five companies, Major Reno, with seven companies attacking on the other side. The soldiers were repulsed and a wholesale slaughter ensued. Gen. Custer, his brother, his nephew, and his brother-in-law were killed, and not one of his detachment escaped. The Indians surrounded Major Reno's command and held them in the hills during a whole day, but Gibbon's command came up and the Indians left. The number of killed is stated at 300 and the wounded at 31. Two hundred and seven men are said to have been buried in one place. The list of killed includes seventeen commissioned officers.

It is the opinion of Army officers in Chicago, Washington, and Philadelphia, including Gens. Sherman and Sheridan, that Gen. Custer was rashly imprudent to attack such a large number of Indians, Sitting Bull's force being 4,000 strong. Gen. Sherman thinks that the accounts of the disaster are exaggerated. The wounded soldiers are being conveyed to Fort Lincoln. Additional details are anxiously awaited throughout the country.

July 8, 1876

The facts as now understood dispose most people here to lay blame for the slaughter upon General Custer's imprudence and probably disobedience of orders. But criticism is kindly and charitable in tone, as it would not be had he not fallen with his command in the thickest of the battle.

July 12, 1876

It is even desirable that our defeats should impel us to wage war in the sharp, vigorous manner which is the truest mercy to friend and foe. But it is neither just nor decent that a Christian nation yield itself to homicidal frenzy, and clamor for the instant extermination of savages by whose unexpected bravery we have been so sadly baffled.

All through the West there is manifested a wild desire for vengeance against the so-called murderers of our soldiers. The press echoes with more or less shamelessness the frontier theory that the only use to which an Indian can be put is to kill him. From all sides come denunciations of what is called in terms of ascending sarcasm "the peace policy," "the Quaker policy," and "the Sunday-school policy." Volunteers are eagerly offering their services "to avenge Custer and exterminate the Sioux," and public opinion, not only in the West, but to some extent in the East, has apparently decided that the Indians have exhausted the forbearance of heaven and earth, and must now be exterminated as though they were so many mad dogs... We must beat the Sioux, but we need not exterminate them.

Source E: Tatanka Yotanka, (The Sitting Bull), told to a New York Herald correspondent

Some soldiers mounted an attack off the ridge, galloping on their horses toward a group of Cheyennes and Oglalas. The Indians scattered to safety, and the white men dismounted again to hide along a second ridge. As hundreds of Indians surrounded this ridge I saw one of the soldiers point his pistol at his head and pull the trigger. Others imitated his example, shooting sometimes themselves, sometimes each other. When Chief Lame White Man [Custer] reached the soldiers all of them were already dead. Indians then attacked the first ridge, and again most of the white men were already dead. The only thing remaining for the Indians to do was pick up the abandoned guns and ammunition. As warriors walked among the white men, they cut off the legs or feet or arms of many of the bodies. Some of the soldiers were still living, having only been wounded, but they were quickly killed and parts of their bodies were also severed.

Only a few soldiers were still alive and able to fight at this point, and they joined forces at the west end of the ridge where they were surrounded by warriors and killed. When the shooting stopped the Indians thought all the soldiers had been killed, but seven soldiers were still alive and they rushed out from behind their horses and started running. I could not see what happened to these seven because of all the dust raised by the Indians and their ponies. I rode away searching for my nephew who had been shot and stabbed. I stayed with him, and brought him to his mother, but Noisy Walking died that night. He was one of the few Indians to be killed -- only half a dozen Cheyennes and two dozen Sioux lost their lives. The Indians said this was because of the Everywhere Spirit who had caused the white men to go mad and kill themselves thus saving many lives from the guns of the soldiers. They said this madness was the Everywhere Spirit's way of punishing the white men for attacking a peaceful Indian camp.

Account F: Sitting Bull

We did not ask you white men to come here. The Great Spirit gave us this country as a home. You had yours. We did not interfere with you. The Great Spirit gave us plenty of land to live on and buffalo, deer, antelope and other game; you are taking my land from me; you are killing off our game, so it is hard for us to live. Now you tell us to work [as farmers] for a living, but the Great Spirit did not make us to work, but to live by hunting. You white men can work if you want to. We do not interfere with you, and again you say, why do you not become civilized? We do not want your civilization! We would live as our fathers did, and their fathers before them.

