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The Seventh U.S. Cavalry and the closing of the military frontier, 1876-1891

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**THE SEVENTH U.S. CAVALRY
AND THE CLOSING OF THE MILITARY FRONTIER, 1876-1891**

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of History

by

John Kenney

May 2005

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ABSTRACT

THE SEVENTH U.S. CAVALRY AND THE CLOSING OF THE MILITARY FRONTIER, 1876-1891

By John Kenney

This thesis studies the history of the Seventh U.S. Cavalry in the years following the Battle of the Little Bighorn. The regiment's combat actions are emphasized, including campaigns against the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Nez Perce tribes. It examines the Seventh Cavalry's pivotal role in the final years of the Indian Wars, and its presence at three of the defining moments in Western history: Custer's Last Stand, the surrender of Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce, and Wounded Knee. The little-known expedition of the Seventh Cavalry to the Indian Reservations to disarm potentially hostile Indians in 1876 is recounted. U.S. Indian policy and its consequences will be reviewed in the segment addressing Wounded Knee.

The Seventh Cavalry's remarkable recovery from the Little Bighorn disaster is also studied. The changing nature of the Army in the late nineteenth century is examined, focusing on weapons, tactics, common soldiers, and Indian relations.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The military history of the years 1865-1918 is frequently overlooked in American history. Understandably, students of the American military have more interest in the Civil War, World War II, or the Cold War era. The transformation of the U.S. Army from a frontier force into a major world power in the twentieth century is often not properly understood. In the late nineteenth century several events developed simultaneously. One was the transformation of warfare into the modern industrialized age. The second was the closing of the American frontier, and a third, closely related to the first, was the growing obsolescence of the horse cavalry. The Indian Wars would be the last major conflicts which would see the U.S. Cavalry play a significant role. No other U.S. Cavalry regiment would be more closely identified with the Indian Wars in the public mind than the Seventh Cavalry after the demise of George Armstrong Custer. Writing of the cavalry's role in world military history, Martin Van Creveld stated, "Though cavalry still had its supporters . . . by 1920 its days on the battlefield were clearly over."¹

The cavalry saw its role transformed in the Civil War from traditional mounted saber charges on the battlefield to becoming highly mobile mounted infantry. Robert L. O'Connell wrote, ". . . mounted troops learned to rely on

¹ Martin Van Creveld, *Technology and War: From 2000 B.C. to the Present* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 175.

firearms and fight dismounted as dragoons, even against each other. Superior mobility continued to endow Civil War cavalry with some use for strategic reconnaissance and as raiders, but their traditional fighting role on the battlefield virtually disappeared and would not return."²

In the late nineteenth century, military technology was changing at a rapid pace. Proceeding simultaneously with the technological transformation of the nineteenth century was the closing of the Western frontier and the end of the Indian Wars. Since the dawn of the American Republic, the army had been the advance guard of the westward movement across the continent. Frederick Jackson Turner wrote in 1893, "Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West."³

The same could be said for the history of the U.S. Army, with interruptions in 1812, 1846, and 1861. The climax of the Indian Wars, which had been waged from the beginning of white settlement in North America, was reached in the years following the Little Bighorn battle. The Sioux Indians were crushed in the aftermath. As Russell Weigley wrote, "The lance of the mightiest Plains Indian nation was shattered, and thereafter no Indians retained enough military power to resist the writ of Washington for long."⁴

For the Western Indian, as well as the cavalryman, the closing of the

² Robert L. O'Connell, *Of Arms and Men: A History of War, Weapons, and Aggression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 199.

³ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1996), 1.

⁴ Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (New York: MacMillan, 1973), 163.

frontier brought about radical new changes toward an unfamiliar world. In the last years of the Indian Wars, no other regiment of the army was as closely associated with the Indian Wars as the Seventh Cavalry. Under the legendary leadership of George Armstrong Custer, it had established itself as the elite unit of the frontier army. The regiment was involved in all the major events of the last struggles with the Indian save the Geronimo campaign. The regiment was at Little Bighorn, the high water mark of Indian resistance. John Keegan would call it, "The U.S. Army's chief mythic episode in its war with native America."⁵

The Seventh Cavalry also participated in the Nez Perce campaign and the surrender of Chief Joseph, the last major plains campaign. It was also at Wounded Knee, the bloody finale of the Indian Wars, in 1890, the same year Turner recorded the closing of the frontier. In the words of Robert M. Utley, "On December 29, 1890, the Indian frontier of the American West vanished in the smoke of Hotchkiss shells bursting over the valley of Wounded Knee Creek."⁶

The Seventh Cavalry suffered, survived, and rebuilt itself out of the worst debacle of the Indian Wars. Its history can be seen as coinciding with two of the prevailing trends of late-nineteenth-century America: the closing of the frontier and rapid technological change both in the civilian and military spheres. The Seventh's history can be said to be a case study of a frontier regiment as the frontier came to a close, and as the horse in war was becoming an anachronism.

⁵ John Keegan, *Warpaths: Travels of a Military Historian in North America* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), 271.

⁶ Robert M. Utley, *The Indian Frontier of the American West 1846-1890* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 261.

In its most famous campaign, Little Bighorn, the Seventh passed up an opportunity to bring early model Gatling Guns into the field. The problems with mobility justified leaving the Gatlings behind, but by the end of the century the machine gun would make cavalry obsolete.

Technology, or lack thereof, would both benefit and plague the frontier army. The Indian tribes frequently had better arms than the army. Railroads and telegraphs made the army's job on the frontier easier in some respects. William T. Sherman saw the railroads as "links binding together not only the United States but the many scattered western settlements."⁷ Sherman saw the process of settlement along with railroads as simplifying the army's mission.⁸ It can be argued that the army was but one of several factors in the successful settlement of the West. "The transcontinental railroads pushing across the West, facilitating the coming of settlers as well as the quick movement of troops; the superior numbers of pressing whites; and the superior quality of white technology. The outcome for the Indians was foreordained."⁹

Yet the army bore the brunt of the Indian Wars in the late nineteenth century. It fell to the Frontier Regulars to enforce the government's Indian policies. "Virtually every major war in the two decades after Appomattox was fought to force Indians on to newly-created Indian reservations or to make them

⁷ Robert G. Athearn, *William Tecumseh Sherman and the Settlement of the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 337.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 335.

⁹ T. Harry Williams, *The History of American Wars: From Colonial Times to World War I* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 316.

go back to reservations from which they had fled.”¹⁰

The Seventh Cavalry and the rest of the army did not just win through impersonal socioeconomic factors, although they were important. Traditional military skills were still decisive. The military history of the American West cannot be dispensed with by simply pointing out that the railroad and increased settlement won the West. As Victor Davis Hanson wrote, “Military history must never stray from the tragic story of killing, which is ultimately found in battle . . . There is an inherent truth in battle. It is hard to disguise the verdict of the battlefield, and nearly impossible to explain away the dead, or to suggest that abject defeat is somehow victory. Wars are the sum of battles.”¹¹

The Seventh Cavalry was and is a military organization whose successes and failures must be measured on the battlefield. The Seventh Cavalry presided over the end of the three major Indian Wars conflicts in the period from 1876 through 1891: the Little Bighorn, the Nez Perce War, and third, Wounded Knee, the end of the Indian frontier and one of the last actions of the U.S. Cavalry. These campaigns saw the climax of the struggle for the continent that began with the arrival of Columbus in 1492.

The Seventh operated in the context of an army and a military era undergoing expansive change in technology and tactics. Knowledge of its weapons, equipment, and training are essential to understanding the regiment. It

¹⁰ Uteley, *The Indian Frontier*, 164.

¹¹ Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage And Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 7.

is also necessary to understand the officers and men recruited into the regiment. The Seventh U.S. Cavalry can be seen as a representative regiment in the U.S. Army and its cavalry arm. The changes in warfare instigated by the Industrial Revolution would doom the horse cavalry, and spell the end of its era as much as Little Bighorn and Wounded Knee did.

In the early 1900s, historians tried to humanize the American Indian and tell his side of the story. Now, in the 2000s, historians must attempt to humanize and explain the frontier soldier and settler. The following thesis is an attempt to explain and understand a legendary cavalry regiment in the closing years of the Indian Wars. A great deal of time is spent in recounting military operations in great detail because, as Hanson pointed out, battles are what wars are all about. The true test of a military organization is combat. The Seventh Cavalry gained undying fame in a battle in which one of its battalions was wiped out to the last man. Therefore, the greater part of this thesis is about the combat actions of the Seventh Cavalry, and how well it performed them.

Chapter Two explains the military context in which the Seventh Cavalry operated, including a broad examination of the army, cavalry, weapons, personnel, and the Plains Indian enemy. Chapter Two also deals with military issues of the period and the changing role of military technology during the Seventh Cavalry's closing years on the military frontier. Chapter Three recounts the experience of the survivors of the Seventh Cavalry at Little Bighorn, specifically the Reno-Benteen siege and its aftermath, the most famous of its

encounters with the American Indian. The Little Bighorn battle is one of the most mythic in American military history. Seldom has such scrutiny been focused on a single battle by various historians. Chapter Four chronicles the reconstitution of Seventh Cavalry in the winter of 1876-1877, and the history of the regiment until 1890. Chapter Five recounts the Seventh Cavalry's role in the Nez Perce War, one of the most tragic conflicts in the history of the Indian Wars. The Nez Perce War may not have seen any great military technological changes, but it saw one of the last great Indian Wars campaigns and seemed to symbolize the closing of the frontier in the Pacific Northwest. Chapter Six deals with the Ghost Dance War and Wounded Knee, an end of an era for both the cavalry and Indians, and perhaps the most controversial of the Seventh Cavalry's actions in the post-Little Bighorn era. A narrative history of the Seventh Cavalry after the Little Bighorn and through the Wounded Knee episode has long been needed.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FRONTIER ARMY

The United States Army was a different army from what it had been during the Civil War. By 1876 it had been reduced to 27,442 officers and men from a wartime size of half a million.¹ The great victorious armies of the struggle of 1861-1865 had become a hollowed-out force. As the Indian wars drew to a close, that army was without a clear mission. The United States Army of the late 1800s faced an uncertain future as the nation prepared to advance overseas. This was an era of military and technological change. The long years of wars against the Indians had shaped the army's self-image and had developed its sense of professionalism in the years after Appomattox. In 1898 the Regular Army would be smaller in proportion to the population than in any other war up to that time.²

In the words of Samuel P. Huntington, "The isolation, rejection, and reduction of the armed services after the Civil War have led historians to mark this as the low point of American military history."³ However, as Huntington points out, this was accurate "only with respect to the social influence and

¹ Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1967), 267.

² *Ibid.*, 292.

³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil Military Relations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), 229.

political power of the military.”⁴ As a result of its isolation from the rest of American society, the military turned inward and developed a high sense of professionalism.⁵

Perry D. Jamieson noted, “Although the late nineteenth century brought the United States Army no major conventional conflicts, it nonetheless proved a critical period in American military history.”⁶ Jamieson noted the growth and development of professional organizations and the beginnings of a military postgraduate education system, as well as the early development of new weapons and tactics that would have a major impact on the twentieth century.⁷

The army was coming to terms with the changes brought about by the changes in military technology that were made obvious by the Civil War. New types of weapons such as repeating rifles and Gatling guns were on the verge of transforming the nature of war. No longer could soldiers simply be the automatons of Napoleonic warfare. The training of the 1880s and 1890s emphasized individual skills and initiative from all ranks as a result of the new weapons and tactics utilized in field exercises.⁸

The Seventh Cavalry was still a part of the Indian fighting army in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Its organization and training were determined by conventional military needs, but its purpose until 1898 was to secure the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Perry D. Jamieson, *Crossing the Deadly Ground: United States Army Tactics, 1865-1899* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), xi.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jamieson, 20.

western frontier from Indian attacks. The principal focus for this chapter will be on weapons, training and doctrine, personnel, and the Indian opponents of the army. This chapter will provide an understanding of the context of the military world in which the Seventh Cavalry operated, the world of changing military tactics and technology which characterized the era between the Civil War and World War I, as well as the background for understanding the Seventh Cavalry, the frontier army, and the Indians.

Weapons

In the aftermath of the Civil War, the U.S. Army experimented with a number of different firearms: the general use of the small bore magazine rifle, firing smokeless powder, the development of modern weapons like the Gatling gun, the machine gun, and rapid fire artillery.⁹ The breechloading rifle had a devastating impact on cavalry tactics, and with its greater accuracy and rate of fire, the cavalry lost its battlefield importance.¹⁰

The next step was to introduce a magazine-fed rifle, as the Germans did in 1884.¹¹ Over the following years smokeless powder was developed, which gave the rifleman greater concealment. By 1900, most armies in the world were equipped with magazine rifles with smokeless powder.¹² The United States Army

⁹ J. F. C. Fuller, *The Conduct of War 1789-1961* (New York: Da Capo, 1992), 134.

¹⁰ Archer Jones, *The Art of War in the Western World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 391.

¹¹ Fuller, 134.

¹² *Ibid.*, 135.

lagged behind in these developments, although it had produced repeating rifles in the Civil War. National Guard troops would still be equipped with single-shot black powder Springfields at the time of the Spanish-American War.¹³

In the late 1860s, the Allin Springfield rifle was a Civil War muzzle-loader that was converted to a breech-loading system with a metallic cartridge.¹⁴ This would be the standard infantry rifle until 1873. The cavalry used a variety of carbines from the Civil War, including the Sharps, Henry, and, most prominently, the Spencer.¹⁵ In 1873, the army standardized its infantry and cavalry weapons by adopting the 1873 model Springfield rifle and carbine. The Springfield rifle and carbine would be used by the army until the Spanish-American War. The 1873 Springfield carbine would be the Seventh Cavalry's standard weapon during the last years of the Indian Wars. The carbine weighed seven pounds, had a .45 caliber metallic cartridge of copper, and a charge of 55 grains of powder.¹⁶ The Springfield carbine had an effective range of just under 300 yards, although hits could be made up to 600 yards with a muzzle velocity of 1,200 feet per second, and could be fired at a rate of twelve or fifteen rounds per minute.¹⁷ The Springfield was regarded as a weapon of high quality, although it was lamented by several historians that the army had passed over reliable

¹³ Jamieson, 132.

¹⁴ Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1973), 69.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁶ Greg Michno, "Guns of the Little Bighorn" *Wild West* (June 1998), 29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

repeating firearms.¹⁸ Don Rickey observed, "Repeating firearms might have given the soldier the psychological advantage of a greater feeling of security, even though the issue single shot Springfield was superior in range and accuracy."¹⁹

The 1873 Springfield carbine would come under a great deal of criticism after the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Principally, the extractor mechanism was faulted for failing to extract expended shells. Edgar I. Stewart noted, "The carbines became overheated and began to jam, the extractors cutting through the rims of the shells as though they were putty and leaving the exploded cartridges wedged in the chambers and rendering the weapons useless until the shells could be removed with a knife."²⁰ Stewart further pointed out that the carbines were prone to jamming on the third or fourth firing, and that the Indians themselves noted the problems with the soldiers's weapons.²¹

Edward Godfrey cited the defective carbines as a key cause of Custer's defeat. "When the cartridges were dirty and corroded the ejectors did not always extract the empty shells from the chambers, and the men were compelled to use knives to get them out. When the shells were clean no great difficulty was experienced."²² Stewart further pointed out that Colonel Gibbon's men found a

¹⁸ David Nevin, *The Soldiers* (Alexandria Virginia: Time Life Books, 1974), 104.

¹⁹ Don Rickey, *Forty Miles a Day on Beans and Hay: The Enlisted Soldier Fighting the Indian Wars* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 218.

²⁰ Edgar I. Stewart, *Custer's Luck* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 458.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 459.

²² Edward S. Godfrey, "Custer's Last Battle," in *The Custer Myth*, ed., W. A. Graham (New York: Bonanza Books, 1953), 147.

number of abandoned carbines.²³ Private Charles Windolph also confirmed the difficulty Custer's command had with the carbines.²⁴ Major Reno, in his official report on the Battle of the Little Bighorn, noted that knives with broken blades were found near the bodies of Custer's command.²⁵ At a point when technological breakthroughs were being made in weaponry, the army was not keeping up with weapons developments. "Even the best single-shot breechloader could not give the Army that assured margin of firepower superiority it desired."²⁶ The Indian wars demanded magazine-fed rifles.²⁷

In spite of these problems, the army retained the Springfield carbine as the standard cavalry weapon. Wayne Michael Sarf has pointed out that repeating rifles would not have made much of a difference: "While a speedy second shot might prove vital at close quarters, much Indian fighting involved firing at longer ranges."²⁸ Greg Michno also noted that soldiers who had their own firearms preferred to carry long-range weapons. Captain Thomas French carried a .50-caliber Springfield, while First Sergeant John Ryan had a .45-caliber Sharps that had been custom-made for him.²⁹

There was debate on the question of the Springfield even before Little Bighorn as Colonel Ranald Mackenzie requested that his Fourth Cavalry be

²³ Stewart, 459.

²⁴ Charles Windolph, *I Fought With Custer* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 171.

²⁵ Ernest L. Reedstrom, *Bugles, Banners and War Bonnets* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1987), 256.

²⁶ Weigley, 268-269.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Wayne Michael Sarf, *The Little Bighorn Campaign: March-September 1876* (Combined Books: Conshohocken, Pennsylvania), 117.

²⁹ Michno, 30-31.

rearmed with repeating Winchesters.³⁰ The Springfield carbine would be modified to include "a trap in the butt plate to hold a three piece cleaning rod and a headless shell extractor. (Development of the brass cartridge . . . came later.)"³¹ The Army Ordnance Bureau chose the Springfield for reasons of manufacturing economy, reliability, ruggedness, and similarity to European weapons.³² Even after the Little Bighorn controversy, the Army stood with the Springfield because of its accuracy advantage.³³ The Springfield would continue as the standard shoulder arm of the United States Army until 1892, when it was replaced by the .30-caliber Krag-Jorgenson which had a five-round magazine capacity firing smokeless cartridges.³⁴

The other standard weapons of the U.S. Cavalry in the late 1800s were the Colt 1872 revolver and the model 1860 Saber. The Cavalry saber was generally regarded as useless in Indian warfare. The saber was seen by most soldiers as too cumbersome for frontier service.³⁵ Rickey wrote, "By the time a cavalryman was close enough to deliver a saber stroke, he was likely to be bristling with arrows and liberally punctured with Indian bullets."³⁶ Custer biographer Frederick Whittaker, a Civil War cavalryman, argued the contrary, after pointing out deficiencies in training, "Teach the men how to use their

³⁰ Sarf, 117.

³¹ E. Lisle Reedstrom, *Apache Wars: An Illustrated History* (New York: Sterling Books, 1990), 129.

³² Michno, 30.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Weigley, 290.

³⁵ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 71.

³⁶ Rickey, 219.

sabers, till they trust them. When officers and men do that, the Indians will fear them, not they the Indians."³⁷ In contrast, Sheridan believed the saber to be obsolete to the needs of the army.³⁸ However, within the Seventh, several officers still believed in its utility. Colonel James W. Forsyth regretted more regiments did not carry the saber into the field. Edward Godfrey was involved in updating the army's manual of cavalry tactics for 1891, which included material for saber practice, specifically advocating when encountering opposing cavalry, "the object was to ride the enemy down, and complete his overthrow with the saber and pistol."³⁹ The saber debate would continue into the twentieth century until 1934, when the U.S. Cavalry finally abandoned it.⁴⁰

There was less controversy over the 1872 Colt revolver, one of the first metallic cartridge pistols.⁴¹ The Colt Forty-Five became one of the most popular weapons in the West.⁴² It fired six .45-caliber rounds with 28 grains of black powder.⁴³ Other types of pistols used by the U.S. Cavalry in this period included the 1875 .45-caliber Schofield Smith and Wesson, and the 1875 Remington.⁴⁴ According to one Indian Wars historian, the pistol played only a small part in actual combat: "The cavalry relied heavily on mobility. During running fights with

³⁷ Frederick Whittaker, *A Complete Life of General George A. Custer: Volume 2 from Appomattox to the Little Bighorn* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 544.

³⁸ Jamieson, 85.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Jason Hook and Marvin Pegler, *To Live and Die in the West: The Frontier Indian Wars, 1860-1890* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1999), 26.

⁴¹ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 70.

⁴² Rickey, 218.

⁴³ Michno, 30.

⁴⁴ Hook and Pegler, 24.

Indians, the distance between cavalry and hostiles was usually far beyond range of pistol or carbine. In many cases, the trooper would have traded both for a long-ranged rifle."⁴⁵

The weapons used by the Seventh Cavalry were a source of controversy, both at the time and later. The soldiers might have received improved weapons after the Civil War, but so did the Indians.⁴⁶ After the 1860s, the Plains Indians received repeating breech-loading weapons, which quickly replaced the bow as a weapon of choice among the warrior tribes.⁴⁷ Robert M. Utley has suggested that the Plains Indians' use of the Winchester has been exaggerated, although he concedes that the Winchester was well-suited for mounted warfare.⁴⁸ On the other hand, the Indians at Little Bighorn had the advantage of volume of fire on their side.⁴⁹ Peter Panzeri pointed out that at Little Bighorn, "With an estimated 2,000 warriors, archaeological data suggests 200 or more repeaters and over twice as many other cartridge fired weapons" were used by the Indians.⁵⁰

The Soldiers

To enlist in the cavalry there were several paths to take. One could go directly to a fort and enlist in a regiment of the recruit's choice; one could enlist in a local recruiting station and be sent to the cavalry recruit depot in St. Louis; or

⁴⁵ Reedstrom, *Bugles, Banners and War Bonnets*, 260-261.

⁴⁶ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 71.

⁴⁷ Hook and Pegler, 86.

⁴⁸ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 71.

⁴⁹ Sarf, 123.

⁵⁰ Peter Panzeri, *Little Bighorn 1876* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1995), 29.

one could go directly to the recruit depot and enlist there.⁵¹ The recruits came from many backgrounds, but they made up the frontier army in the last years of the closing of the frontier, and faced down the warriors of Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and Chief Joseph in warfare as difficult as any faced by American soldiers in any other period.

The men who were recruited into the army during these years usually came from the bottom rungs of society. Immigrants comprised a large proportion of the recruits, with the majority coming from the British Isles, Germany, and Italy.⁵² The Irish and the Germans had more of an impact than the Italians.⁵³ Many of these immigrants brought military experience with them from the old country.⁵⁴ Some sergeants had served in the British Army.⁵⁵ African-Americans also enlisted in significant numbers. Other recruits came from various backgrounds. Private Ami F. Mulford recalled in 1876:

In my company we have one printer, one telegraph operator, a doctor, two lawyers, three professors of languages, one harness maker, four cooks and bakers, two blacksmiths, one jeweler, three schoolteachers, also former lumbermen, peddlers, railroad men and day laborers.⁵⁶

Utley noted, "The enlisted force represented widely varying social and economic backgrounds. Reflecting the location of the recruiting depots . . . it

⁵¹ Dan Bird, "Answering an Old Question" *Newsletter Little Bighorn Associates*, 35 (November 2001): 4.

⁵² Hook and Pegler, 11.

⁵³ Vincent A. Transano, "Custer's Italians" *Wild West* (June 1999), 1.

⁵⁴ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 23.

⁵⁵ Rickey, 61.

⁵⁶ Ami Frank Mulford, *Fighting Indians in the Seventh United States Cavalry* (Fairleigh, Washington: Ye Old Galleon Press, 1972), 57.

drew heavily on the urban poor.”⁵⁷ As a result, many recruits reflected the economic health of the country.⁵⁸ Often former criminals and those on the run from the law found the army a refuge.⁵⁹ Some recruits joined out of a sincere desire to be soldiers or see the West.⁶⁰ Others sought to use the army as a means of going west and deserting at their first opportunity.⁶¹

The soldiers were quartered at forts which were not fortified stockades of wood but simply collections of barracks constructed from local materials. Often the soldier would be on details that diverted him from his military duties, and found himself employed as a maintenance handyman. Work details were constant, especially at the more isolated posts.⁶² Until the early 1880s, there was little in the way of initial training. New soldiers were expected to learn their duties by observation and instruction.⁶³ Overall, the regular soldier was the object of civilian contempt, and was seen as a wastrel who would join the army as a last resort.⁶⁴

A soldier’s loyalties went to his company, which often varied in size, as regiments were seldom assembled to fight beyond a few companies.⁶⁵ The company was the soldier’s military family. In artillery and cavalry regiments, twelve companies were the standard complement, while infantry regiments were

⁵⁷ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 22.

⁵⁸ Rickey, 19.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁰ Hook and Pegler, 11-12.

⁶¹ Nevin, 25.

⁶² Hook and Pegler, 27.

⁶³ Rickey, 38.

⁶⁴ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 22.

⁶⁵ Rickey, 48-49.

authorized ten companies.⁶⁶ Until 1891, organization below the company level was haphazard and ad hoc at best. In 1891 the section, squad, and platoon were made permanent features of company structure.⁶⁷ Above company level, battalions became permanent formations instead of temporary arrangements of two or more companies.⁶⁸

The gulf between officers and enlisted men was great. Private Ami F. Mulford wrote, "As a rule an army officer does not mix with or recognize the fact that enlisted men have any rights or attributes to be respected."⁶⁹ According to Rickey, some soldiers likened the distance between officers and enlisted men to an intense Prussian-style discipline.⁷⁰ The chasm between officers and enlisted men was not unbridgeable. Mulford wrote, "There is, socially, an impassable gulf between enlisted men and their officers--I qualify this broad statement by adding 'with rare exceptions.'"⁷¹

Due to strict budgetary constraints, the army was only capable of providing a minimal allowance of food and clothing. Private William C. White of the Second Cavalry wrote that "the army issue cap was the usual headgear at the post. Black felt hats were provided for use in campaigning."⁷² This was an era when the uniforms of the United States Army were marked by a strong

⁶⁶ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 16.

⁶⁷ Jamieson, 108.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁶⁹ Mulford, 57.

⁷⁰ Rickey, 63.

⁷¹ Mulford, 57.

⁷² William C. White, *Custer, Cavalry and Crows: The Story, William C. White as told to Thomas Marquis* (Ft. Collins, Colorado, The Old Army Press, 1975), 25.

Prussian influence, but in the field and at some posts cavalry uniform regulations were ignored or modified. Private White recalled, "Almost any kind of clothing was allowed during all ordinary times at the post. On campaigns the officers rarely wore the insignia of rank. Many of them did not wear the regulation uniform."⁷³ All personnel were allowed considerable discretion in obtaining suitable clothing for field service.

Training and Doctrine

There was no set doctrine or methodology common throughout the army for fighting the Indian Wars. According to Utley, "The gathering currents of military professionalism, centering on wars of the future, left almost wholly untouched the wars of the present."⁷⁴ The U.S. Army of the late 1800s did not have the organization or process for developing new ways to fight present and future enemies, according to principles recognized and taught throughout the army.⁷⁵

The Indian Wars required the army to emphasize the role of horse cavalry and to put artillery in a secondary role.⁷⁶ Hence, mobility was of great importance. Some have seen the frontier army as something other than a pure military unit. The frontier army was not so much a military force as a police

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 44.

⁷⁵ Jamieson, 20.

⁷⁶ Weigley, 267.

force.⁷⁷ As an institution, the army expected each Indian War to be the last and that it was not expected to be a long-term commitment.⁷⁸ Throughout the Indian Wars, Sherman and Sheridan practiced a form of "Total War" adopted from their Civil War experience.⁷⁹

In terms of operational strategy, the army learned to use converging columns and strike in the winter at vulnerable tribes.⁸⁰ The use of Indian scouts, especially in the Apache Wars, was also used extensively, especially by General George Crook.⁸¹ But Indian scouts were not usually assigned to regiments on a permanent basis. The army usually deployed its regiments in small, scattered garrisons inside the tribal domains, both as a deterrent and as possible logistical bases. Offensive operations were always stressed by Indian fighting officers.⁸²

As the Indian Wars drew to a close, the army began to reduce the number of garrisons. Sherman believed that the railroad completely changed the way the Indian would be dealt with in large part because of the influx of settlers. Robert G. Athearn, a Sherman biographer, wrote, "It had long been his contention that the impact of settlement and the density of population would offer the ultimate solution to the Indian problem."⁸³ John M. Gates agreed: "The pressure of an expanding white civilization, not the campaigns of the army, was the primary

⁷⁷ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 46.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 51-52.

⁸⁰ Jamieson, 37.

⁸¹ Ibid., 40.

⁸² Jamieson, 49.

⁸³ Robert G. Athearn, *William Tecumseh Sherman and the Settlement of the West* (Norman: University of Nebraska Press, 1956), 328.

reason for the end of Indian resistance.”⁸⁴ In the end, the development of the West owed much to the settlers themselves as they built their communities on the plains and the southwest.

The major change in training after Little Bighorn was the emphasis on rifle and carbine marksmanship. During the second day of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, officers had to restrict the men from firing without permission because their marksmanship was so poor.⁸⁵ As a result of the Custer debacle, congressional hearings were held in 1878, which in turn resulted in more realistic battle training with emphasis on marksmanship.⁸⁶ Greg Michno argued that poor fire discipline had doomed Custer's battalion at Little Bighorn.⁸⁷ The Seventh's poor training in marksmanship and fire discipline played a large role in the disaster at Little Bighorn.⁸⁸ Prior to Little Bighorn weapons training was almost unknown--the government authorized twenty rounds per year for target practice.⁸⁹ Some soldiers were already proficient marksmen, such as Captain Thomas French, Company M, Seventh Cavalry, according to Private Ami Frank Mulford: “The Captain [French] is a great hunter and a splendid shot--I think the best in the whole regiment, with either rifle or revolver.”⁹⁰ Yet most soldiers were poor shots.

⁸⁴ John M. Gates, “Indians and Insurrectos: The U.S. Army's Experience with Counterinsurgency” *Parameters: Journal of the U.S. Army War College* 13, No. 1, (March 1983): 62.

⁸⁵ Rickey, 101.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁸⁷ Michno, 33.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Mulford, 111.

The progress of reform was slow. Before the Little Bighorn in the 1870s, the newly-formed National Rifle Association, in conjunction with state militia, sponsored competitions between regular army and militia rifle teams at Creedmore on Long Island; by 1880 the regular army team won.⁹¹ In general, during the 1880s, the army began to practice more realistic battle training. Sheridan directed infantrymen to use targets made to look like an opposing force.⁹² Mounted drill was also emphasized during this time. Prior to Little Bighorn, according to Frederick Whittaker:

Recognizing fully the difficulties which surround army operations against the Indians, we must still admit the worst to be the low character of the regular troops. In the infantry, this is marked by the apparent inability to execute several marches on foot, in the cavalry by an almost total incapacity to fight mounted against the Indians. Infantry and cavalry advance well in the common skirmish line on foot, but there are so many recruits, so few veterans in the ranks, that the issue of a single combat between an Indian and a dragoon is, almost as a matter of course, the death of the dragoon.⁹³

After the Little Bighorn, more priority was given to training for the operations against the Indians, especially mounted drill. From April of 1878, the entire Seventh Cavalry, with few exceptions, engaged in mounted drill every morning.⁹⁴ In the cavalry, it was vital to know the bugle calls, for the bugle was the main instrument of communication in combat. One veteran Indian fighter recalled that cavalry drill "was entirely by the bugle. Indian fighters must be drilled by the bugle, and the men must be taught the bugle calls, and constantly

⁹¹ Jamieson, 56.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Whittaker, 543-544.

⁹⁴ Rickey, 103.

exercised lest they forget."⁹⁵

During the campaign of Wounded Knee, the added training showed its benefits. Edward Godfrey of the Seventh Cavalry wrote of his company, "With perhaps two exceptions, I don't believe the men had been under fire before. They had fired at targets and drilled at aiming until it seemed to be second nature to shoot where they looked."⁹⁶ Godfrey made a general observation concerning the impact of modern firearms: "Having a strong firing line on the defensive, of equally well trained troops, I believe no attacking body of troops, however strong or determined, could reach the line. The moral of that story is that target practice is an immense success, and as a factor in fire discipline will prove of very great value."⁹⁷ As a result of the weapons training, the soldiers became ardent marksmen.⁹⁸

During the period from 1876 through 1891, the Seventh Cavalry was a part of an army that was in transition from the Napoleonic Age to the Industrial Age. This had been heralded in the Civil War, but was now becoming institutionalized through the efforts of a number of reformers in the army like Emory Upton, and reform was encouraged by senior officers such as Sherman and Sheridan. The practical experience of the Civil War, as well as the groundswell of professionalism of the postbellum era, meant that the United

⁹⁵ Eugene F. Ware, *The Indian War of 1864* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 8.

⁹⁶ Edward Godfrey, "Cavalry Fire Discipline" *Journal of the Military Service Institute of the United States*, 19 (1896): 256.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Rickey, 104.

States Army would be better prepared intellectually for modern, twentieth-century warfare than any other army of the time. Godfrey's observations on the defensive firing line anticipated the triumph of the tactical defense in World War I. Jamieson recalled:

For most of the Nineteenth Century the American Army . . . was marked by three . . . attitudes: inflexible linear tactics, tedious drill and a stifling of individual initiative. During the 1880s and 1890s the United States Army abandoned these traditional elements and began moving its tactics toward the Twentieth Century.⁹⁹

Indians and Indian Warfare

The Plains Indian tribes were the primary antagonists of the Seventh Cavalry during its time in the West. The wars against the Indians affected the development of the United States and its institutions, including the army. In the years 1876-1891, the Seventh Cavalry faced the Sioux, the Cheyenne, and the Nez Perce on the Northern Plains of the Dakotas and Montana.¹⁰⁰ These were the last years of Indian resistance to the tide of westward expansion. According to Utley, "The tribes . . . shared a long history of warfare."¹⁰¹ They were a horse people whose way of life was transformed by the introduction of the horse by the Spanish in the 1600s.¹⁰² "Clearly the horse permeated every aspect of the Indians's lives. Trade, culture, leisure, hunting, and war all revolved around it."¹⁰³ Over a hundred-year period, from the mid-1600s to the late 1700s, the Indians

⁹⁹ Jamieson, 69.

¹⁰⁰ Strictly speaking, the Nez Perce were not a Plains tribe but hailed from the Pacific Northwest.

¹⁰¹ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 6.

¹⁰² Hook and Pegler, 81.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 82.

acquired the two instruments that would transform their culture: the horse and the gun.¹⁰⁴ In the words of the military historian John Keegan, "When Indian horse culture and Indian gun culture met and overlapped . . . a warrior way of life was born which was to impede and distort the Manifest Destiny of Europeans to possess the continent for nearly a hundred years."¹⁰⁵

The Indians were not fully cognizant of the transformation they were to undergo. Utley has written, "Only dimly, if at all, did the Indians perceive their final wars with the whites in apocalyptic terms rather than the traditional terms of glory, plunder and revenge."¹⁰⁶ The Indian could not assemble large numbers to fight the army on equal terms on a normal basis.¹⁰⁷ Logistically it was impossible for the tribes to maintain large numbers for very long. Also, disunity among and within the tribes worked to create a united effort against the white encroachment. "People accorded allegiance to family, band and tribe," wrote Utley, and not to a pan-Indian identity.¹⁰⁸ Tribal enmities continued throughout the Indian Wars. Many tribes allied themselves with the army and provided scouts for the army. Traditional tribal rivalries worked against any sense of common danger from white settlement.¹⁰⁹

The Indians did not fight the army in a conventional way, nor did they

¹⁰⁴ John Keegan, *Warpaths: Travels of a Military Historian in North America* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), 287.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 288.

¹⁰⁶ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 6.

¹⁰⁷ Hook and Pegler, 106.

¹⁰⁸ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 5.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

resort to guerilla warfare. According to Gates, "They fought as warriors although tactically they fought as guerillas . . . strategically they were not guerillas."¹¹⁰ They were not guerillas in the classical sense of the term because they were not trying to wear down the army by harassment, nor were they trying to win over a civilian population in the army's home territory.¹¹¹ In the words of David Nevin, "The Indians . . . were a stone age people, recently introduced to the technology and social structure of the whites but having neither the capacity nor the desire to reproduce either one."¹¹² Comparing the Indians to Mao's concepts of guerillas, Gates believed the Indians were fish without a sea, "easily identified as enemies if not so easily hunted down."¹¹³ Moreover, the Plains warrior societies were unable to mobilize for total war, nor were they able to settle upon a clear objective.¹¹⁴ Tribal wars before the coming of the white man were waged over horse raids or revenge. After the coming of the horse, Indian warfare grew to a larger scale as more warriors were involved in raids.¹¹⁵ Although they were armed with rifles, the basic style of Indian warfare did not change with the coming of the American westward movement.

War was the heart of the Plains warrior society. This way of life had come to an end by the 1880s, when the only Indian war was fought in the southwest against the Apache. The Plains Indians were forced onto reservations, where

¹¹⁰ Gates, 61.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Nevin, 33.

¹¹³ Gates, 61.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Hook and Pegler, 84.

they would rebel in 1890. Before this time the Plains Indians lived in a culture where "War was. . . the most important sphere in which a man had to prove his worth. The courting of danger brought renown, while cowardice met with scorn."¹¹⁶ The culture of the Indian produced a magnificent fighting man.¹¹⁷

At Little Bighorn, the Indians, armed with repeating rifles, were able to inflict a devastating defeat on the Seventh Cavalry. According to First Lieutenant Charles Varnum, during Reno's retreat from the timber, he recalled a "great many Indians riding along the column with Winchester rifles across saddles firing into the column."¹¹⁸ Little Bighorn scholar W. A. Graham believed that at least ten percent of the warriors were armed with repeating rifles, and that many were hidden from army searches later on.¹¹⁹ Archaeological evidence gathered in the 1980s indicated that the Indians used a variety of modern firearms.¹²⁰ Frederick Whittaker noted that the Indians were supplied with Winchesters from the Indian Department, and that the Indians were "better soldiers individually; they always were, for every man is a perfect rider and good shot, while the regular cavalry is mainly composed of green recruits, so unreliable that even a chief like Custer did not dare to fight them mounted, but had turned his men into mounted infantry."¹²¹

Many soldiers witnessed the plight of the Indians first-hand. They knew

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 83.

¹¹⁷ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 6.

¹¹⁸ W. A. Graham, ed., *The Reno Court of Inquiry: Abstract of the Official Record of Proceedings* (Mechanicsburg Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 1954), 51.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 52.

¹²⁰ Michno, 31.

¹²¹ Whittaker, 536.

that the Indians were not always in the wrong, and they had often been provoked into war. Private William O. Taylor had great respect for Crazy Horse, calling him "one of the great soldiers of his day and generation."¹²² The soldiers of the Seventh Cavalry, who campaigned against the Nez Perce in 1877, showed compassion for their opponents. Private Theodore Goldin recalled, "Our sympathies were with the Indians."¹²³ Private William Slaper stated, "The Nez Percés were good people and very much abused by our pinhead government officials."¹²⁴

During the Ghost Dance War of 1890-1891, men who fought against the Sioux were convinced that bad faith on the part of the Indian Bureau and its agents, coupled with starvation among the Indians, were the real causes for the conflict.¹²⁵ Many soldiers believed that the Indians were victims of dishonest and inept Indian agents and traders.¹²⁶ Few soldiers held any personal animosity toward the Indians.¹²⁷ One sergeant recalled, "I feel the Indian agents, many times, not all, were the cause of a great deal of the unrest."¹²⁸ Among the soldiers, few trusted the Bureau of Indian Affairs to treat the Indians fairly.¹²⁹

The frontier soldier of the late-nineteenth century served under very trying conditions. It was an era of rapidly changing military technology, during which

¹²² William O. Taylor, *With Custer on the Little Bighorn* (New York: Viking, 1996), 132.

¹²³ Jerome A. Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877: The U.S. Army and the Nee-Me-Poo Crisis* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2001), 227.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹²⁵ Rickey, 227.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹²⁷ Hook and Pegler, 34.

¹²⁸ Rickey, 227.

¹²⁹ Hook and Pegler, 35.

the Indians were as well-armed as the horse soldiers. The United States was among the world's foremost technological and industrial powers in the late 1800s, yet it did not provide state of the art weapons to its army. As the U.S. Army did not fight against an industrial-age opponent in the years between 1876 and 1891, it was difficult for its leadership to see the cavalry's growing obsolescence when utilized against the Plains Indians. The cavalry was the only branch of the army that had the potential to match the Plains Indians's mobility. The cavalry's antagonists were themselves becoming an anachronism, even as the Plains Wars and its preparations received a low priority from both the people and the government of the United States in the midst of repairing the rift of the Civil War and expanding economically. Remembered today simply in popular films or as the oppressor of the Indian, the frontier soldier deserves to be remembered for the many hard and intense campaigns over difficult terrain against a bitter foe. Without the frontier army, the settlement of the West would have been much slower and far more dangerous than it was. Even if the frontier army itself was not a major factor in the winning of the West, it made it possible.