I am no white man! They are the only people who make rules for other people that say, "If you stay on one side of this line it is peace, but if you go on the other side, I will kill you all." I don't hold with deadlines. There is plenty of room; camp where you please.

Account G: Lieutenant Jessie Lee, Court of Inquiry, March, 1879

The well-known capacity, tenacity and bravery of General Custer and the officers and men who died with him forbid the supposition of a panic and a rout. There was a desperate and sanguinary struggle in which the Indians must have suffered heavily. From the evidence that has been spread before this Court it is manifest that General Custer and his comrades died a death so heroic that it has but few parallels in history.

Fighting to the last and against overwhelming odds, they fell on the field of glory. Let no stigma of rout and panic tarnish their blood-bought fame. Their deeds of heroism will ever live in the hearts of the American people, and the painter and poet will vie with each other in commemorating the worldwide fame of Custer and his men.

Account H: Tashunkewitko (Crazy Horse), through Horned Horse as his spokesman, told to a correspondent for the Chicago Times, May 28, 1877

Some young men ran in to me and said, "The Long Hair [Custer] is in the camp. Get up. They are firing in the camp." I jumped up and stepped out of my lodge. The old men, women and children were hurried away. Long Hair retreated and my men fought him in the brush, and he fell back to the northern bluffs. Then he took the road to see if he could beat us by the river. The soldiers were brave men, but they were tired. They were too tired.

Your people were killed. I tell no lies about dead men. These men who came with the Long Hair were as good men as ever fought. When they rode up their horses were tired and they were tired. When they got off from their horses they could not stand firmly on their feet. They swayed to and fro -- so many young men have told me -- like the limbs of cypresses in a great wind. Some of them staggered under the weight of their guns. But they began to fight at once; but by this time, as I have said, our camps were aroused, and there were plenty of warriors to meet them. They fired with needle guns. We replied with magazine guns -- repeating rifles. It was so. Our young men rained lead across the river and drove the white braves back.

At first I was in doubt as to whether we would whip the Long Hair and began telling the women to pack up the lodges and get ready to move away. I was not in the battle, but my warriors tell me that they decided to surround Long Hair's soldiers. When Long Hair found that he was so outnumbered and threatened on his flanks, he took the best course he could have taken. The bugle blew. It was an order to fall back. All the men fell back fighting and dropping. They could not fire fast enough, though. But from our side it was so (rapid firing). They could not stand up under such a fire.

The soldiers kept in pretty good order. Some great chief must have commanded them all the while. They would fall back across a coulee and make a fresh stand beyond, on higher ground. The map is pretty nearly right. It shows where the white men stopped and fought before they were all killed. I think that is right -- down there to the left, just above the Little Big Horn. There was one party driven out there, away from the rest, and there a great many men were killed. There were no cowards on either side.

I have understood that there were a great many brave men in that fight, and that from time to time, while it was going on, they were shot down like pigs. They could not help themselves. One by one the officers fell. I believe the Long Hair rode across once but I am not sure of this. Anyway it was said that up there, where the last fight took place, where the last stand was made, the Long Hair stood like a sheaf of corn with all ears fallen around him. He killed a man when he fell. He laughed; he had fired his last shot. He rose up on his hands and tried another shot, but his pistol would not go off. One man was kneeling, that was all. But he died before Long Hair. All this was far up on the bluffs, far away from the Sioux encampment. I did not see it. It was told to me. But it is true.