All too often the U.S. Cavalry in the West is seen as nothing more than an instrument of white racism. This is even less accurate than the older stereotype of neat yellow-kerchiefed troopers in Hollywood films and western novels. In the words of social commentator Guenter Lewy, "In the end the sad fate of America's Indians represents not a crime but a tragedy, involving an irreconcilable collision

of cultures and values . . . there existed no good solution to this clash."¹³⁰ Even if it had been the government's policy to do so, in the words of Jason Hook and Martin Pegler, westward expansion "was impossible to stop, as the lure of gold fields, trappings, timber and limitless lands proved irresistible to the war weary easterners."¹³¹

¹³⁰ Guenter Lewy, *"Were American Indians the Victims of Genocide?"* Commentary, September 2004, 63.

¹³¹ Hook and Pegler, 8.

CHAPTER THREE

SUMMER 1876 CAMPAIGN

The Little Bighorn Campaign and the demise of George Armstrong Custer would become the defining moment in the history of the Seventh Cavalry. The Battle of the Little Bighorn lives on in the mythology of the American West. It might have been Custer's Last Stand, but it was also the last stand of the Plains Indians. It became the most famous battle of the Plains wars. "The greatest Indian victory of all time could only postpone the inevitable."¹

The Indians's triumph only resulted in the Army's greater drive for victory in 1876-1877. The disaster at Little Bighorn gripped American culture in ways no other setback in the long Indian wars could have. As cultural historian Brian Dippie has argued, "It was a defeat that, paradoxically, stood for victory--and for conquest."² As for the frontier, it became a thing of the past in a rapidly-changing world. In 1876, Custer and the Seventh Cavalry made it stand out again. "By standing for endings, Custer stood for beginnings, that was the key to the Last Stand's appeal in the nineteenth century--it was a last stand for all of yesterday." The Seventh Cavalry also made a "last stand" for all of yesterday. Custer and his end has become an enduring source of interest, but the Seventh Cavalry's experience at Little Bighorn is less known to the general public. Before the

¹ Wayne Michael Sarf, *The Little Bighorn Campaign: March-September 1876* (Conshohocken Pennsylvania: Combined Books, 1993), 11.

² Brian W. Dippie, *Custer's Last Stand: The Anatomy of an American Myth* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), XI.

Seventh could become a legend, it had to endure the ordeal of the Little Bighorn campaign which immortalized both Custer and the Seventh.

On June 22, 1876, the Seventh Cavalry, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Custer, was directed by Brigadier General Alfred H. Terry, commander of the Department of Dakota, to follow an Indian trail that had been discovered a few days earlier. Custer was to operate in conjunction with a separate column led by Colonel John Gibbon. This was a major movement in the Sioux War of 1876, which had been brought on by long-standing tension between the Sioux and the Army, aggravated by the rush of miners into the sacred Black Hills of the Sioux Nation in 1874-1875.

The Army was moving against the combined forces of Sioux Chiefs Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, as well as the Northern Cheyenne. General Terry, in cooperation with the forces of Brigadier General George Crook, was directing a campaign of converging columns against the hostile Indians. The rugged nature of the country precluded specific instructions for Terry's commanders. Custer proceeded toward the Little Bighorn with his Seventh Cavalry, and a group of Arikara and Crow scouts aligned with the army. Custer had a total of 31 officers, 566 enlisted men, and 35 Indian scouts, as well as newspaper correspondent Mark Kellogg.³

On June 25, 1876, believing he had been discovered by hostile Indians, just past noon Custer divided his command into four columns to engage the

³ Sarf, 159.

combined Sioux and Cheyenne warriors encamped in a large but hidden village nearby. Custer directed one column of five companies, while two other columns, consisting of three companies each, led by Major Marcus Reno and Captain Frederick Benteen, respectively. Captain Thomas McDougall was in charge of the escort for the pack mules, which carried Custer's supplies, including his reserve ammunition.

Benteen was sent on a scouting expedition to the left, and shortly afterward, Major Reno was sent to charge the newly discovered villages. Reno was quickly forced on the defensive and was routed. The Indians forced Reno to retreat to high ground across the Little Bighorn River. Benteen and his Battalion had returned to Custer's trail after a barren scouting expedition. Benteen received orders to reinforce Custer with McDougall's pack train and especially its ammunition packs. However, Custer had earlier taken his column toward the village, but was wiped out to the last man on the hills above the Little Bighorn. For Custer, the battle had ended, but for the rest of the Seventh Cavalry, it was a struggle that would last for two days until the arrival of the Terry-Gibbon column on June 27, 1876.

It was approximately 4 p.m. when Benteen and his battalion joined up with Reno's battered command on the fateful afternoon of June 25, 1876, on the high ground overlooking the Little Bighorn River.⁴ Benteen was moving slowly to obey Custer's orders to "Come on be quick and bring packs," which was Custer's call

⁴ Edger I. Stewart, *Custer's Luck* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 390. Stewart gives the time as between 3:30 and 4.

for Benteen to bring his battalion and the reserve ammunition packs with the supply pack mules to his support. Reno's battalion had just completed a frantic retreat from a defensive position in the timber on the opposite side of the Little Bighorn River. There has been controversy over whether or not Benteen should have pushed on without Reno to Custer's support. Benteen's orders became Reno's when the two battalions joined. Officers and enlisted men of the two battalions could hear distant volleys, indicating that Custer was heavily engaged. Robert Nightengale has written that it was possible that Custer's battalion had crossed the Little Bighorn and attacked the village.⁵

Reno and Benteen had Custer's orders to hurry forward with the pack mules. Neither was inclined to follow Custer's trail. Private William O. Taylor of Company A wrote that after the arrival of Captain Benteen's battalion, the command was "unmolested in any manner."⁶ The Indians had moved downstream to oppose Custer's battalion. Ammunition was not a problem, as only a few troops from Reno's battalion sought ammunition when it was available; according to Lieutenant George Wallace, only one box of ammunition was opened at this point.⁷ Benteen and Reno delayed until Captain Thomas Weir forced them to move forward when he took D Company on Custer's trail

⁵ Robert Nightengale, *Little Bighorn* (Lincoln MN: DocuPrint Services, 1996), 115. Nightengale writes that acoustic evidence indicates that the sound of the volleys heard by men of the Reno-Benteen command could only have come from the village.

⁶ William O. Taylor, *With Custer on the Little Bighorn* (New York: Viking Press, 1996), 48.

⁷ Stewart, 394. As with so much else concerning the Little Bighorn there is controversy concerning the need for ammunition among Reno's battalion in the valley fight. First Sergeant John Ryan wrote that "Our ammunition was nearly exhausted" at the time of Benteen's arrival. Sandy Barnard, *Custer's First Sergeant John Ryan* (Terre Haute, Indiana: AST Press, 1996), 186.

without authorization. According to Private Taylor, the troops thought the command should move to the sound of the heavy firing.⁸ There was no general movement toward Custer's position; a leadership void had developed, with Reno disoriented and Benteen declining to assume responsibility. Each company moved out on its own: first Weir's D, and then Captain French's M, and Lieutenant Edward Godfrey's K.⁹ The rest of the command, including the pack mules, followed. Captain Weir brought his company to a high point (later to be named Weir Point) from which he and others of his company observed the Custer battlefield.

According to Godfrey, they saw "a large assemblage" of Indians. He further related "the conclusion was arrived at that Custer had been repulsed and the parting shots we heard were the parting shots of the rear guard."¹⁰ Private Edward Pigford of Company M later noted the Indians were firing from a large circle which grew smaller.¹¹ Little Bighorn scholar Francis Taunton has written that the troops of Weir, French, and the others witnessed the first hour of Custer's last battle. Taunton wrote of the Seventh Cavalry officers, "None ever admitted [that they had witnessed the last of Custer] and certainly the extinction of five companies was unparalleled in Indian warfare in the 19th century."¹²

⁸ Taylor, 48.

⁹ Sarf, 224. The fact that M Company was one of the first to move out indicates that the rest of the Reno battalion might not have been as demoralized as is usually presented.

¹⁰ Edward S. Godfrey, "Custer's Last Battle," in W. A. Graham, ed., *The Custer Myth* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1953), 142.

¹¹ Kenneth Hammer, ed., *Custer in 76: Walter Camp's Notes on the Custer Fight* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 143.

¹² Sarf, 231.

Charles Kuhlman, one of leading chroniclers of the Little Bighorn, has written that not only was Custer's command still fighting when Captain Weir arrived at the high point bearing his name, but Weir's movement precipitated Custer's final movements.¹³

"From every hill and vale," First Lieutenant Charles Varnum of Company A, detailed as chief of scouts, wrote, "Indians were coming up the river toward us."¹⁴ Faced with an increasing number of hostile Indians on their front, the Seventh was forced to withdraw. Lieutenant Luther Hare, Reno's acting adjutant, later testified, "The command turned back because they could see the Indians coming from downstream in great numbers."¹⁵ Who gave the order to withdraw is a subject as contentious as any other concerning Little Bighorn. Hare recalled that Reno gave no orders during the retreat from Weir Point.¹⁶ Varnum recalled, "We fell back along the line of bluff and the Indians swarmed back on us. A dismounted skirmish line was formed by Lt. Godfrey and K Company covering the movement."¹⁷ Godfrey and his troopers covered the retreat, fighting desperately but successfully in the movement of the Seventh. Godfrey's testimony to the Reno Court of Inquiry recalled his rearguard action:

I remained in position--I did not receive orders to retire . . . Lt.

¹³ Charles Kuhlman, *Legend Into History* (Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 1952), 118.

¹⁴ John M. Carroll, ed., *Custer's Chief of Scouts: The Reminiscences of Charles A. Varnum* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 70.

¹⁵ W. A. Graham, ed., *The Reno Court of Inquiry: Abstract of the Official Proceedings* (Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 1954), 96.

¹⁶ Ibid, 97. Hare was Reno's adjutant replacing Lt. Benjamin Hodgson who had been killed in the retreat from the timber.

¹⁷ Carroll, *Custer's Chief of Scouts*, 92.

Hare came back and told me the command was moving back, and told me to mount my company and follow . . . I drew in my skirmish line, mounted my company and started back. I had gone but a short distance when Capt. French's company came down the hill, passing to the rear very rapidly; and soon after, Lt. Edgerly with D Company came down . . . As soon as I saw the Indians I dismounted my company and threw it out as skirmishers and when D Company had passed commenced firing on the Indians and drove them back beyond the hill. I then received orders from Capt. Benteen through Lt. Varnum to . . . fall back.¹⁸

By now Benteen had become the real leader of the remnant of the Seventh Cavalry. Major Reno had lost control of himself in the initial assault on the village in the valley. According to Little Bighorn historian Larry Sklenar, "There is not a single instance of courage in Reno's behavior from first to last in the valley, nor is there any evidence that he took one step to look out for the soldiers dependent on his leadership. . . At no point from the timber to the river crossing did Reno make any effort to provide cover for the men in the rear."¹⁹ Benteen was forced to fill the leadership vacuum created by Reno. It was Benteen, according to Lieutenant Hare and Francis Gibson, who "suggested" to Major Reno that the command fall back to the point where the two battalions had originally joined.²⁰ Benteen was of the opinion that Reno Hill was a better defensive position.²¹ At no point did Reno exercise any responsibility during the advance to Weir Point or the retreat to Reno Hill.²²

During the withdrawal to Reno Hill, scout George Herendeen rejoined the

¹⁸ Graham, *The Reno Court of Inquiry*, 179-180.

¹⁹ Larry Sklenar, *To Hell with Honor: Custer and the Little Bighorn* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 261.

²⁰ Nightengale, 130.

²¹ Stewart, 405.

²² Nightengale, 130.

command. He and several soldiers had become separated from Reno's battalion during the retreat from the timber and took refuge there. The retreat was orderly and well-conducted.²³ The remnant of the Seventh only took one casualty.²⁴ Benteen thought the position where the regiment had started from on its ill-fated attempt to link up with Custer was better suited for defense. With the withdrawal complete, the remnant of the Seventh took up defensive positions for a siege.

The Seventh Cavalry set up its position on Reno Hill "in the form of a saucer with one side broken out," according to one of the officers.²⁵ The pack mules and the horses, as well as Dr. Porter's field hospital, were in a depression, with the rest of the regiment deployed around it for protection.²⁶ According to Godfrey, "The Indians [took] . . . possession of all the surrounding high points and opened a heavy fire. They had . . . sent a large force up the valley, and soon our position was surrounded."²⁷ There was little cover on Reno Hill other than sagebrush.²⁸ Colonel John Gibbon of the Seventh Infantry thought Reno Hill was weak for defensive purposes.²⁹ Gibbon believed "the country was broken by a succession of little rolling hills and valleys behind which attacking parties could conceal themselves."³⁰ Charles Kuhlman noted, "It was impossible to cover the whole position without exposing large sections of the line to long-distance cross-

²³ Stewart, 406.

²⁴ Graham, *Reno Court of Inquiry*, 34.

²⁵ Kuhlman, 124.

²⁶ Cyrus Townsend Brady, *Indian Fights and Fighters* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), 249.

²⁷ Godfrey, 143.

²⁸ Stewart, 409.

²⁹ Graham, *Reno Court of Inquiry*, 208.

³⁰ Ibid.

fire."³¹ Another shortcoming with Reno Hill was that water was at least 100 yards from the perimeter and accessible only through a narrow ravine.³²

From the time the Seventh returned to Reno Hill until nightfall, about 9 or 10 p.m., the Indians maintained a heavy fire.³³ The companies were arranged along the perimeter as follows from the twelve o'clock (north) position to two o'clock: Companies K, Lieutenant Godfrey, from 2-4 Company D, Captain Weir. From 4-5, Lieutenant Wallace and G Company. From 5-6 Company A, Captain Moylan. From 6-8 H Company, Captain Benteen. From 8-9 M Company, Captain French and from 9-11, B Company, Captain McDougall. Captain French's company at various times was on both flanks of McDougall's B, filling the gap between McDougall and Benteen or McDougall and Godfrey.

The Seventh faced massive numbers of Indians, emboldened by their victory over Custer.³⁴ According to Private Taylor of Company A, "The Indians had us completely surrounded and opened a furious fire."³⁵ The Seventh had only pack saddles for cover.³⁶ It was a long-range sniping duel for the most part. Noting the lack of cover, Godfrey "got up and walked along the line, cautioned the men not to waste their ammunition; ordered certain men who were good shots to do the firing, and others to keep them supplied with loaded guns."³⁷ First

³¹ Kuhlman, 124.

³² Sarf, 236.

³³ Godfrey, 143.

³⁴ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 259. Estimates run from 1,500 to 6,000.

³⁵ Taylor, 49.

³⁶ Sarf, 236.

³⁷ Godfrey, 143.

Sergeant Ryan of Company M recalled, "We had been in position but a short time when they advanced in great numbers from the direction in which we came. They made several charges upon us and we repulsed them every time. Finally they surrounded us. Soon the firing became general all along the line, very rapid and at close range."³⁸ Private Taylor wrote, "The firing . . . was continuous on the part of the Indians until dusk and after that a few scattering shots, ceasing altogether about nine o'clock."³⁹ Taylor noted "only three dead and a few more, wounded."⁴⁰ During the hours preceding nightfall the Seventh suffered eighteen dead and forty-six wounded.⁴¹

Varnum recalled, "The Indians fired at us at from behind a circle of hills varying from two to five hundred yards in range. They would pour lead into us for fifteen to thirty minutes, and then charge us mounted. We lay low while they were firing and when they charged we sat up and let them have it and drove them back."⁴² Godfrey related that after dark little attention was paid to the firing which had become sporadic.⁴³

There was little done initially to fortify the Seventh's position. Both the officers and enlisted men showed little interest in digging in. Private Taylor explained, "The only excuse I can offer for this seeming indifference was that they doubtless expected General Custer would make his appearance during the

³⁸ Barnard, 187.

³⁹ Taylor, 50.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Stewart, 409.

⁴² Carroll, *Custer's Chief of Scouts*, 71.

⁴³ Godfrey, 143.

night and our labor would be wasted.”⁴⁴ However, as time went on, the Seventh Cavalry began to fortify its position. Private William Slaper of M Company used his butcher knife to build an earthen mound in front of him to rest his carbine.⁴⁵ One problem was the fact they had only three or four spades or shovels with them, so any tool would have to suffice to entrench such as axes, spoons, tin cups, and knives.⁴⁶ As they worked in the darkness, they could hear celebrations in the Indian encampment.⁴⁷ Godfrey remembered, “All night long they continued their frantic revels: beating tom-toms, dancing, whooping, yelling with demoniacal screams, and discharging firearms.”⁴⁸ Private Taylor remarked on the barricade the men of his company had reluctantly built: “That barricade proved of the greatest service to us . . . saving the lives undoubtedly of many of the men who were not slow to seek its protection.”⁴⁹ While Moylan’s A Company fortified itself with hardtack boxes or rifle pits, Benteen’s H Company did not fortify at all, which resulted in Benteen’s company having the greatest number of casualties.⁵⁰

Through the night there was discussion of Custer’s whereabouts. Some believed he had been driven off to join up with Terry and Gibbon. Others such as Godfrey believed that Custer was surrounded and besieged as they were. Godfrey conferred with Weir, and the two thought “he had been repulsed and

⁴⁴ Taylor, 52.

⁴⁵ E. A. Brininstool, *Troopers With Custer: Historic Incidents of the Battle of the Little Bighorn* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 55.

⁴⁶ Godfrey, 144.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Taylor, 52.

⁵⁰ Sklenar, 314. See Stewart, 421.

unable to join us, and that we ought to move that night and join him as we then had fewer casualties than we were likely to have later.”⁵¹ Nothing was done toward this end. The Indians began firing again at 2 a.m. on the 26th but it soon died down and did not resume until daylight.⁵² Private Taylor recalled that during the night the officers ordered trumpet calls be made in an effort to demonstrate to Custer their location, including Taps, which was ironic considering Custer’s condition.⁵³

The morning of the 26th began with two rifle shots at first light, which Private Taylor attributed as a signal to open fire.⁵⁴ This was followed by a “perfect shower of bullets . . . from all along their line.”⁵⁵ The Indians had the command encircled and they had the higher ground.⁵⁶ Godfrey believed the Indians were trying to get the soldiers to use up their ammunition.⁵⁷ The Indians were deadly opponents. At one point they used a stuffed dummy mounted on a horse to draw fire and expose the soldiers’s positions.⁵⁸ During the long siege one of the pack mules broke loose and toward the Indian line. Sergeant Richard Hanley of C Company’s pack train detachment rode out to recover the mule, believing he might be blamed if the mule got away.⁵⁹ Hanley caught the wayward mule and brought it back through the lines under heavy fire, an act for

⁵¹ Graham, Reno Court of Inquiry, 181.

⁵² Brady, 250.

⁵³ Taylor, 50.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 54.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 54-55.

⁵⁶ Stewart, 421.

⁵⁷ Godfrey, 144.

⁵⁸ Hammer, 144.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 127.

which he was later awarded the Medal of Honor.⁶⁰

All along the perimeter the troops remained under fire. The slightest movement would provoke Indian sniping.⁶¹ The Indians made a game of it by trying to bait the troopers into firing; they would stand erect for a moment but would drop before they could be shot.⁶² Private Taylor recalled, "From the time the Indians began firing early in the morning until late in the forenoon there was no time it was prudent for a man to raise his head above the barricade."⁶³

Private Charles Windolph of Benteen's H Company later wrote:

The lead kept spitting up around where I lay. Up on the hilltop I could see a figure firing at me from a prone position. Looked like he was resting his long-range rifle on a bleached buffalo head. I tried my best to reach him with my Springfield carbine but it simply wouldn't carry that far.⁶⁴

The day wore on and it soon became apparent that sniper fire would not be the only problem. The wounded gravely needed water. Along the line the troopers had tried to satisfy their thirst with pebbles or raw potatoes.⁶⁵ Dr. Porter explained the need for water and volunteers were called for.⁶⁶ On Benteen's front a ravine ran down to the river.⁶⁷ Benteen ordered French to reinforce him with his M Company. The Indians were positioned in the brush on the opposite

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Stewart, 421.

⁶² Godfrey, 144.

⁶³ Taylor, 57.

⁶⁴ Charles Windolph, *I Fought With Custer* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 103.

⁶⁵ Sarf, 242.

⁶⁶ Brininstool, 57.

⁶⁷ Stewart, 424.

side of the river.⁶⁸ There were seventeen volunteers in the first detachment, four of whom would cover the others and draw the Indians's fire.⁶⁹ The water party was successful in making it to the river; however, several were wounded even though the covering marksmen kept a steady fire on the Indians.⁷⁰ Private William Slaper went with the second water detachment:

We had to creep cautiously down the hill through a coulee until we arrived at its mouth where it debauched into the river. It was about thirty feet from the mouth of the coulee, and we had to cover this thirty feet entirely exposed to Indian bullets at short range, fill the canteens or camp kettles from the stream, and go back again under fire. When the first squad went out nobody had the forethought to post a bunch of good shots at a point where they could fire volleys into the brush to silence the fire of the Indians; but when my detachment went for water, several expert riflemen were instructed to fire volleys into the brush while we were getting the water and running back to the coulee.⁷¹

Before the water details could move toward the river, the Indians in front of Benteen became especially aggressive. H Company's position was more exposed to Indian fire from surrounding high ground than the other companies, and by its failure to fortify its position.⁷² Leaving Gibson in charge of H Company, Benteen went to French and M Company for support for a charge.⁷³ If the Indians had broken through on Benteen's front, they would be in an excellent position to destroy the remainder of the Seventh before Terry and Gibbon could

⁶⁸ Brininstool, 57.

⁶⁹ Windolph, 104.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 105.

⁷¹ Brininstool, 57. The members of the water details received the Medal of Honor for their efforts.

⁷² Godfrey, 144.

⁷³ Brady, 251.

arrive. Benteen charged the Indians before they could attack him.⁷⁴ Benteen's company was low on ammunition, reduced to only four or five rounds per man.⁷⁵ Benteen's charge forced the Indians back, almost to the river.⁷⁶ According to Private Windolph, "Yelling and firing we went at the 'double quick' and the Indians broke and ran. When we had cleared them out for a hundred yards ahead of us, we hustled back to our holes. Once again we settled back to the business of getting fired at, with men hit at intervals."⁷⁷

By about noon on the 26th, the Indian fire seemed to fade. At roughly 2 p.m. the Indians did make one final effort according to Kuhlman, "but were met by a steady fire and driven back but not before some of them in McDougall's front had come close enough to Benteen's men to reach them with arrows in an annoying cross-fire."⁷⁸ McDougall's company charged out on Benteen's orders, but were met with heavy fire and had to fall back.⁷⁹ Godfrey recollected that the battle was largely over by 3 p.m., but the Indians still guarded the approaches to the river.⁸⁰ Private Slaper recalled that by dusk the troopers could lead their horses to the river with a fair degree of safety.⁸¹ Late in the day, by about 7 p.m., the troopers witnessed the exodus of the Indian village heralded by a grass fire.⁸²

Private Windolph recalled:

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Godfrey, 144.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 145.

⁷⁷ Windolph, 106.

⁷⁸ Kuhlman, 138.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Godfrey, 145.

⁸¹ Slaper, 60.

⁸² Godfrey, 145.

The heavy smoke seemed to lift for a few moments, and there in the valley below we caught glimpses of thousands of Indians on foot and on horseback, with their pony herds and travois, dogs and pack animals, and all the trappings of a great camp, slowly moving southward. It was like some Biblical exodus . . . a mighty tribe on the march.⁸³

Private Taylor remembered "a great mass of Indians were seen in motion going up the valley toward the Bighorn mountains. It was a joyful sight to us."⁸⁴ The Indians were withdrawing and scattering to avoid contact with the column of Terry and Gibbon. It was a welcome sight to the tired troopers of the Seventh Cavalry who had fought for two hard days and had yet to learn of the fate of the men of General Custer's command. Godfrey recalled that the Indian column was five or six miles distant but seemed closer.⁸⁵ Many in the command thought that the Indian movement might be a ruse.⁸⁶ It seemed difficult to believe their ordeal might be coming to a close. The command drew closer to the river.

The men of Gibbon's command had heard of Custer's defeat from Crow scouts who had been with Custer.⁸⁷ When the Gibbon's column went into bivouac on the evening of the 26th they were faced by a thousand well-armed and highly motivated warriors who were covering the withdrawal of the Indian village the Seventh Cavalry had been up against for the previous two days.⁸⁸ On Reno Hill, French and John Ryan fired the last shots of the battle. Ryan

⁸³ Windolph, 106.

⁸⁴ Taylor, 60.

⁸⁵ Godfrey, 145.

⁸⁶ Hammer, 116.

⁸⁷ Stewart, 304.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

"possessed a seventeen pound Sharp's telescope rifle . . . which cost me \$100. I used infantry ammunition, 70 grains of powder."⁸⁹ French also had an infantry "long-tom" rifle.⁹⁰ Ryan drove a few Indians away from a bluff with his Sharps, thus firing the last shots of the battle.⁹¹ That evening Lieutenant Charles DeRudio of Company A, Private Thomas O'Neil of Company G, and scouts Fred Gerard and Billy Jackson came into the lines.⁹² They had taken refuge in the timber by the river during Reno's retreat. They had concealed themselves there, unable to rejoin the rest of the command until the Indians began to withdraw.⁹³

Terry and Gibbon arrived on the 27th. Their journey had been hard, and although they had heard of indications of a battle from scouts, they would have been astounded by the idea of a Seventh Cavalry defeat. Lieutenant James Bradley, Gibbon's chief scout, found the bodies of General Custer's command. In a letter to the *Helena Herald* on July 25, 1876, Bradley reported his discovery of the battlefield:

In my capacity as Commander of the Scouts, accompanying Colonel Gibbon's column, I was usually in advance of all his movements, and chanced to be upon the morning of the 27th of June when the column was moving on the supposed Indian village in the Little Bighorn valley. I was scouting the hills some two or three miles to the left of the column . . . when the body of a horse attracted our attention to the field of Custer's fight, and hastening in that direction to the appalling sight was revealed to us of his entire command in the embrace of death. This was the first discovery of the field, and the

⁸⁹ Barnard, 191.

⁹⁰ C. Lee Noyes, "Captain French At The Little Bighorn: A Different Perspective", *NewsLetter Little Bighorn Associates* 35, (March 2001), 2.

⁹¹ Sarf, 244.

⁹² Taylor, 60.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 61.

hasty count of the 197 dead bodies reported by General Terry.⁹⁴

The Terry-Gibbon column was sighted by the remainder of the Seventh Cavalry at 9:30 a.m. on the 27th. At first it was believed to be the column of General George Crook.⁹⁵ Muggins Taylor, one of Gibbon's scouts, arrived inquiring as to the whereabouts of General Custer; the Seventh was also informed that Crow scouts had reported that the Seventh Cavalry "had been whipped and nearly all killed."⁹⁶ Lieutenant Bradley arrived soon afterward, and informed the officers of the Seventh that he had counted 197 dead bodies on the battlefield, and doubted that any had escaped.⁹⁷ Godfrey noted, "We were simply dumbfounded. This was the first intimation we had as to his fate. It was hard to realize; it did seem impossible."⁹⁸

General Terry arrived shortly after Bradley to announce to the Seventh Cavalry the fate of Custer. According to Private Charles Windolph, "There were tears running down his cheeks as he spoke. I think most of us had tears in our eyes, too. More than 200 of our comrades had met violent death, and now naked and unburied were lying in the hot Montana sun three miles to the northward."⁹⁹ Private William Slaper recalled, "It was an awful blow to us, every man lost friends who were in the companies commanded by Custer. Nobody

⁹⁴ James H. Bradley, *The March of the Montana Column: A Prelude to the Custer Disaster* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 172. This was a collection of Bradley's writings, including his diary.

⁹⁵ Godfrey, 146.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Windolph, 109.

even dreamed that he could possibly meet with such an overwhelming defeat.”¹⁰⁰

With the shattered remnant of the Seventh Cavalry united with Colonel Gibbon's column, the major priorities were the care of the wounded and the burial of the dead. June 28 was spent burying the dead of Custer's command.¹⁰¹ This grim task was made all the more difficult by the lack of shovels, one per company.¹⁰² Lieutenant Varnum and the scouts were posted to give warning of possible surprise attack.¹⁰³ The burials were hasty and a number of bodies were not identified. Captain Keogh's horse Comanche was found with a number of men taking credit for it. Comanche would survive for an additional fifteen years as the special mascot of the Seventh Cavalry, the only survivor of Custer's last battle.¹⁰⁴ At dusk on the 28th, the burials had been completed and the Seventh Cavalry and the men of the Terry-Gibbon column began their return march to the mouth of the Little Bighorn and the steamboat *Far West*.¹⁰⁵ The steamboat would be the depository for the Seventh's wounded.

The Seventh Cavalry itself underwent a reorganization with the arrival of General Terry's command. In light of the losses among the officers, a rearrangement of assignments was necessary. According to Varnum, George

¹⁰⁰ Brininstool, 60.

¹⁰¹ Taylor, 73.

¹⁰² Ibid., 74.

¹⁰³ Ibid. Varnum believed Reno assigned him this task out of malice, denying him the opportunity to bury his friends, because Varnum added "some additional material to the notes Reno had tried to send out of the lines on June 26th." See Hammer, 63.

¹⁰⁴ There are a number of claimants for who found Comanche. Lieutenant Nowlan, Captain McDougall and Privates Gustave Korn and Henry Brinkerhoff, Stewart, 473. Sergeant Kanipe noted that Comanche had been wounded six times, Hammer, 94. Evidently the Indians had given up on Comanche unlike the other Seventh Cavalry horses.

¹⁰⁵ Taylor, 115.

Wallace was promoted to First Lieutenant and appointed regimental adjutant, First Lieutenant Henry Nowlan was appointed Captain of Company I, Winfield Edgerly was promoted to First Lieutenant and appointed regimental quartermaster in place of Nowlan, while Varnum himself was promoted First Lieutenant and placed in charge of a company composed of troopers from the companies assigned to Custer Battalion, but had been on detached service during the battle.¹⁰⁶ Reno was designated as the field commander of the Seventh Cavalry. There was also tension with Colonel Gibbon as he took a great deal of public credit for rescuing the command.¹⁰⁷

General Terry moved his force north of the Yellowstone River in the days after the meeting with the *Far West*.¹⁰⁸ Terry wanted to await reinforcements before engaging the hostile Indians again.¹⁰⁹ The month of July was spent in bivouac for the Seventh Cavalry and the Montana Column. Terry sent three messengers, privates from the Seventh Infantry, on a mission to make contact with the column of General Crook; they departed from Terry's camp on July 9.¹¹⁰ The three returned sixteen days later with news of Crook's operations which would begin the campaign anew.¹¹¹

Terry's campaign was rejuvenated with the arrival of reinforcements. On

¹⁰⁶ Carroll, *Custer's Chief of Scouts*, 77.

¹⁰⁷ Koury, 12.

¹⁰⁸ Edward J. McClelland, *On Time for Disaster: The Rescue of Custer's Command* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 96.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Alan and Maureen Gaff, eds., *Adventures on the Western Frontier: Major General John Gibbon* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994), 155.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 158. The three men would be awarded the Medal of Honor for their dangerous undertaking.

August 1, six companies of the Twenty-Second Infantry under Lieutenant Colonel Elwell S. Otis arrived, and on the following day six companies of the Fifth Infantry under Colonel Nelson Miles.¹¹² Terry marched out of his bivouac site with a force of 83 officers and 1,611 men of the Second and Seventh Cavalry, and elements of the Fifth, Sixth, Seventh and Twenty-Second Infantry regiments.¹¹³ Terry moved up the Rosebud Valley to meet with General Crook's force.¹¹⁴ Colonel Miles was much disgusted with the conduct of operations, believing that Crook and Terry functioned too independently of each other and should have been under one commander.¹¹⁵ He further noted that the entire command, in spite of reinforcements, lacked vigor; he also noted that Terry had no enthusiasm for the campaign.¹¹⁶

The Seventh Cavalry made one last reconnaissance near Glendive but found nothing.¹¹⁷ The Seventh returned to Ft. Abraham Lincoln, completing their long tragic campaign on September 22.

The aftermath of the Little Bighorn brought few laurels to the Seventh Cavalry and the army as a whole. The stand of the Seventh Cavalry at Little Bighorn was not well-remembered by the American people except for the demise of Custer and his battalion. This is unfortunate, as the stand on the hill was

¹¹² Sarf, 280.

¹¹³ Ibid., 281.

¹¹⁴ Jerome Greene, *Yellowstone Command: Colonel Nelson A. Miles And The Great Sioux War, 1876-1877* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 37.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 61.

worth remembering, whatever the defects of the leadership of the two leaders of the remnant of the Seventh Cavalry. The rigors of the subsequent campaign were miserable, and Terry's summer campaign was a brutal anticlimax to Custer's last battle. The sacrifice of Custer and his command would not be avenged until the winter months of 1876-1877 by Colonel Miles and Colonel Ranald Mackenzie's Fourth Cavalry. The Seventh Cavalry would play only a small part in their operations.

In all the attention the Last Stand has received, it has generally been forgotten that the greater part of the Seventh Cavalry survived the battle, reconstituted itself, and presided over the closing of the frontier in its final campaigns in the West. The Seventh Cavalry would see the end of the resistance of Chief Joseph, Dull Knife, and Big Foot. Yet its greatest defeat, rather than its victories, would be long remembered in the consciousness of the American people.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE RENAISSANCE OF THE SEVENTH CAVALRY

On September 26, 1876, the Seventh Cavalry returned to Fort Abraham Lincoln, Dakota Territory, completing the most costly campaign the regiment had endured in its brief history.¹ The Seventh Cavalry had to be rebuilt and reorganized. Colonel Samuel Davis Sturgis was recalled from his post in St. Louis to take charge. Sturgis had been the commander of the Seventh in 1869. During the years between 1869 and 1876, Sturgis was sent on detached service by Sheridan away from the regiment, allowing Custer to command the Seventh in practice. After the Little Bighorn, Sturgis had to prepare the Seventh for active field service once again. According to Second Lieutenant Hugh Scott, "The regiment had got back from its post from the Yellowstone . . . and was in the process of reorganization with thirty new officers . . . five hundred new recruits and five hundred new horses had been received from the east."² It was expected that the Seventh Cavalry would soon take to the field to disarm the Indians at the Standing Rock and Cheyenne Agencies.³ But the previous June, the Seventh Cavalry had experienced the worst defeat the Frontier Army would endure in the late nineteenth century and time was needed to refit the regiment.

While Custer was the *de facto* commander of the Seventh Cavalry, Sturgis

¹ Melbourne Chandler, *Garryowen in Glory* (Annandale, Va.: Privately Printed), 73.

² Hugh Scott, *Some Memories of a Soldier* (New York: The Century Company, 1928), 29.

³ Chandler, 73.

was in charge of the mounted recruiting command. He resented his assignment, but Custer had demonstrated considerable ability during the Civil War and afterwards on the Plains. Lieutenant General Philip Sheridan, commander of the Division of the Missouri, the high command of the U.S. Army against the Indian tribes of the Great Plains, wanted his protégé in a leadership position. Custer had been one of Sheridan's favorite officers during the Civil War. During the early years of Sturgis's command, relations with Custer may not have been as strained as generally believed. Sturgis wrote of Custer in a letter in 1869, "There is perhaps no other officer of equal rank on this line who has worked more faithfully against the Indians, or who has acquired the same degree of knowledge of the country and of Indian character."⁴ In the aftermath of Little Bighorn, Sturgis was recalled from his post in St. Louis in October of 1876, and sent to Ft. Abraham Lincoln to rebuild the Seventh Cavalry.⁵

In the fall of 1876 there was little time for either recriminations or for any long-term reorganization. Following the Custer disaster, Congress authorized the Army to take on 2,500 new recruits for the cavalry.⁶ The Sioux War of 1876, of which Little Bighorn was only one part, still raged and General Sheridan had plans for the Seventh Cavalry. There were large numbers of potentially hostile Indians on nearby reservations.

⁴ Frederick Whittaker, *A Complete Life of General George A. Custer. Volume 2: From Appomattox to Little Bighorn* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 475.

⁵ John M. Carroll and Byron Price, *Roll Call on the Little Bighorn*, 28 June 1876 (Mattituck New York: J. M. Carroll and Company, 1974), 102.

⁶ Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 267.

New recruits flooded into Ft. Abraham Lincoln. One of them, Private Ami Frank Mulford, observed of Ft. Abraham Lincoln, "I was amazed and depressed with the appearance of the camp . . . I saw how unkempt the soldiers were-- unshaved, uniforms flayed and dirty."⁷ Lieutenant Hugh Scott recalled that the new recruits were "a rough lot who had enlisted in the cities under stress of the excitement caused by the Custer fight and were called the 'Custer Avengers.' Many were criminals who were court martialed from time to time during the winter and discharged."⁸ Vacancies among the officers had to be filled to replace the losses of Little Bighorn. Five officers joined the regiment, but sixteen remained absent, on leave, or on detached duty.⁹ Even the Custer tragedy could not force the Army to reassign Seventh Cavalry officers from detached duty. First Lieutenant Charles Larned remained at West Point as professor of drawing.¹⁰ Captain Henry Jackson continued his service with the Signal Corps in Washington.¹¹

On October 20 the Seventh Cavalry departed from Ft. Abraham Lincoln for the Standing Rock Indian Agency to disarm and dismount potentially hostile Indians. The Seventh's mission to disarm the reservation Indians has generally been ignored by historians, yet that mission was of vital importance to the Army's

⁷ Ami Frank Mulford, *Fighting Indians in the Seventh Cavalry* (Fairfield, Washington: Ye Old Galleon Press, 1972), 26.

⁸ Scott, 40.

⁹ Chandler, 73. Lieutenants Scott and Garlington were 1876 graduates of the Military Academy. Lieutenant Edwin Eckerson, who would later distinguish himself at Bear Paw Mountain in 1877, was a civil appointment to the Army in 1876 after three years prior service with the Fifth Cavalry from which he was dismissed in 1875. See Carroll and Price, 126.

¹⁰ Carroll and Price, 72.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

campaign against the Northern Plains tribes.¹² The potential for an armed clash was great. The Indians at the Standing Rock and Cheyenne River agencies were hardly pacific, thus vindicating Sheridan's policy of military control of the reservations, which provoked controversy both at the time and later. The Seventh Cavalry won a bloodless victory on the reservations. Indians managed to conceal most of their modern arms. They could not conceal their mounts, which were confiscated. The loss of the mounts in a Plains Indian society could be as devastating as the loss of weapons.

Sheridan had finally received authorization from both the Interior and War Departments to assume control of the Indian reservations in the Dakotas, and to disarm the reservation Indians.¹³ The reservations had been a potential source of warriors, weapons, ammunition, and horses for the hostile tribes.

On July 17, at War Bonnet Creek, Colonel Wesley Merritt and the Fifth Cavalry intercepted a group of Cheyenne Indians on their way to join the hostiles, defeated them, and forced them back to the reservation.¹⁴ Throughout the previous summer large numbers of Indians had departed the reservations to join the forces of Sitting Bull.¹⁵ Military control of the reservations was a necessity and should have come about earlier in the conflict. It made little sense to allow

¹² Utley, 272.

¹³ John S. Gray, *Centennial Campaign: The Sioux War of 1876* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 259. Gray believed Sheridan was wrong to take control of the reservations, but it is difficult to see what other course could have been taken in the aftermath of Little Bighorn.

¹⁴ Charles M. Robinson III, *A Good Year to Die: The Story of the Great Sioux War* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 233.

¹⁵ Utley, 271.

the reservations to be sources of reinforcements and supplies for the hostile Indians. In the years preceding the Great Sioux War, the reservation Indians had been strongly belligerent. Colonel David S. Stanley observed that they spent "half their time at these agencies and half in the hostile camps. They abuse their agents, threaten their lives . . . do everything they can to oppose the civilizing movement."¹⁶ The mission of the Seventh Cavalry to disarm the Indians at the Standing Rock Reservation was thus an important and dangerous task.

Lieutenant Hugh Scott later recalled, "As we approached Standing Rock the signs of excitement among the Sioux began to be frequent."¹⁷ Private Mulford later wrote, "We looked for trouble to begin as there was a large body of [hostile] Sioux . . . and they were getting the agency Indians rather uneasy and all were reported as getting ready to join Sitting Bull."¹⁸ As the Seventh Cavalry arrived at Standing Rock, they were met by over "a thousand Indians" who "rode their ponies in a circle on the open prairie."¹⁹

Lieutenant Hugh Scott, traveling with an orderly ahead of the main body of the regiment, recalled, "We saw . . . Sioux bodies lashed on high platforms and went to examine them. We had seen a long line of Indian heads skirting the timber watching our movements but that made no difference to us until the orderly called out 'Hurry up, Lieutenant, they are going to charge.'" Scott then

¹⁶ Ibid., 240.

¹⁷ Scott, 36.

¹⁸ Mulford, 30.

¹⁹ Ibid., 32.

observed eight companies of the Seventh come into line at a gallop.²⁰ Private Ami F. Mulford reported that he saw "the Indians scatter and return to the agency." He believed the Indians were afraid to challenge the Seventh in open combat, especially when it had artillery and Gatling guns. The regiment then followed the Indians over a distance of eight miles to the agency.²¹ Mulford believed the Indians may have given up too easily. "Had they charged us in a body there is no doubt but that they would have won the battle as they were five to our one."²² The Indians "were all armed with rifles and revolvers most of them having new repeating rifles and they could handle them mounted better than our troops."²³ They obtained arms from the Bureau of Indian Affairs trading posts.