Account I: Nelson Miles, Personal Recollections and Observations, 1896

On the top of the first page of the morning papers of July 5, 1876, in large black letters, was the one word, "Horrible." The journals announced that a good part of General Custer's command of the Seventh Cavalry had been annihilated on the Little Big Horn in Montana. Custer's command was very popular with the citizens of that region. The news of this massacre, as it was called, created intense excitement and sympathy. In fact, there had been no such demonstration of sorrow since the appalling tragedy of April 12, 1865. Buildings were draped in mourning. Telegrams were flying between military authorities, and a command was ordered from Fort Leavenworth to move to Montana and take part in the campaign. A part of my regiment, the Fifth United States Infantry, was ordered for this service, and I requested permission to go in command; the request was approved, and within a few days the command was equipped for war and marched away as light-hearted as ever troops proceeded to the field of arduous and hazardous service.

What the Indians did at the Little Big Horn, or the Custer Massacre, as it was called, and how the battle was fought on their side, was perfectly familiar to them. What our government and people knew concerning the battle was very vague, for of the two hundred and sixty-two officers and soldiers who fought under Custer not one lived to tell the story. All that was known to the other troops in the field was the orders given and the actions of Custer and his men while they were with them, and the impressions and surmises made from the evidences of the field, as well as the position of the dead

bodies after the battle.

Unfortunately, in that campaign the government authorities greatly underestimated the strength of the hostile Indians. They had little knowledge of the character of the country, and sent weak exterior columns, five hundred miles apart, into the field without concert of action against a superior body. The commands from the East and West united on the Yellowstone at the mouth of the Rosebud, under General Terry. He even then divided his force, sending General Custer with the Seventh Cavalry south and west, while with the remainder he moved on the north side of the Yellowstone west and then south. Evidently his object was to inclose the Indians, but he placed at least fifty miles of rough country and an impassable river between the two columns, necessitating the giving of discretionary authority to the commander of the column thus isolated and moving into a country known to be occupied by a powerful body of Indians. General Custer has often been unjustly accused of disobedience of orders. The order referred to is in the nature of a letter of instruction, and not a positive order.

Account J: Chicago Tribune articles

July 4, 1876

Custer . . . was a brave, brilliant soldier, handsome and dashing, but he was reckless, hasty and impulsive, preferring to make a daredevil rush and take risks rather than to move slower and with more certainty, and it was his own mad-cap haste, rashness and love of fame that cost him his own life, and cost the service the loss of many brave officers and gallant men. He preferred to make a reckless dash and take the consequences, in the hope of making a personal victory and adding to the glory of another charge, rather than wait for a sufficiently powerful force to make the fight successful and share the glory with others. He took the risk and he lost.

July 7, 1876

Since the murder of General Canby by the Modocs the country has not been more startled than it was by the announcement that General Custer and five companies of his regiment, the Seventh Cavalry, had been massacred by the Sioux Indians in a ravine ... the Indians outnumbering our troops ten to one. General Custer had personal and soldierly traits which commended him to the people. He was an officer who did not know the word fear, and, as is often the case with soldiers of this stamp, he was reckless, hasty, and impulsive, preferring to make a daredevil rush and take risks rather than to move slower and with more certainty. He was a brave, brilliant soldier, handsome and dashing, with all the attributes to make him beloved of women and admired of men; but these qualities, however admirable they may be, should not blind our eyes to the fact that it was his own madcap haste, rashness, and love of fame that cost him his own life, and cost the service the loss of many brave officers and gallant men. They drew him into an ambush ravine.... In this instance, three hundred troops were instantly surrounded by 3,000 Indians, and the fatal ravine became a slaughter-pen from which but a few escaped.... No account seems to have been taken of numbers, of the leadership of the Sioux, of their record of courage and military skill.

Account K: Reverend D. J. Burrell, sermon in Chicago on the battle of the Little Bighorn, August, 1876

Who shall be held responsible for this event so dark and sorrowful? The history of our dealings with these Indian tribes from the very beginning is a record of fraud, and perjury, and uninterrupted injustice. We have made treaties, binding ourselves to the most solemn promises in the name of God, intending at that very time to hold these treaties light as air whenever our convenience should require them to be broken.... We have driven them each year further from their original homes and hunting- grounds.... We have treated them as having absolutely no rights at all.... We have made beggars of them.

Sources:

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