Upon the Seventh's arrival at Standing Rock, Sturgis had some of the soldiers search the lodges. Scott could not help but notice that the troops he was with were "ignorant tenderfeet" who acted "very rudely and had to be severely checked."²⁴ Scott later wrote, "Someone who understands both parties is always needed in time of stress to prevent a clash . . . and to keep them far enough apart so that the nervousness of one man may not bring it on."²⁵ Mulford said that the Indians were divided on whether they should resist until "finally a few squaws appeared bringing some old rifles and carbines. Although we knew the braves were well equipped with arms and ammunition we could not find where

²⁰ Scott, 36.

²¹ Mulford, 32.

²² Ibid., 33.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Scott, 9.

²⁵ Ibid., 156-157.

they had hidden them."²⁶ According to 1st Sergeant John Ryan of Company M, some Indians offered "slight resistance" to the search for weapons and ammunition.²⁷ Private Mulford remembered that the command spent only a few days at Standing Rock Agency before returning to Fort Rice and Fort Abraham Lincoln.²⁸

Depriving the Indians of their horses was a major objective. The Seventh Cavalry captured 2,000 horses at Standing Rock.²⁹ With regard to weapons, the other half of the Seventh's assignment, the results were mixed. According to Private Mulford, the Seventh confiscated "a wagon load of old guns, sabers and revolvers among the latter some of the old time flintlock variety."³⁰ First Sergeant Ryan wrote, "We took . . . several hundred stands of arms. But the Indians probably knew that we were coming, for what we got were not their best ones. They consisted of a good many shotguns, old muskets and patched up rifles. They had probably hidden their best Winchesters miles from their camps, as we searched them thoroughly."³¹ The rifles and revolvers that Mulford had seen earlier were nowhere in evidence.

After Standing Rock and Cheyenne River, the regiment returned to its

²⁶ Mulford, 33.

²⁷ Sandy Barnard, *Custer's First Sergeant: John Ryan* (Terre Haute, Indiana: AST Press, 1996), 202.

²⁸ Mulford, 41.

²⁹ Utley, 272. Mulford also gave the number of horses captured at Standing Rock as 2,000. But Ryan gave the number as 2,300; Barnard, 202.

³⁰ Mulford, 41.

³¹ Barnard, 202.

normal duty stations for the winter,³² its mission to disarm the reservation Indians having been frustrated. The Seventh was more successful in dismounting the Indians, with over 2,000 horses captured. It should be noted that many of the elements that later would be at Wounded Knee were present at Cheyenne River and Standing Rock. The Seventh Cavalry was filled with mostly raw recruits, the "Custer Avengers," but there were many veterans of Little Bighorn, both officers and enlisted men. There was no bloodletting on the reservations in 1876. If anything, the atmosphere in the aftermath of Little Bighorn, and the action against belligerent reservation Indians, should have resulted in violence, yet violence was avoided.

After the Seventh Cavalry returned to its stations during the winter of 1876-1877, training continued for the coming spring campaign. Half the regiment was at Fort Abraham Lincoln, while other companies were posted to Forts Rice, Abercrombie, and Totten in the Dakota Territory where they would remain in garrison until the following spring.³³ While the Seventh remained in winter quarters, the Sioux War continued with other units in the field. The regiment would be absent from most of the final campaigns of Miles and Mackenzie.

The campaigns of Colonels Nelson Miles and Ranald Mackenzie had done much to turn the tide of the Sioux War. The Army was making a massive effort to win the Sioux War and avenge Custer's loss in the eyes of the American

³² E. A. Garlington, "The Seventh Regiment of Cavalry," *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States* 16, (1895): 658.

³³ Chandler, 74.

people. Mackenzie's battle with Dull Knife on November 25, 1876, along the Red Fork of the Powder River broke the power of the Cheyennes. In a bitter, desperate fight, Mackenzie destroyed the Cheyenne village, along with its provisions, and captured 700 ponies.³⁴ The Cheyenne who escaped to join Crazy Horse's band were in miserable condition.³⁵

Throughout the fall and into the winter of 1876, Miles and the Fifth Infantry kept up the pressure on Sitting Bull's Sioux. In December he moved against Crazy Horse with a force of 436 officers and men, and two cannons.³⁶ At the Battle of Wolf Mountain, Miles inflicted a severe defeat on Crazy Horse in a closely contested fight in the snow.³⁷ Wolf Mountain cost both sides few casualties,³⁸ but the psychological victory for the Army was great. It had defeated the legendary Crazy Horse in open combat. Jerome Greene pointed out:

"The Wolf Mountain campaign assured the success of Sheridan's strategy of controlling the Yellowstone corridor by a permanent military presence. Miles' execution of the campaign, coupled with those recently conducted north of the river, fulfilled his design of thwarting a union of Indians . . . such as occurred in the spring and summer of 1876."³⁹

³⁴ Utley, 275.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Robert Wooster, *Nelson A. Miles and the Twilight of the Frontier Army* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 88.

³⁷ Ibid., 89.

³⁸ Jerome Greene, *Yellowstone Command: Colonel Nelson A. Miles and the Great Sioux War 1876-1877* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 176. Miles had one dead and nine wounded while Indian losses are estimated anywhere from three dead and three wounded to twenty-five dead and thirty wounded. Greene, 176.

³⁹ Greene, 182.

The Seventh Cavalry returned to the field in the spring of 1877 to participate in the final phases of the campaign. Sitting Bull had fled to Canada, and Crazy Horse surrendered on May 6, 1877. A splinter faction under Chief Lame Deer continued in the field, pursued by Miles and his command. On April 30, eleven companies of the Seventh Cavalry assembled at Ft. Abraham Lincoln and the following day departed to join Miles's force.⁴⁰ The Seventh Cavalry arrived too late to participate in the Battle of Muddy Creek of May 7 against the Sioux under Lame Deer, but the Seventh Cavalry did pursue and engage scattered survivors until resistance ceased. This was one of the closing phases of the long Sioux War, although Sitting Bull remained at large in Canada, thus leaving the army's work partially undone.

The most significant activity of the Seventh Cavalry in 1878 was its response to the flight of Chief Dull Knife's Cheyenne from Oklahoma to their traditional home on the Northern Plains. The Northern Cheyenne under Chief Dull Knife had been relocated to Oklahoma following their surrender to General George Crook at Ft. Robinson, Nebraska, in April, 1877. The escape of the Northern Cheyenne from their Oklahoma reservation was brought on by the hardships on their reservation, most especially starvation.⁴¹ For some time it had been evident that the Cheyenne would rebel. Sheridan himself blamed the

⁴⁰ Garlington, 658.

⁴¹ Utley, 283.

Indian Bureau for failing to supply the Indians with proper rations.⁴² Brigadier General John Pope reported, "I know the Indians have suffered more privations and hardships, and endured them more patiently and with less grumbling, than would the same number of white men . . . when they found the Government wasn't keeping its promises . . . they resolved to go back to their old hunting grounds in the north."⁴³ On September 7, 1878, Chiefs Dull Knife and Little Wolf led an estimated 300 Cheyenne in an effort to return to their ancestral land.⁴⁴ In the north Sioux Chief Red Cloud had left his reservation, and it was believed by the Army that the Dull Knife Cheyennes would try to join with him.⁴⁵

Dull Knife's Cheyenne slowly made their way northward from Oklahoma, avoiding the army but often fighting with settlers along the way.⁴⁶ Like Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce before them, Dull Knife and the Cheyenne sought to remain in their ancestral homeland. In Dakota Territory, early precautions were taken against the Cheyenne joining forces with the Sioux for a major Indian war.⁴⁷ It was initially reported that Red Cloud had killed the agent at the reservation at White Clay Creek; this report from army headquarters turned out to be false, but it reflects the panic caused by Dull Knife's flight. The Seventh Cavalry was ordered to take thirty days's rations and join with other troops in the

⁴² Paul Andrew Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and his Army* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 334.

⁴³ Thomas Goodrich, *Scalp Dance: Indian Warfare on the High Plains, 1865-1879* (Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1997), 296.

⁴⁴ Utley, 283.

⁴⁵ Scott, 94-95.

⁴⁶ Garlington, 661. See also Goodrich, 296-299.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

field to prevent Red Cloud and Dull Knife from combining for another war.⁴⁸

Lieutenant Scott noticed signs along the way up White Clay Creek that indicated Red Cloud had 5,000 young men under his leadership, and Red Cloud was in no mood to negotiate with the army when contacted.⁴⁹ However, when it was made clear to Red Cloud by Scott and other officers at the Sioux encampment close to their reservation in late September that the Seventh Cavalry intended to fight the Cheyenne and not the Sioux, he became more conciliatory. He had thus far not been violent, nor did he want a war.⁵⁰

Red Cloud returned to his reservation without incident. The Seventh Cavalry remained in the field to block the Cheyenne from reaching the Sioux. Dull Knife's Cheyenne were forced to divide into smaller parties because of the overwhelming military presence near the Sioux reservations, not just the Seventh Cavalry, but other units as well.⁵¹ By acting as a check on Red Cloud and other Sioux, the Seventh kept a bad situation on the northern plains from getting worse and igniting another major Indian war.

After the Dull Knife conflict, the attention of the army on the Northern Plains was again devoted to Sitting Bull in Canada. This involved the Army in a war of nerves, trying to anticipate Sitting Bull's excursions across the United States-Canadian border, resulting in long periods of inactivity. When not in

⁴⁸ Scott, 96. Scott did not specify what the "Ugly Signs" were, nor did he state his source for the size of Red Cloud's force.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Scott, 97.

⁵¹ Chandler, 77.

garrison, the Seventh Cavalry was engaged in scouting and patrolling. The following years were spent escorting surveying and construction crews for the Northern Pacific Railroad.⁵² When Sitting Bull finally surrendered on January 9, 1881, near Ft. Buford, Dakota Territory, Company F of the Seventh Cavalry, once a part of Custer's battalion at Little Bighorn, received his surrender and escorted the aging Hunkpapa chief to confinement. It was a quiet end to the Great Sioux War of 1876.

Sitting Bull's surrender has been little remarked upon, both at the time and later. The capture of the Sioux chieftain was ironically quiet, as a few years earlier he had been seen as the greatest of menaces in the pages of America's press. In a few years he would be an attraction at Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. It was the end of the Sioux War of 1876, and the last sustained resistance of the Plains Indians. In that resistance, the events at Little Bighorn defined the Seventh Cavalry in the American imagination. Both the Northern Cheyenne and Chief Joseph's Nez Perce had tried resistance and failed, marking the end of an era among the Indian tribes of the West.

In 1886, the Seventh Cavalry departed Dakota Territory, and established its headquarters at Ft. Riley, Kansas. In June of that year, Colonel Sturgis retired from the Army after a forty-year career, and was replaced by Colonel James W. Forsyth, a longtime staff officer and protégé of Phil Sheridan. Forsyth was a

⁵² Chandler, 78.

gregarious, "champion story-teller" with an intellectual bent.⁵³ The only flaw in Forsyth's makeup was his lack of Indian-fighting experience. As the U.S. Army in the 1880s was concentrating on more conventional missions, this would not have been seen as a handicap. Forsyth had accompanied Philip Sheridan to Europe in 1870-1871 to observe the Franco-Prussian War.⁵⁴

In the months leading up to the Ghost Dance War in 1890, the Seventh Cavalry's strength was cut from twelve companies to ten, by the elimination of Companies L and M as a part of overall reductions in the army, which resulted in the closure of a number of frontier posts. Even before the clash at Wounded Knee, the Army was preparing for post-frontier missions: regiments were brought together for training exercises.⁵⁵ In keeping with this trend, the Seventh Cavalry participated in the early field maneuvers held by the Army at Camp Schofield in Oklahoma in 1889. Although no one in the Seventh Cavalry realized it at the time, the long twilight of the U.S. Cavalry was just beginning.

⁵³ Hutton, 154.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 202.

⁵⁵ Weigley, 290.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE NEZ PERCE CAMPAIGN

One early historian of the war between the U.S. Army and the Nez Perce tribe called it "the meanest, most contemptible thing the United States was ever guilty of."¹ The conflict with the Nez Perce would be one of the last Indian Wars carried out over a large geographic area, stretching from the Idaho panhandle to northeastern Montana by way of Yellowstone Park. As one of the last of the great Indian Wars in the post-Little Bighorn era, it would be a factor in the renewal of the Seventh Cavalry, and would be one of the legendary events in the closing of the West, and an end of an era for the American Indian in the Pacific Northwest.

The Nez Perce in eastern Oregon and western Idaho had a long record of peace with white settlers going back to the time of Lewis and Clark. In the spring of 1877, that peace came to an abrupt end. The main issue involved in the Nez Perce dispute was the removal of the tribe from the Wallowa Valley in northeastern Oregon. The Nez Perce were not a centrally-organized tribe. They were loosely divided into "Treaty" and "Non-treaty" bands. This designation was the result of the Treaty of 1863 which was enacted to open Nez Perce territory with rich gold deposits to white settlement, and to shrink the territory held by the

¹ J. P. Dunn, *Massacres of the Mountains: A History of the Indian Wars of the Far West* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1969), 527.

Nez Perce from the Treaty of 1855.² The Treaty divided the Nez Perce into two factions: those who accepted the 1863 treaty and those who did not. Those who did not accept the 1863 treaty were unanimous in denying the Wallowa Valley had been ceded to white settlement. They were under the general leadership of Chief Joseph, son of a chief of the same name who had rejected the 1863 treaty. In the years following 1863, as most Nez Perce settled within the boundaries called for by the new treaty and for some years despite white encroachment, general peace prevailed.³

In the 1870s, white settlement began to invade Nez Perce territory. In 1873, President Grant signed an executive order barring white settlement in the Wallowa Valley. In 1875, however, bending to political pressure, Grant rescinded his executive order. Brigadier General Oliver O. Howard, commander of the Department of the Columbia, tried to arrange a peaceful agreement with the Nez Perce. Howard had previously been instrumental in negotiating with the Apache chief Cochise in the Southwest, and was thus experienced in Indian diplomacy, if not in warfare. Howard sought to avoid a major war with the Nez Perce.⁴ He was sympathetic with their plight and thought removal from their ancestral homeland unjust.⁵

² Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 297.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Dave Ballard "White Bird Canyon: First Fight of the Nez Perce Flight" *Wild West*, February 2001, 31.

⁵ S. L. A. Marshall, *Crimsoned Prairie: The Indian Wars on the Great Plains* (New York: Charles Scribner's 1972), 194. Utley wrote that although Howard was sympathetic to the plight of the Nez Perce he failed to understand their attachment to their ancestral homeland and sought removal to

Joseph was a force for peace and counseled restraint, but the deaths of two Nez Perce at the hands of settlers in June of 1876 produced a crisis that was not resolved until the opening of war in the late spring of 1877.⁶ Joseph was very much attached to the Wallowa Valley, and he and his tribe had deep spiritual roots there.⁷ In November of 1876, Howard was told by Joseph "to part with the earth would be to part with himself."⁸ The problems created by the influx of miners and ranchers remained.⁹

In the spring of 1877, Howard met with Joseph and his brother Ollokot, and delivered his ultimatum. Howard was frustrated with the Nez Perce question and wanted a quick end.¹⁰ There was no way for him to change the government's policy, and he believed that it would be better if the Nez Perce dispute were settled quickly. The Non-treaty Nez Perce would be given one month in which to prepare for movement to the reservation at Ft. Lapwai, and to abandon their claim to the Wallowa Valley. The final meeting between Howard, Monteith, and the Nez Perce leadership occurred on May 4. Howard told Joseph and the other chiefs to move to the Lapwai Reservation, and he gave them a thirty-day time period to accomplish the relocation.¹¹ The Nez Perce intended to comply with Howard's instructions, as they believed that resistance to the army

the Ft. Lapwai with compensation for the loss as a way to avoid war. Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 298.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 298.

⁸ Bruce Hampton, *Children of Grace: The Nez Perce War of 1877* (New York: Avon Books, 1994), 45.

⁹ Ballard, 31.

¹⁰ Ibid., 47.

¹¹ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 299.

would fail.¹² Even the Dreamers saw the futility of resistance at this point.¹³

The Nez Perce War would begin in earnest with the killing of several local whites by drunken Nez Perce warriors acting on their own. Joseph denied responsibility for the killings, but he stated that the whites would never believe him—in that he was correct.¹⁴ Up to this point he had reluctantly decided to move his people to the Lapwai Reservation, but the deaths of the settlers produced a new crisis. For his part, Howard believed that the rash of violence would bring a greater Indian uprising.¹⁵ He decided to send Captain David Perry and two companies of the First Cavalry to stop and contain the Nez Perce offenders until reinforcements arrived.¹⁶ Perry, with one hundred troopers, made contact with the Nez Perce, accompanied by civilian volunteers, attempted to head off a Nez Perce raiding party that had killed the settlers and were reportedly still in the vicinity.¹⁷ Joseph and the other Nez Perce chiefs still had hopes of avoiding war, but they resolved to fight if necessary if negotiations with the soldiers failed. Consequently, they planned to cross the Rocky Mountains to the buffalo herds on the plains.¹⁸

Perry, like the Nez Perce, hoped to avoid war. He wanted to take the Nez Perce raiders into custody, and sent his scouts to the tribal leadership to

¹² Ballard, 31.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Mark H. Brown, *The Flight of the Nez Perce* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), 116.

¹⁵ Ballard, 33. See also Brown, 116.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 300.

¹⁸ Ibid.

convince the chiefs to give up the offenders.¹⁹ As Perry's command approached a small Nez Perce village near White Bird Creek, one of the civilian volunteers fired on Nez Perce warriors who came out to the command under a flag of truce.²⁰ The ensuing battle resulted in one of the worst defeats suffered by the army in the Indian Wars of the 1870s. Perry's two companies were routed.²¹ The Nez Perce War had begun, the last major Indian campaign the army would engage in.

Howard gathered a large force to pursue the Nez Perce. It would be one of the last major mobilizations of the frontier army. Over the next several months, the Nez Perce would fight one of the greatest rear guard actions in history. Under the leadership of such chiefs as Ollokot and Toohoolzote, the Nez Perce fought well. Joseph yielded military leadership to the other chiefs, and was pessimistic concerning the tribe's prospects, although he did participate in the fighting at various times during the campaign.²² One historian has written that Howard promoted the image of Joseph as a "Red Napoleon" to offset press criticism of his handling of the campaign.²³ Nez Perce leadership was exercised collectively by several chiefs, most notably Looking Glass, Toohoolzote, Yellow Wolf, and Lean Elk, often called Poker Joe. Joseph remained with the tribe in a subordinate capacity, taking part in the fighting but not exercising military

¹⁹ Ballard, 33.

²⁰ Jerome A. Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877: The U.S. Army and the Nee-Me-Poo Crisis* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2000), 36.

²¹ Ballard, 72.

²² Hampton, 95.

²³ Ibid.

leadership.

Usually historians have stressed the Army's poor tactical performance. There is some justification for this, but the two sides had different objectives. For the Nez Perce, victory could be had by simply avoiding contact with the Army. As the resources and manpower of the Nez Perce were limited, they could not afford to fight battles of annihilation. For the Army, victory could not be defined in simple tactical terms. In order to win, the Army not only had to defeat the Nez Perce, but had to capture the entire tribe. The Nez Perce could win simply by getting away.

As the summer of 1877 wore on, the Nez Perce would depart Howard's department and enter Brigadier General Alfred H. Terry's Department of Dakota, where the great Sioux War of 1876 was winding down, and the Nez Perce faced seasoned veterans of months of campaigning in difficult terrain. On August 9, Colonel John Gibbon's Seventh Infantry would attack the Nez Perce at their encampment along the Big Hole river, although the Nez Perce were able to put the infantry on the defensive and move the tribe to safety. The battle was a turning point; however, as the Nez Perce suffered heavy casualties, the Nez Perce admitted to a loss of between forty-five and a hundred killed, including many of their best warriors.²⁴ Gibbon failed, however, because of the small size of his attacking force.

In late August and early September, the Seventh Cavalry joined the Nez

²⁴ Ibid., 138.

Perce campaign under the overall command of Samuel D. Sturgis. In addition to Sturgis, who had long been the official commander of the regiment, Lt. Col. Elwell Otis and Major Lewis Merrill had joined the regiment, which had been assigned to Colonel Nelson A. Miles's Yellowstone command earlier in the year.

The Seventh had eleven of its twelve companies assigned to it, composed mostly of "Custer Avengers," who had enlisted in the aftermath of Little Bighorn.²⁵ Sturgis's orders from Miles on August 12 were straightforward.²⁶ He was to take six companies of the Seventh and a twelve-pound Napoleon cannon to the valley of the Yellowstone and Musselshell Rivers to locate and intercept the Nez Perce.²⁷ Three companies of the Seventh would remain, with Miles under the command of Captain Owen Hale, a veteran of Custer's Washita campaign. B Company would remain with an infantry command south of the Yellowstone.²⁸ Lt. DeRudio and Company E was sent with Lt. Doane of the Second Cavalry on a scout, with a small number of Crow auxiliaries, who reluctantly joined the fight against their traditional Nez Perce allies. Sturgis was an officer of long frontier experience who resented being placed under the command of Miles.²⁹ This would be Sturgis's only major campaign with the Seventh.

²⁵ Jerome A. Greene, *Yellowstone Command: Colonel Nelson A. Miles and the Great Sioux War 1876-1877* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 216.

²⁶ Hampton, 255.

²⁷ Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 205.

²⁸ E. A. Garlington, "The Seventh Regiment of Cavalry," *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States*. 16 (1895): 658. Garlington had been the regimental adjutant of the Seventh during the Nez Perce campaign.

²⁹ Ami Frank Mulford, *Fighting Indians in the Seventh United States Cavalry* (Fairfield: Washington, 1972), 83.

Sturgis had 378 officers and men with him, divided into two battalions:³⁰ Companies F (Captain James Bell, Second Lieutenant Herbert J. Slocum), I (Captain Henry J. Nowlan, Second Lieutenant Edwin Brewer), and L (First Lieutenant John Wilkinson) were under Major Lewis Merrill, with a strength of 150 officers and men.³¹ Captain Frederick Benteen had the second battalion: Companies G (First Lieutenant George Wallace, Second Lieutenant William J. Nicholson), H (Second Lieutenants Ezra Warner and Albert Russell), and M (Captain Thomas H. French and Second Lieutenant John C. Gresham).³² H Company would serve as rearguard.³³ Most of the troops in Merrill's battalion were recent recruits who filled the empty ranks of the Seventh after Little Bighorn.³⁴ The artillery would not take part in the Canyon Creek fight, as one howitzer had been lost in the Yellowstone, and the other was pulled by worn-out horses.³⁵

Supply problems would hinder the Seventh throughout the campaign, especially with regard to rations.³⁶ A steamboat with supplies for the Seventh was delayed; rations would be reduced for days at a time.³⁷ Benteen pointed out in a letter to his wife, "Chases after Indians in so vast a country where we must go with a limited quantity of supplies is but a chance in a thousand to hit the mark

³⁰ Garlington, 659.

³¹ Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 216.

³² Ibid., 206.

³³ Ibid., 216.

³⁴ Harvey Chalmers II, *The Last Stand of The Nez Perce* (New York: Thyne Publishers, 1962), 175.

³⁵ Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 222.

³⁶ Ibid., 207.

³⁷ Hampton, 255.

you are aiming at. 'Tis terribly hard on horses and men and poor satisfaction at best should you gain the end."³⁸ The Nez Perce campaign would be the most logistically challenging the Seventh Cavalry had yet faced.

Sturgis had also failed to recruit Crow scouts in any appreciable number because of the friendship between the Crows and the Nez Perce. Captain Benteen noted, "We shall not be able to find Joseph nor his brethren . . . they are quite friendly with the Crows."³⁹ The Crows were traditionally the army's best scouts on the Northern Plains. Sturgis and the Seventh spent ten days at the Crow agency.⁴⁰ The Nez Perce, through Chief Looking Glass and other emissaries, had tried to bring the Crow into the war on their side but were refused.⁴¹ The Crow scouts that Sturgis did manage to recruit were of doubtful reliability.⁴² Sturgis was totally unfamiliar with the terrain he was moving into, with no maps to guide him and scouts of dubious loyalty.⁴³ Without the help of Crow scouts, the Seventh Cavalry would have a more difficult task in finding the Nez Perce.

The Seventh Cavalry was part of a coordinated movement. The Nez Perce had entered Yellowstone National Park, and were expected to emerge from the park through Absaroka Mountain Range, adjacent to the park's eastern

³⁸ John Carroll, ed., *Camp Talk: The Very Private Letters of Frederick W. Benteen of the 7th U.S. Cavalry to His Wife 1871-1888* (Mattituck New York: J. M. Carroll & Company, 1983), 85.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Brown, 346.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 347.

⁴³ Chalmers, 175.

boundary. The Seventh Cavalry under Sturgis, and the Fifth Cavalry under Colonel Wesley Merritt, were to guard likely exits from the park:⁴⁴ along the lower reaches of the Stinking Water and the Canyon through which Clark's Fork flows.⁴⁵ As it would take Merritt and the Fifth some time to get into position, Sturgis and the Seventh had to watch both exits.⁴⁶

Eluding Sturgis, the Nez Perce traveled near Yellowstone Lake over Yellowstone River, and then made a deceptive move toward the Stinking Water River; instead they moved through a canyon toward Clark's Fork, and then on to Yellowstone.⁴⁷ The Nez Perce avoided Sturgis entirely as he moved toward the Stinking Water River further south.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, Howard had been closing fast from behind the Nez Perce, and had seen an opportunity to enclose the Nez Perce from two directions.⁴⁹ But he was to be disappointed. Sturgis had received word from his scouts that the Nez Perce had moved toward the Stinking Water River, but some of the scouts had been seen by the Nez Perce chief Yellow Wolf and several of his warriors, who warned the rest of the Nez Perce.⁵⁰ The Nez Perce were able to enter the Clark's Fork Valley unobserved by the Seventh, as Sturgis had taken the regiment south.

Sturgis and the Seventh made their way to the Stinking Water River (so

⁴⁴ Utley, 310.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Dunn, 551.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Hampton, 252.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 257.

called because of the sulfur fumes, and now called Shoshone River) in search of the Nez Perce. On the morning of September 10, they discovered a trail made by the Nez Perce in a feint toward the Stinking Water and followed it until they reached Clark's Fork.⁵¹ One historian characterized the Nez Perce strategy as a "cleanly executed maneuver" which had "countered an extremely serious threat and won a brilliant, though temporary respite."⁵² It was perhaps the most brilliant Nez Perce victory of the war. They had diverted Sturgis away from their true course, and evaded him without firing a shot. Every time the Nez Perce stopped and fought, they lost valuable men and used up ammunition, allowing the army to wear them down through attrition. This time they did not have to fight as they outmaneuvered Sturgis. One of Howard's planned pincers failed to close. A major opportunity had been lost to end the Nez Perce war quickly by the diversion of the Seventh Cavalry to Stinking Water River.

Sturgis discovered a discarded First Cavalry horse, which indicated he was behind Howard's force.⁵³ The Seventh Cavalry now pushed forward to catch up with Howard. Sturgis was eager for a fight to make up for his failure to intercept the Nez Perce, exhausting his men and horses for nothing. One Seventh Cavalry trooper described Sturgis as "being hopping mad that the savages had outwitted him."⁵⁴ Upon uniting with General Howard's column, Sturgis was given the opportunity he had been waiting for. Howard sent the

⁵¹ Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 210.

⁵² Brown, 351.

⁵³ Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 210.

⁵⁴ Hampton, 260.

Seventh to overtake the Nez Perce on the morning of September 12; Sturgis departed from Howard's command equipped with additional scouts, a surgeon, Captain Jenkins Fitzgerald, and two mountain howitzers.⁵⁵ The men and horses of the Seventh Cavalry were exhausted from the campaign's exertions, and rations were still unavailable. One trooper recalled, "We had nothing to eat, so we merely drew our belts in one notch tighter, took a drink of water, threw our saddles on our horses . . . and hit the trail."⁵⁶

The Nez Perce, not wasting time, had quickly moved through the Clark's Fork valley and headed toward the lower Yellowstone valley terrain, with which they were familiar.⁵⁷ They killed several white miners and others along the way for fear they would reveal the Nez Perce movements. Sturgis covered thirty miles on the first day of his march. The following afternoon, September 13, Sturgis would encounter the Nez Perce near the present site of Billings, Montana.⁵⁸ Calling a halt to await word from his scouts, Sturgis received word that the Nez Perce were close. The Seventh remounted and rode along the bank of the Yellowstone; from a high point they observed some Nez Perce cooking a meal in the distance at the mouth of Canyon Creek.⁵⁹

The Nez Perce were not present in overwhelming numbers. The number

⁵⁵ Brown, 356.

⁵⁶ Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 213.

⁵⁷ Hampton, 260.

⁵⁸ Chalmers, 180.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

of warriors was counted at about 300 by Private Ami F. Mulford of Company M.⁶⁰ Mulford characterized them as "hardened by the difficulties of the march, able to go days without food or water and each brave carrying a gun made for use in hunting larger game. They also had a number of long range guns."⁶¹ The encounter between the Seventh Cavalry and the Nez Perce warriors was the climax of a frustrating campaign for the six companies of the regiment.

Upon receiving word of the close proximity of the Nez Perce, Sturgis advanced the Seventh Cavalry at a trot up Canyon Creek six miles toward where the scouts believed the Nez Perce were moving⁶²--Major Merrill's battalion in the advance and Captain Benteen's two companies in reserve.⁶³ At about 2 p.m. Scouts J. W. Redington and Stanton Fisher came across the Nez Perce column first and were immediately fired on.⁶⁴ The scouts made their way back to the cavalry. Merrill had dismounted his battalion and returned fire.⁶⁵ Fisher said later that Merrill should have made a mounted charge instead of forming a dismounted skirmish line 500 yards from the Indians.⁶⁶ Wilkinson's L Company was in the center, while F and I were on the flanks and to the rear because their mounts had given out earlier, and the horse holders were having difficulty.⁶⁷

The Nez Perce warriors boldly moved toward the dismounted cavalry and

⁶⁰ Mulford, 118-119.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Greene, 216.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Hampton, 265.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Brown, 360.

⁶⁷ Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 216.

often fired their weapons wildly, using up precious ammunition to protect the rest of the tribe as it moved away.⁶⁸ Sturgis remained with Benteen's battalion and watched the opening of the battle from a small rise.⁶⁹ Sturgis held Benteen's command back to protect Merrill's rear as Sturgis mistook an approaching party of Crow for Nez Perce warriors.⁷⁰ Merrill later wrote of his battalion, "The men were almost entirely recruits, but dismounted and formed under fire, and moved rapidly to the front, driving the Indians with perfect steadiness and unexpected coolness and absence of confusion."⁷¹ However, it was not only his scouts who questioned Merrill's decision to dismount the battalion--Captain Benteen also criticized the decision to fight on foot.⁷² Private Mulford later recalled, "Prompt action was what the men of the old Seventh wanted. They all felt if turned loose they could and would clean out Chief Joseph and his warriors in short order."⁷³ For thirty minutes Merrill's battalion fired at the Indians from the brim of a plateau, as the Nez Perce fell back. Merrill pursued them through its slopes and into sagebrush-covered flat terrain.⁷⁴ The Nez Perce warriors positioned themselves to protect their horse herd.⁷⁵

The Nez Perce, with their noncombatants and horse herd, moved northwest just north of Canyon Creek. There the canyon narrowed between a

⁶⁸ Chalmers, 180.

⁶⁹ Hampton, 266.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 217.

⁷² W. A. Graham, ed., *The Custer Myth* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1953), 191.

⁷³ Mulford, 115.

⁷⁴ Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 218.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

high butte and a high canyon wall. Beyond this canyon lay the great plains and escape. It was vital that Sturgis seize the high butte and block the Nez Perce.⁷⁶ Sturgis hoped to capture the Nez Perce horse herd, and thus impede their mobility. In order to secure the entrance of the canyon, Sturgis sent Captain Benteen with his two companies off to the left to cut off the Nez Perce escape route. Major Merrill was to remount his battalion and protect Benteen's left flank.⁷⁷

Merrill had difficulty pulling his command together, as his troops were exhausted from the three-mile running fight they had with the Nez Perce. He was also hampered by the fact his horse holders had fallen too far to his rear.⁷⁸ Merrill and Sturgis also mistook a small group of Crow scouts for Nez Perce when they came too close to Merrill's horse holders.⁷⁹ Benteen did attempt to charge the Nez Perce, but his strength was too weak. Only one company managed to get across Canyon Creek, and it was quickly withdrawn.⁸⁰ In the words of one historian, "Both sides raced for possession of the canyon."⁸¹ Private Goldin of G Company believed the cavalry were ahead of the Indians when the warriors suddenly arose in the canyon mouth with rifles and let loose heavy fire on the cavalry.⁸²

⁷⁶ Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 217-218.

⁷⁷ Hampton, 266.

⁷⁸ Ibid. See also Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 219.

⁷⁹ Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 219.

⁸⁰ Brown, 362.

⁸¹ Chalmers, 181.

⁸² Ibid.

Both sides fought it out at the mouth of the canyon for the rest of the day,⁸³ but the main Nez Perce column managed to avoid the cavalry. The warriors kept up a steady rear guard action;⁸⁴ Benteen's command attempted to scale the High Butte, but the Nez Perce were out of effective range by the time the troops had gained possession of the butte.⁸⁵ Benteen withdrew after it was clear he would not be supported and after Sturgis sounded recall.⁸⁶ Scout Fisher recalled that Merrill's battalion, after moving forward two miles, that "the Indians were driven very slowly from point to point. . . . It soon became apparent that we could not do any good by remaining where we were and that we would have to get out."⁸⁷ The difficult terrain frustrated moves by Merrill's company commanders to maneuver. By about 5:30 p.m., the fight at Canyon Creek was over.

Sturgis would take stock of his situation. He claimed the Seventh Cavalry had suffered three dead and eleven wounded, while killing sixteen Nez Perce and capturing 1,000 horses.⁸⁸ His adjutant, Ernest Garlington, agreed with Sturgis's assessment in his history of the Seventh Cavalry, except that he only states, "A large number of ponies were captured."⁸⁹ The Crow scouts captured an indeterminate number of horses from the Nez Perce, but nowhere near the

⁸³ Hampton, 267.

⁸⁴ Brown, 362.

⁸⁵ Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 222-223.

⁸⁶ Hampton, 267.

⁸⁷ Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 223.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Garlington, 659.

number reported by Sturgis. The Nez Perce themselves did look upon Canyon Creek as a major fight. The Nez Perce claimed no dead, only three wounded and an uncounted number of horses lost.⁹⁰ Scout Fisher recalled having the battlefield searched for dead and wounded after the battle: "I do not think a single Indian was found dead on the battlefield."⁹¹ As the Nez Perce had once again slipped away, it was a victory for the Nez Perce.

Sturgis's conduct of the battle has received mixed reviews. Scout Stanton Fisher wrote, "The Scouts were generally very disgusted with General Sturgis's management of the fight."⁹² Jerome Greene wrote that many of the accounts critical of Sturgis were "without foundation."⁹³ However, the fact remains that with near-equal numbers, Sturgis failed to deliver a major blow against the Nez Perce. A factor in the battle was the quality of the weapons used by both sides. Private Ami F. Mulford later wrote, "Their long range rifles are much more effective than our short range carbine unless we get in close quarters."⁹⁴ The soldiers of the Seventh fought remarkably well as a unit, even though they failed to gain their objective. It should be remembered that the Seventh had only six companies at Canyon Creek, one of which was not engaged. C Company was at Ft. Lincoln, B Company was further south attached to an Infantry command, and Lt. DeRudio and E Company were with Lt. Doane and his scouts. Those three

⁹⁰ David Lavender, *Let Me Be Free: The Nez Perce Tragedy* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 307.

⁹¹ Hampton, 268.

⁹² Brown, 362.

⁹³ Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 227.

⁹⁴ Mulford, 115.

companies might have made all the difference had they been at Canyon Creek.

The day after the fight at Canyon Creek Sturgis once again pursued the Nez Perce. It was a difficult chase over a distance of thirty-seven miles; to add to Sturgis's problems, the regiment's horses began to give out and many troopers walked and led their horses.⁹⁵ The Seventh Cavalry would encounter the Nez Perce rearguard, resulting in five dead warriors,⁹⁶ but the stress of the campaign took its toll. Lieutenant Ernest Garlington wrote in his history of the Seventh Cavalry, "The Indian could not be brought to stand owing to the exhausted condition of the cavalry horses--ninety-three were killed or abandoned on the march. The command had been on half rations for several days; the supplies now gave out completely."⁹⁷ Private Mulford recalled, "If this were a war of attrition they were getting the food and we were getting the appetites. Rations ran short until we had nothing to eat then we butchered Indian ponies."⁹⁸

During the pursuit the Seventh had troops stretched out over a distance of ten miles.⁹⁹ Sturgis had previously sent Colonel Miles word of the Nez Perce line of march, but he had become convinced that he could never catch up with the Nez Perce before they reached the Missouri River, and so he paused for General Howard's command to arrive.¹⁰⁰

Canyon Creek was the culmination of the Seventh Cavalry's first major

⁹⁵ Chalmers, 182.

⁹⁶ Garlington, 659.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Mulford, 116.

⁹⁹ Brown, 364.

¹⁰⁰ Garlington, 659.

campaign since Little Bighorn. The six companies under Sturgis's immediate command over a period of eight days rode over 200 miles in their pursuit of the Nez Perce. In the words of one historian, they had "lost the Nez Perce, found them and then lost them again."¹⁰¹ Canyon Creek was a tactical failure on the part of the army, but there were some significant accomplishments. The Nez Perce had lost valuable horses, which slowed down their rate of march.¹⁰² They were also becoming exhausted from their exertions to avoid the army, and were becoming low on ammunition.¹⁰³ The pursuit of the Nez Perce was frustrating and a logistical nightmare as supplies had fallen behind. On September 18, the Seventh's pursuit ended. Colonel Sturgis and the Seventh Cavalry did manage to make a contribution to the army's final victory in the Nez Perce war, but it was one of attrition, of wearing down the enemy.

Colonel Nelson Miles had been informed by both General Howard and Colonel Sturgis of the route of the Nez Perce. Miles had been stationed at Ft. Keogh at the mouth of the Tongue River. He had four mounted companies and one dismounted of his own Fifth Infantry, plus three companies each from the Second Cavalry, three companies of the Seventh Cavalry under Captain Owen Hale, plus two pieces of artillery and Cheyenne scouts,¹⁰⁴ a total of some 350 to

¹⁰¹ Hampton, 270.

¹⁰² Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 229.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Wooster, *Nelson A. Miles and the Twilight of the Frontier Arm* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 101.

400 men.¹⁰⁵ Captain Hale's battalion consisted of Company A, under Captain Myles Moylan, Company D under Captain Edward Godfrey and First Lieutenant Edwin Eckerson, and Company K under Captain Hale himself and Second Lieutenant J. W. Biddle.¹⁰⁶ Miles was designated as commander of the District of the Yellowstone on September 4, 1877.¹⁰⁷

On September 18, Miles led his command from Ft. Keogh northwest to intercept the Nez Perce retreat to Canada.¹⁰⁸ The Nez Perce were rocked by internal quarrels as they moved north.¹⁰⁹ Both Looking Glass and Lean Elk were in a dispute over the pace of the retreat, as Looking Glass believed they had outdistanced the army and could afford to slow the pace.¹¹⁰ They moved toward the Bear Paw Mountains at a slower pace, believing they had eluded the army. Miles moved swiftly to block the Nez Perce from reaching Canada. Howard had his column reach the Missouri River on September 23, proceeded to the region of the Bear Paw Mountains, and slowed the pace of his column in order to give Miles time to get in front of them.¹¹¹ On September 29, having left his supply train behind him, Miles moved quickly toward the Nez Perce.¹¹² That evening Miles's scouts discovered the Nez Perce trail, which he proceeded to follow the

¹⁰⁵ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 311.

¹⁰⁶ Chandler, 74.

¹⁰⁷ Greene, *Yellowstone Command*, 226.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁰⁹ Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 242.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 312.

¹¹² Wooster, 102.

next day.¹¹³

The Nez Perce were located after Miles's Cheyenne scouts had skirmished with them.¹¹⁴ Miles received word from his chief of scouts, Lt. M. P. Maus, that the Nez Perce village was five miles ahead.¹¹⁵ Miles directed Capt. George Tyler's Second Cavalry battalion and the Cheyenne scouts to attack the rear of the Nez Perce camp to ensure they would not be able to escape, and also to capture the village pony herd.¹¹⁶ Captain Owen Hale's Seventh Cavalry battalion was directed to attack the camp in a frontal assault, while Captain Simon Snyder would hold the mounted infantry in reserve.¹¹⁷ Second Cavalry Lieutenant Edward McClernand recalled, "The Second Cavalry was in the lead followed by the Seventh and the mounted infantry."¹¹⁸ The mounted troops rode in a column of fours.¹¹⁹ Second Lieutenant Thomas Mayhew Woodruff, Miles's adjutant, wrote, "Our line was deployed, . . . the Seventh Cavalry . . . on the right, the Mounted battalion of the Fifth Infantry in the center, and the three companies of the Second Cavalry on the right."¹²⁰

When the village was sighted, the Seventh Cavalry was given the order to

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Hampton, 287.

¹¹⁵ Edward J. McClernand, *On Time for Disaster: The Rescue of Custer's Command* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 104.

¹¹⁶ Wooster, 102.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ McClernand, 102.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Thomas M. Woodruff, "A Soldier Writes Home About the Final Battle: A Document." *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*. 27, No. 4 (Autumn 1977):32.

charge it without delay.¹²¹ Miles decided to assault the village directly, as it was a legitimate military target. The Nez Perce, like other Indians, did not maintain separate military installations. The Seventh Cavalry battalion was formed as follows, according to Moylan's report: "Company K on the right. Company D in the center, Company A on the left."¹²² The movement toward the village began at the trot, then sped to a gallop, and finally the order to charge was given.¹²³ The Nez Perce held their fire until the Seventh came within very close range and then let loose a murderous fire.¹²⁴ The Second Cavalry battalion had veered off to the left as terrain permitted, toward the Nez Perce pony herd.¹²⁵ The intense fire the Seventh had come under allowed the Second to approach the herd almost unobserved.¹²⁶ The Second was able to secure the herd, consisting of an estimated 600 to 800 horses, swiftly and successfully.¹²⁷

In his official report, Moylan wrote, "During the movement to the front of the line, Company K under Captain Hale diverged to the right and struck at the Indians almost at right angles to the direction which companies A and D charged. Company K struck the Indians first and was repulsed with some loss."¹²⁸ The cavalry got within 400 yards of the Nez Perce encampment but no further.¹²⁹

¹²¹ Garlington, 659.

¹²² Chandler, 74.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Garlington, 659. Brown, 391, gives the range at which the Nez Perce fired on the Seventh as two hundred yards.

¹²⁵ McClernand, 104.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Brown, 391.

¹²⁸ Chandler, 74.

¹²⁹ Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 273.

Difficult terrain added to the Seventh's problems, along with the Nez Perce small arms fire. Steep terrain would have stopped their charge; in any case, a precipice which covered the Nez Perce positions made a formidable obstacle. Companies A and D were forced to halt, Captain Hale and his Company K maneuvered toward the right along easier ground, and the other two companies soon followed.¹³⁰ There was an initial lull in the Nez Perce firing, of which the cavalry took advantage to shift their position, but the lull did not last.

The Nez Perce rifle fire was deadly and accurate. The Seventh suffered heavy casualties in this fight. The Nez Perce marksmanship was telling as they singled out officers and noncommissioned officers who displayed their insignia of rank. "Any insignia of rank was almost a death warrant," wrote one correspondent later.¹³¹ All three company first sergeants would be killed.¹³²

Moylan brought Companies A and D to the relief of Hale's K Company. Hale had his company dismount to fight on foot, and very quickly went up against the Nez Perce in close quarters hand-to-hand combat.¹³³ The fighting was vicious. Lieutenant Biddle was killed in the fray. Moylan brought A and D Companies, and after dismounting them, went to Hale for further orders concerning their deployment, but was wounded in the upper right thigh and had to seek medical treatment.¹³⁴ Regarding Hale himself, in Moylan's words: "I

¹³⁰ Brown, 391.

¹³¹ Greene, Nez Perce Summer 1877, 277.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Hampton, 294.

¹³⁴ Chandler, 75.

found him on the skirmish line encouraging his men by his words and acts."¹³⁵ Hale was shot dead by a Nez Perce sniper while reloading his revolver, leaving Lieutenant Eckerson as the only unwounded officer of the Seventh Cavalry battalion still in action against the Nez Perce.¹³⁶

Colonel Miles ordered the Fifth Infantry's mounted battalion, under Captain Snyder, to advance along the Seventh's original line of attack. The Fifth Infantry arrived under heavy fire at the Seventh's first dismounted position.¹³⁷ The infantrymen were armed with the Springfield rifle, not the cavalry carbine; they had greater range and hitting power than the cavalrymen. Lieutenant Eckerson had gone back for a resupply of ammunition that was badly needed by the Seventh, bringing it back at great risk to himself.¹³⁸ The Indians were exposed to fire from the Fifth Infantry, causing them to fall back to concealed positions closer to their encampment, which eased the pressure on the Seventh.¹³⁹ Up to this time the fighting had not lasted an hour.¹⁴⁰ A tactical stalemate resulted from the Fifth Infantry's forward movement.

Miles decided on a new course of action. He sent Lieutenant Henry Romeyn of the Fifth Infantry to take over the two Seventh Cavalry companies, which had lost their officers (A and K), along with his own G company of the Fifth

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Greene, Nez Perce Summer 1877, 277.

¹³⁷ Wooster, 103.

¹³⁸ Greene, Nez Perce Summer 1877, 277.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Hampton, 295. Moylan in his official report, gives the duration of the heaviest fighting as "not more than 45 minutes." Chandler, 74. Lieutenant Woodruff gives the duration of the entire battle as three hours. Woodruff, 30.

toward the southeastern end of the Nez Perce camp, and to clear the warriors from their positions.¹⁴¹ Another detachment of the Fifth Infantry, under Lieutenant Mason Carter, would advance from the southwest.¹⁴² The attack was repelled by the Nez Perce with heavy casualties. Carter's command closed the distance with the Nez Perce, and engaged them in a bitter hand-to-hand struggle, resulting in three Nez Perce dead before Carter withdrew.¹⁴³ Romeyn's battalion also took losses. Nez Perce marksmanship was again deadly. Romeyn himself was wounded in the assault.¹⁴⁴ Romeyn's command was forced to withdraw to their original position held prior to the attack.¹⁴⁵ One Seventh Cavalry corporal found himself in a duel with a Nez Perce marksman which was of long duration, resulting in the death of the Nez Perce.¹⁴⁶ The assaults of September 30 were an exercise in futility, as the Nez Perce held off the army. But Miles had done what no other army commander had done: He had cornered the Nez Perce. Miles was committed to a siege, and although a sizable number of Nez Perce managed to make their way to Canada, Miles had cut off and surrounded the majority of the tribe.¹⁴⁷

With his attacks on the Nez Perce failing and resulting in heavy casualties, Miles had no choice but to lay siege to the Nez Perce. In a message to General

¹⁴¹ Brown, 397.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Hampton, 295.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 284.

¹⁴⁶ Hampton, 296.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 298. The number of Nez Perce who escaped to Canada has been estimated as 140 warriors and 93 women and girls.

Terry, Miles wrote that the Nez Perce "fight with more desperation than any Indians I have ever met."¹⁴⁸ He had suffered heavy casualties in his efforts, which made further assaults unwise. He also opened up negotiations with Chief Joseph, the senior surviving tribal chief, who was popularly mistaken for being the mastermind of Nez Perce resistance. Miles wanted to wind up the Nez Perce before the arrival of General Howard and his column. Miles wanted the credit for ending the Nez Perce War for himself. Joseph still had 380 men, women, and children with him.¹⁴⁹ Miles encircled the Nez Perce with his depleted forces. Miles began his parley with Joseph on October 1, and negotiations continued on the following day. At one point Miles violated the flag of truce by detaining Joseph, but the Nez Perce retaliated by seizing Second Cavalry Lieutenant Lovell H. Jerome, who was conducting an unauthorized reconnaissance near the Nez Perce encampment; both men were returned unharmed. The Nez Perce had been informed when they first raised the flag of truce on October 1 that if they did not surrender by October 3, they would be fired on by the army. When the deadline passed, Miles opened fire with his artillery.¹⁵⁰

Scattered firing continued over the following two days. The Nez Perce could not break out without leaving their wounded, their women, and their children behind, as they had lost their pony herd on the first day of the battle.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 297.

¹⁴⁹ Woodruff, 30.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 33.

¹⁵¹ Brown, 398.

Miles could not carry the Nez Perce position by assault.¹⁵² The Seventh Cavalry battalion had lost 53 men out of 115 engaged. The Fifth Infantry and the Second Cavalry had also suffered heavy casualties. Another problem was the possible intervention of the warriors of Chief Sitting Bull (a major worry throughout the campaign), either on behalf of the Nez Perce or independently into the United States out of Canada.¹⁵³ Small arms fire and artillery fire continued on the 4th.¹⁵⁴ General Howard arrived with a small escort on October 4, and to the relief of Miles, he did not assume command. Howard brought with him interpreters and scouts known to the Nez Perce.¹⁵⁵ The scouts learned through contact with the surrounded Nez Perce that they were exhausted from the long journey, and from the constant fighting and insecurity.¹⁵⁶

Lieutenant Woodruff, in a letter to his mother, did not specify the terms under which Joseph surrendered on October 6, simply stating that through General Howard's interpreter, "We made terms with the Indians who surrendered on the sixth about 11 o'clock."¹⁵⁷ According to legend, attributed to Lieutenant Charles E. S. Wood of the Twenty-First Infantry, serving on Howard's staff, Joseph spoke with great eloquence. He surrendered his rifle and uttered the

¹⁵² Ibid, 399. Moylan in his official report lists the company casualties as follows A Company 5 dead and 9 wounded, D Company 4 dead and 12 wounded, K Company 11 dead and 12 wounded, 53 dead and wounded out of 115 engaged on the first day and no casualties over the subsequent 5 days of siege. Chandler, 76.

¹⁵³ Wooster, 105.

¹⁵⁴ Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 306. Miles had both a Hotchkiss mountain rifle and a 12 pound Napoleon cannon, but his ammunition was limited.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 307.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 309.

¹⁵⁷ Woodruff, 33.

famous words, "From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever."¹⁵⁸ His words were recorded by Wood, who may have embellished Joseph's speech. Joseph was anxious to end the conflict; the other Nez Perce leaders had been killed in the fighting and he had stepped forward to fill the void. Although he had not played any role in determining the Nez Perce resistance, he would be popularly known as a "Red Napoleon." Miles and Howard told Joseph that the tribe would return to the Northwest if they surrendered. To Joseph, this meant the Wallowa Valley; to the government, this meant the Lapwai Reservation.¹⁵⁹ However, the government ultimately sent the Nez Perce to the Oklahoma Territory in violation of assurances given them. Both Miles and Howard opposed this (even as they squabbled over the credit for the Bear Paw Mountain victory) and worked to reverse that decision. Ultimately in the mid 1880s, the Nez Perce were returned to the Northwest, specifically to the Colville Reservation in central Washington,¹⁶⁰ thus ending one of the least justified and most avoidable Indian Wars in American history.

The Seventh Cavalry's leadership was uneven at best. Sturgis allowed himself to be drawn away too easily at the start of the campaign. At Canyon Creek he was over-cautious to a fault after having pushed the Seventh through arduous marches. He also should have pressed harder to keep his regiment together, rather than allow three companies to be sent off on inconsequential

¹⁵⁸ Brown, 407.

¹⁵⁹ Wooster, 106.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 110.

tasks. Companies B, C, and E might have brought better results at Canyon Creek had they been present. Merrill fumbled badly in bringing his battalion into action; the scouts believed he should have made a direct head charge at the Nez Perce. He instead engaged them in long range fire.¹⁶¹ The Nez Perce did not suffer any great losses at Canyon Creek.¹⁶²

There are other judgments on Canyon Creek; Jerome Greene believed that Canyon Creek had more positive results. He wrote, "Although Sturgis failed to win a solid victory and stop the Indians and end the war, his action thwarted them materially, physically and psychologically that its significance . . . became compelling in view of what happened to the tribesmen over the ensuing three weeks, and how, in turn, it affected their final defeat by the army."¹⁶³

The fight at Canyon Creek did not end the Seventh Cavalry's role in the Nez Perce War. Captain Owen Hale's battalion suffered devastating casualties. Second only to Little Bighorn in combat deaths for the Seventh Cavalry, the Bear Paw Mountain battle was instrumental in forcing the majority of the Nez Perce to halt their retreat and ultimately surrender to Colonel Miles. It was the only truly decisive battle of the war.

Whatever the deficiencies in the government's Indian policies and whatever the shortcomings of the army's leadership, the army and the Seventh Cavalry responded to the war as well as could be expected. As the result of

¹⁶¹ Hampton, 266.

¹⁶² Ibid., 268.

¹⁶³ Greene, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, 229-230.

political squabbling in Washington the army went without pay from July through November of 1877. When the Seventh Cavalry went into action in September, it had gone without pay. Yet it fought heroically at Bear Paw Mountain regardless. It was an unnecessary and cruel war that could have been easily avoided but for the rigidity of the government's Indian policy. The Nez Perce fought as heroically as their military opponents, yet the troopers of the Seventh revealed no bitterness toward the Nez Perce. Private William Slaper of Company M wrote that the Nez Perce "were good people and very much abused by our pinhead government officials."¹⁶⁴ The Nez Perce did not mutilate the Seventh's dead at Bear Paw Mountain or kill or scalp the wounded--they simply took weapons and ammunition, and in one instance left a wounded man with a canteen of water.¹⁶⁵ The efforts of the Seventh Cavalry demonstrate the Frontier Army at its best in a very sad war.

The Nez Perce War was significant for two reasons: it was one of the last major Indian Wars campaigns to be conducted over great expanses in territory in the Northwest. It also involved a mobilization of a sizable portion of the army's strength. In many ways, the army still had many problems with logistics and training. As in the Sioux War, large army columns such as those led by Howard and Sturgis had difficulty maintaining themselves in the field.

The surrender of Chief Joseph, as told by Charles E. S. Wood, has become one the most telling legends of the Indian Wars, illustrating the flaws in

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 228.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 290.

the government's Indian policy. For the Seventh Cavalry, it was a milestone, as it was the first major campaign since Little Bighorn, an example of the rebirth of the regiment in just over a year. It was the only campaign in which the Seventh was led by its titular commander, Samuel D. Sturgis. The Nez Perce campaign was also the only major combat the regiment experienced in the fourteen years between Little Bighorn and Wounded Knee, resulting in the Medal of Honor being awarded to Captains Moylan and Godfrey. In a curious way, the Seventh Cavalry recovered over its last stand at Little Bighorn only to help bring about the last stand of the Nez Perce at Bear Paw Mountain.

CHAPTER SIX

THE GHOST DANCE WAR

In January of 1891, the long struggle for control of North America that had begun with the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the New World in 1492 came to an end with the surrender of the hostile Sioux in the Ghost Dance War. The resistance of the American Indian to the settlement of America came to an end. Combat at Wounded Knee Creek and Drexel Mission ended once and for all the resistance of the Sioux to the United States government as completely as Appomattox had ended the Civil War. Just as Little Bighorn had marked the beginning of the end for the Plains Indian, Wounded Knee marked the climax. For the United States Army, whose origins and mission from the founding of the United States until 1891 had been determined by the needs of westward expansion, it was a watershed--an end to a series of long wars which offered little glory and often much controversy.¹

Over the century since the fight at Wounded Knee, historians have viewed the final armed confrontation from three general perspectives: first, as a wanton massacre of noncombatant, unoffending Sioux by a bloodthirsty, vengeful Seventh Cavalry; second, as deliberate treachery on the part of the Sioux, who refused to surrender their arms as they had agreed and instead opened fire on

¹ Of course there were further troubles with Indian tribes, notably in 1898 with the Chippewa and the final clash between the U.S. Army and the American Indian came in 1918, a skirmish between the Tenth U.S. Cavalry and the Yaqui. Most historians, however, look upon the Ghost Dance conflict in 1890-91 as the final major confrontation.

unsuspecting and surprised cavalry troopers; third, the fight at Wounded Knee was an accident neither side wanted, nor was either side totally blameless. In the late twentieth century, most historians have accepted the first interpretation.

The fight at Wounded Knee was the result of a failed Indian policy, which could be said of most of the conflicts between the U.S. Army and the American Indian throughout the nineteenth century. Before any examination of the events of December 29-30, 1890, there must be an explanation of the events which led to it. In spite of the controversy over Wounded Knee there is a remarkable degree of consensus on the underlying causes of the conflict, though not of all the details, which erupted in the Dakotas in late 1890. A summary of the very complex subject of U.S. Indian policy concerning the Sioux is therefore needed.

Following their defeat in the Great Sioux War of 1876-1881, the Plains Indian tribes were forced by both circumstance and the Bureau of Indian Affairs to adjust to an entirely new culture.² The Plains tribes, like all other Indian tribes at the time, underwent a major cultural transformation. The goal of the Indian policy of the United States government was to break down tribal authority and culture in order to integrate individual tribal members into the mainstream of American society. This process had four components: religion (Christianity), agriculture, education, and law. It was a process advocated by groups of Indian reformers who saw that the best way to the benefits of modern life to the Indian, who in reality was unprepared for the onslaught of modern civilization. Many

² The Great Sioux War can be dated as beginning in early 1876 and ending in 1881 with Sitting Bull's surrender.

peoples throughout history have experienced defeat, but seldom have any people been subjected to such cultural pressure. It was one of the most far-reaching attempts at social engineering in American history. The U.S. government was not equipped for such an undertaking, nor did it assign committed, qualified personnel; instead it relied upon political spoilsmen.

Reformers such as Richard Henry Pratt believed the Indian would have to be integrated and assimilated into the American mainstream, but his process of total cultural immersion was too fast-paced, and it sought to totally sweep away traditions which might have been of use in accomplishing the goals of the reformers. The reformers also underestimated the place tribal authority had held in Indian life. The Dawes Severalty Act of 1887 sought to divide Sioux lands among tribal families, with the surplus put up for sale to western land boomers. In 1889-90, the pressures of the Dawes Act and the programs of cultural assimilation helped produce a crisis on the Northern plains, in which a religious revival would play a prominent part.

The Ghost Dance religion originated with the spiritual visions of a Paiute named Wovoka in the late 1880s, in which he saw a vision where a messiah told of the white man being forced out of the West with the rising of the dead--and the return of the buffalo.³ The Indians were to reject the white man's way of life in all ways, and not to quarrel among themselves. Wovoka emphasized peace and non-violence, with spiritual forces doing away with the whites. From all over

³ Members of the Potomac Corral of the Westerners, *Great Western Indian Fights* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), 304-305.

the Western states, Indians came to hear Wovoka's message, but the Teton Sioux made modifications to Wovoka's Ghost Dance religion that would greatly impact the Sioux tribes in the Dakotas. The pacifism which characterized Wovoka's vision was dropped by the Sioux in favor of a much more militant stand.⁴ Kicking Bear made the major changes in the religious doctrine, and he, along with Big Foot of the Miniconjou Sioux, emerged as the primary leaders. The Ghost Dance was the primary ceremony of Wovoka's religion, in which the visions of the dead and the aftermath could be seen. In the summer and fall of 1890, tension rose on the reservations in the Dakotas; the Sioux, reeling from the Dawes Severalty Act and cultural assault, as well as crop failure, embraced their version of the Ghost Dance.

Among the whites in South Dakota, fear of a general war rose. On the Pine Ridge and Standing Rock reservations, the situation was especially grim. At Standing Rock the Indian Agent James McLaughlin, one of the few honest and experienced agents, maintained control working with the reservation police and tribal leaders. At Pine Ridge, Indian Agent Daniel Royer, an incompetent and timid political appointee, lost control over the reservation and the reservation police. In November of 1890 he called for military aid. The Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington seconded Royer's request. Elements of the Second and Eighth Infantry regiments and the Ninth Cavalry were ordered to Pine Ridge.⁵

⁴ Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1973), 402-403.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 403.

The Sixth Cavalry was ordered to Pine Ridge from New Mexico, and the Seventh Cavalry arrived from Fort Riley, Kansas.

The coming of the army sparked turmoil on the reservations, and many Indians who had been aloof from the Ghost Dance movement either joined it or fled to the agencies seeking shelter.⁶ Close to 1,100 Brules fled the reservation at the Rosebud agency, some of whom moved toward Pine Ridge. In late November and early December, large numbers (estimated at roughly 600 warriors) of Sioux gathered at a defended plateau in the Dakota Badlands called the Stronghold. Brigadier General John Brooke, operational commander of the military force assembling at the Pine Ridge Reservation, wanted to move on the Stronghold, but was restrained by Major General Nelson A. Miles, commander of the Division of the Missouri, which included South Dakota. Miles, a distinguished Indian fighter from the 1876 Sioux War, wanted to try diplomacy as a means of restoring peace to the reservations.

The actual shooting war began with the attempt to arrest Sitting Bull at Standing Rock. Although Sitting Bull was not involved in the Ghost Dance revival, McLaughlin feared he would join the militants at Pine Ridge.⁷ On December 15, Sitting Bull was killed in a skirmish between McLaughlin's Reservation Police and Sitting Bull's followers. Big Foot, a Miniconjou chief and Ghost Dance leader at Standing Rock, fled the reservation and moved out into

⁶ Robert M. Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 118.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

the Badlands with a band of 350 Indians. It was feared they would try to join other Ghost Dance adherents in the Stronghold.

The flight of Big Foot and his Miniconjou Sioux resulted in a search by the army to intercept them and prevent them from joining Kicking Bear's force at the Stronghold. General Miles's strategy up to this point had been to contain Kicking Bear at the Stronghold, and waiting for the effects of winter and cold to wear down the Indians, either for a bloodless surrender, or for brief combat against weakened, demoralized Indians.⁸ Big Foot's movement to Pine Ridge would have strengthened the diehards in the Stronghold. Kicking Bear was thirsting for a fight. Some of the Sioux were becoming discouraged, even after small clashes with white ranchers and soldiers. He needed a bloody clash with the soldiers to strengthen their resistance.⁹

Big Foot, in his flight from Standing Rock, had been joined by several of Sitting Bull's followers. He was pursued by Lt. Col. Edwin V. Sumner and the Eighth Cavalry. Sumner caught up with Big Foot and met with him. In light of the fact that Big Foot had fled the reservation with fugitives from Sitting Bull's band, Sumner had orders from General Miles to return Big Foot and his band to the reservation. The cavalry was to take Big Foot himself into custody.¹⁰ Sumner informed Big Foot of his intention to return the Miniconjou to Standing Rock. Big Foot professed peaceful intentions, but on the night of December 22, he slipped

⁸ Ibid., 145.

⁹ Gregory Laire, "Ghost Dancers' Last Stand" *Wild West*, June 1993, 30.

¹⁰ S. L. A. Marshall, *Crimsoned Prairie: The Indian Wars on the Great Plains* (New York: Charles Scribners, 1972), 250.

away from Sumner.¹¹ Had the intentions of Big Foot and his followers been truly pacific, why didn't he surrender to Sumner? Big Foot claimed that his intentions were peaceful.¹² George Metcalf pointed out that Big Foot intended to join up with Kicking Bear, the most militant of the Ghost Dance leaders, at the Stronghold.¹³ Lalire believed that Big Foot was going to turn himself in, and that his followers were going to turn themselves in at the Pine Ridge agency.¹⁴ Both Lalire and Metcalf emphasized the desperate plight of Big Foot's Miniconjou, the lack of food and shelter in the cold weather, and contended that the Miniconjou were in no shape for a fight. By refusing to surrender to Sumner and eluding the Eighth Cavalry, Big Foot gave evidence his intentions were not peaceful.

General Miles was furious when informed of Big Foot's escape. Miles reportedly said, "Big Foot has been defiant to both the troops and authorities, and is now harboring outlaws and renegades from other bands."¹⁵ Over the days since his escape from Sumner, Big Foot had come down with pneumonia, and his band moved slowly toward the Badlands. Miles had sent several columns to intercept them, hoping to prevent Big Foot from reinforcing the diehards in the Stronghold. He also pressed his superiors to allow him to win the confidence of the tribes by requisitioning more and better rations for them, all a part of Miles's

¹¹ E. D. Scott, "Wounded Knee: A Look At The Record" *Field Artillery Journal*, 29, January--February 1939, 8.

¹² George Metcalf, "Tragedy at Wounded Knee" *Great Western Indian Fights* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), 309-310. Lalire does not mention the encounter with Sumner in his article in *Wild West* magazine.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Lalire, 30.

¹⁵ Rex Alan Smith, *Moon of Popping Trees: The Tragedy at Wounded Knee and the End of the Indian Wars* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), 175.

carrot-and-stick diplomacy.¹⁶ Miles met with some success as several Indians from the Stronghold voluntarily gave themselves up and returned to Pine Ridge agency.¹⁷ Miles even turned down a proposal from Brigadier General John M. Brooke to assault the Stronghold, as it would scatter the hostile Indians and make his diplomacy more difficult to carry out.¹⁸ It is clear that the consensus among the military leadership was that the Stronghold should not be reinforced by Big Foot's band, and that it could not be taken for granted that Big Foot's intentions were peaceful.

At the Stronghold itself, a peace faction led by Little Wound, Big Road, and Fast Thunder was attempting to talk Kicking Bear into surrendering at Pine Ridge. The appearance of Big Foot and a new group of potentially hostile Indians might have given Kicking Bear encouragement to resist.¹⁹ Bad weather and Big Foot's illness impeded the movements of Big Foot's band toward the Stronghold. The remaining chiefs at Pine Ridge had been in contact with Big Foot, and erroneously informed him that Kicking Bear and the other Ghost Dance militants would be surrendering on the 29th.²⁰ On the evening of December 28, Big Foot's Sioux made contact with the cavalry unit that had been searching for them, a battalion of the Seventh Cavalry.

The army had sent several columns to intercept Big Foot. Major Samuel

¹⁶ Robert Wooster, *Nelson A. Miles and the Twilight of the Frontier Army* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 185.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Smith, 175.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 176. Evidently they assumed the peace delegation would be successful.

M. Whitside, with a Seventh Cavalry battalion composed of companies A, B, I, and K (commanded respectively by Captains Myles Moylan, Charles Varnum, Henry Nowlan, and George Wallace), and an artillery platoon of Light Battery E First Artillery under Second Lieutenant Harry Hawthorne²¹ made contact with Big Foot's tribe late on the 28th. From the first contact between Whitside's battalion and Big Foot's Sioux, controversy would rage over what happened and why at Wounded Knee. Whether or not the Indians were entirely peaceful or truculent has remained in dispute.

Major Whitside and his battalion encountered Big Foot's band at roughly 2:30 p.m. near Porcupine Creek. Scout John Shangreau asked Baptiste Garnier about the condition of the Indians. Garnier, who had made contact with Big Foot earlier that day and arranged for his surrender, replied, "They look pretty tough. We are liable to catch them today."²² Trooper William Slaughter of Company A later wrote, "We came into contact with them near the Buttes and a blood thirsty lot they were; their faces painted green, yellow and red with colored feathers in their hair."²³ Slaughter continued, "Each one of them wore a calico 'Ghost Shirt' which . . . the medicine men had told them would stop the pale faces's bullets

²¹ Ibid, 201. The artillery was composed of Hotchkiss breech loading Mountain Rifles of 1.65 Inch projectiles, with a weight of two pounds ten ounces at a range of 4,200 yards. Light Battery E at Wounded Knee had four Hotchkiss rifles. Contrary to myth, there were no Gatling guns at Wounded Knee.

²² Ibid., 195.

²³ William J. Slaughter, "Some Recollections of the Battle of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, December 29, 1890, and White Clay Creek, December 30, 1890. *Winners of the West* 14, No. 5, April 1937, p. 4.

from harming them."²⁴ Indians on a reservation normally wore ordinary civilian clothes, but on this occasion were dressed for war.²⁵ This contributed to the military's distrust of Big Foot and his band.

Whitside deployed his battalion to receive an attack. The Indians had 120 warriors, and 230 women and children. Whitside had a total force of ten officers and 225 men, one-fourth of whom had to hold the horses for the dismounted, leaving only 170 men on the line.²⁶ First Lieutenant John C. Gresham would write that several mounted Indians aggressively approached Whitside's left, and for a few moments the atmosphere was tense, but the Indians were recalled by Big Foot.²⁷ A conference between Whitside and Big Foot decided there would be no combat. Whitside gave Big Foot a choice: war or surrender. Big Foot, ill with pneumonia, chose surrender.²⁸ Whitside told Big Foot to move his camp to Wounded Knee creek fourteen miles northeast of the Pine Ridge agency.²⁹ It was an unconditional surrender, and Big Foot had no complaint about going to Wounded Knee.³⁰ Whitside wanted to disarm Big Foot's Indians right then and there, but believed that would have provoked a fight.³¹ Some of the Indians took an interest in the Hotchkiss rifles, whose presence in the center of Whitside's line

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Scott, 9.

²⁶ John C. Gresham, "The Story of Wounded Knee" *Harper's Weekly* 35, No. 1781, (February 7, 1891), 106.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Fairfax Downey, *Indian Fighting Army* (New York: Charles Scribners, 1941), 265.

²⁹ Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 196.

³⁰ Marshall, 251.

³¹ Scott, 9

may have induced Big Foot to cooperate.³² The Indians seemed awed by the light cannons, which would have indicated the futility of resistance.

The movement to Wounded Knee went on without incident. Two companies of cavalry constituted the advance guard, with the other two companies and the artillery platoon made up the rear. In between the two elements on the order of march were the Indians.³³ Whitside sent a courier to Forsyth, notifying him of Big Foot's capture. Colonel Forsyth proceeded to take the second squadron of the Seventh Cavalry, a company of Oglala scouts, and the remainder of Captain Allyn Capron's Light Battery E First Artillery to Wounded Knee, bringing the total military force to 470 officers and men.³⁴

Whitside arrived at Wounded Knee late on the afternoon of the 28th. A wall tent was erected for the ailing Big Foot, and Sibley tents were distributed to the Indians who did not have shelter.³⁵ Regimental surgeon John van R. Hoff personally attended to Big Foot. Whitside also distributed rations of bacon and hardtack to the Indians.³⁶ Whitside hoped the Indians could be disarmed peacefully but believed a show of force would be necessary, and that Forsyth's squadron would be needed. "The object I had in view," Whitside stated later, "was that by their presence, we could overawe the Indians, and so they would submit quietly to be disarmed. I was convinced from a hostile demonstration at

³² Ibid.

³³ Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 196.

³⁴ Metcalf, 310. Rex Alan Smith gives the total as 492 officers and men see Smith, 310, and Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 201, gives Forsyth's strength as just over 500.

³⁵ Scott, 10.

³⁶ Smith, 179.

the time of the surrender, that otherwise trouble would ensue."³⁷

Forsyth and his reinforcements arrived at Wounded Knee at 8:30 p.m. The orders he brought from General Brooke were clear and direct: "To disarm Big Foot's band, take every precaution the escape of any; if they fought destroy them."³⁸ The army could not risk allowing the Big Foot's people to retain their weapons. There was the possibility of some of them defying Big Foot and joining the diehard Ghost Dance followers at the stronghold. Brooke and Miles could not afford letting a potentially hostile force remain armed in there, as it would have forced them to divide their forces to keep both Big Foot and Kicking Bear (still at this point in the stronghold) covered. According to General S. L. A. Marshall, a twentieth century military analyst, "Big Foot's band had been surrendered unconditionally. That meant that all arms should be yielded peacefully upon request. This is not the mere symbolic gesture of surrender but its essence."³⁹ Unknown to the soldiers, Big Foot had received a message from Red Cloud warning Big Foot, "If you give them your weapons they will kill you as they did Sitting Bull."⁴⁰

The situation was delicate. The soldiers were armed with single-shot

³⁷ Utley, *Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 197.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Marshall, 255.

⁴⁰ Julia B. McGillicuddy, *McGillicuddy: Agent* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1941), 267. Whether or not Red Cloud's warning was justified, or whether it was the basis of a self-fulfilling prophecy has been at the heart of the Wounded Knee controversy.

Springfield carbines.⁴¹ The Springfields were a .45-caliber weapon that the army had selected for its durability, reliability and low cost.⁴² The Springfield had a maximum effective range of 300 yards, although the Springfield could hit targets fairly well at a range of 600 yards.⁴³ The Indians were believed to be armed with the .44-caliber Winchester, which had a capacity for seventeen cartridges. The Winchester was believed to be a more effective weapon at shorter ranges, such as would be the case at Wounded Knee, as the Winchester was ineffective at targets over 300 yards.⁴⁴ While the Springfield could still hit fairly well at 600 yards, the slow muzzle velocity of the Springfield was a disadvantage to the cavalry at longer ranges, as was the slower volume of fire.

An additional factor was the fact that most of the Seventh Cavalry had not been under hostile fire, and the Oglala scouts could not be trusted to fight against other Sioux. At least one-fifth of the troops were recruits who had little or no firearms training.⁴⁵ The numerical superiority of the soldiers was partially offset by the weapons and experience of the Indians.

On the morning of the 29th, Forsyth met with the leaders of the Miniconjou, and informed them of his intention to disarm them⁴⁶ as per his orders and military common sense. They claimed to have no weapons. General Marshall has

⁴¹ Rex Alan Smith writes that the soldiers were armed with "single shot Remingtons," Smith 180. Lieutenant John Gresham wrote that the Seventh Cavalry was armed with Springfields, Gresham, 106.

⁴² Greg Michno, "Guns of the Little Bighorn", *Wild West* (June 1998), 30.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 32

⁴⁵ Harry L. Hawthorne, "Comment and Criticism: The Sioux Campaign of 1890-91," *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States*, 19, (1896): 186.

⁴⁶ Gresham, 106.

written that Forsyth could have waited longer for the Indians to give up their arms, and could have done more to see to the physical needs of the Miniconjou.⁴⁷ Forsyth did provide rations for the Indians, as well as medical care.⁴⁸ Forsyth was also expected by his superiors, Generals Miles and Brooke, to disarm the Indians, and was not given any flexibility in the timing of the surrender procedures, as Kicking Bear at this time was still in the Stronghold. Alan Axelrod insists that the Indians had few arms, and that the fact that some of them did have rifles was "seized upon to justify calling Wounded Knee a battle rather than a massacre."⁴⁹ Stanley Vestal, an early specialist on Indian life and history, believed that the Indians feared being sent off to a Florida prison.⁵⁰ The Indians also resented having to give up their weapons, and feared the soldiers would demand their horses as well.⁵¹

Forsyth deployed the Seventh Cavalry, not for battle but for a show of force. The heavily outnumbered Indians could not possibly be thinking of armed resistance, so the cavalry officers reasoned. If there was any great cultural blunder displayed by Colonel Forsyth at Wounded Knee, it was his assumption that the Indians would be awed by a display of force. No rational white men under those circumstances would have opposed the Seventh Cavalry. Forsyth cautioned his command not to take any action to excite suspicion on the part of

⁴⁷ Marshall, 253.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 251-253.

⁴⁹ Alan Axelrod, *Chronicle of the Indian Wars* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1993), 255.

⁵⁰ Stanley Vestal, *Warpath and Council Fire: The Plains Indians Struggle for Survival in War and Diplomacy, 1851-1891* (New York: Random House, 1948), 303.

⁵¹ Ibid.

the Indians.⁵² But Forsyth and his officers were not dealing with rational white men, but with Miniconjou Sioux in the grip of Ghost Dance fanaticism. In the words of Stanley Vestal, "They knew resistance meant death. Yet some may have felt that it would be better to die all together."⁵³

Some degree of responsibility for what happened at Wounded Knee must be assumed by the Miniconjou leadership. As General Marshall pointed out, "The prime movers in the band were older men. They were not innocents; they had been through like dealings with the army for more than a decade, they knew the routine"⁵⁴

Forsyth's deployment of the Seventh Cavalry would be controversial after the battle. He positioned mounted troops of Whitside's squadron on three sides of the Indians, while Captain Charles Ilsley's squadron (companies C, D, E, and G under Captains Jackson and Godfrey, First Lieutenant Sickel, and Captain Edgerly) would be held in reserve on the fourth side. The point was to demonstrate to the Indians that resistance would invite destruction.⁵⁵ Two-thirds of Companies A and I of Whitside's squadron, under Medal of Honor recipient Captain Myles Moylan, had been picketed around the Indian village the night before.⁵⁶ The remaining third under Moylan's immediate command remained in reserve just to the east of the artillery, which was deployed on a nearby hill under

⁵² Edward S. Luce, Keogh, *Comanche and Custer* (Ashland, Oregon: Lewis Osborne, 1939), 90.

⁵³ Vestal, 304.

⁵⁴ Marshall, 256.

⁵⁵ Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 204.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Captain Capron. Companies B and K, under Captains Varnum and Wallace respectively, would take up positions west and south of the large assembly of Indian warriors, with Company K between the warriors and the noncombatants.⁵⁷

During his conference with the Miniconjou leaders, Forsyth told them he wanted them to give up their weapons, but they only gave up a few old carbines.⁵⁸ Forsyth then had Big Foot speak to them, but there was little response.⁵⁹ Big Foot himself denied the presence of any rifles, claiming they had been destroyed at Cheyenne River by Colonel Sumner's cavalry.⁶⁰ The Indians were given to believe, no doubt influenced by Red Cloud's message, that they would be slaughtered if they gave up their weapons.⁶¹ Forsyth saw no alternative but to search through the lodges.

The search was conducted by troopers from B and K companies. Captains Varnum and Wallace made a thorough search of the camp. The women and children were entirely uncooperative, some hiding weapons in their clothing.⁶² According to Lieutenant James D. Mann of Company K, "The enlisted men were not allowed to go inside the tents and only took the arms as we handed them out."⁶³ As for treatment of the Sioux noncombatants, "The squaws were sitting on bundles concealing guns and other arms. We lifted them as

⁵⁷ Ibid., 205.

⁵⁸ Downey, 266.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 208.

⁶¹ Ibid., 206.

⁶² Scott, 12.

⁶³ Frazer Arnold. "Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee", *Cavalry Journal*, 43, (1934): 19.

tenderly and as nicely as possible.”⁶⁴ Metcalf writes of the search as being unnecessarily harsh: “Troopers shouldered their way into tepees, ripped beds apart, tossed through bundles of clothing, tore open bags.”⁶⁵ Mann also noted as the search ended, the women began packing in a hurry, which he regarded as suspicious.⁶⁶ Lieutenant Hawthorne recalled that the search of the Sioux’s camp resulted in “a pile of trash consisting of a few muzzle-loading muskets, old Springfield carbines and bundles of bows and arrows, probably belonging to the children.”⁶⁷ Having searched the camp, there was only one place where the weapons could be with the Indian warriors.

A personal search would even be more delicate. Forsyth’s patience was wearing thin. The Indians had been given three opportunities to surrender their arms and settle matters peaceably.⁶⁸ Forsyth announced that the individual warriors would be subjected to a search.⁶⁹ Private Andrew Flynn of Company A was asked by a civilian scout if he had said his prayers. The scout told Flynn the medicine man was telling the Indians not to give up their guns because they were going to be killed anyway.⁷⁰ Some Indians claimed the medicine man was deaf and did not understand the soldiers, and was trying to turn his weapon in, and others said another militant, Black Coyote, was a crazy young man without

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Metcalf, 311.

⁶⁶ Arnold, 20. Mann recalled the search to his brother two days later as he was dying of wounds. It is doubtful under the circumstances he would attempt to cover up anything amiss.

⁶⁷ Hawthorne, 186.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 211.

⁷⁰ Andrew T. Flynn. “Looking Back Over Forty-Nine Years,” *Winners of the West*, 16, No. 10, (November 1939): 4.

influence.⁷¹ According to Lieutenant Hugh Scott, who knew many of the Indians involved, "A medicine man had convinced them the soldier's guns could not kill and they acted on this belief."⁷² Lieutenant Mann was told by an interpreter that that Yellow Bird's rhetoric demanded resistance, and that the Ghost Shirts would protect the warriors from the soldiers' bullets.⁷³ Black Coyote was also exhorting the warriors, which resulted in a brief struggle between Black Coyote and two soldiers who tried to take his rifle away. The weapon fired as they struggled.⁷⁴ Yellow Bird gathered a handful of dust and threw it into the air.⁷⁵

At the same time as Yellow Bird's gesture, six young warriors rose and raised their weapons, and the rest of the warriors emulated them.⁷⁶ Captain Varnum later said, "I saw five or six bucks throw off their blankets and bring up rifles. I turned to Major Whitside saying, 'By God they have broken,' and the Indians faced my troops and began firing."⁷⁷ Lieutenant Gresham wrote, "We learned from wounded Indians that it had been resolved in council the night before to attack the troops. The medicine man gave the signal by throwing in the air a handful of sand. . . ."⁷⁸ "There is no doubt who started that day's fight," as S. L. A. Marshall wrote:

Forsyth may have been clumsy and his soldiers could have been

⁷¹ Dee Brown. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York: Holt Rinehart, 1971), 443-444.

⁷² Hugh Scott, *Some Memories of a Soldier* (New York: Century Company, 1928), 335.

⁷³ Arnold, 20. See also Brown, 442.

⁷⁴ Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 212.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Scott, 13.

⁷⁸ Gresham, 106.

rude and provocative, but deliberate Sioux action so timed as to indicate that it had been well plotted, initiated the slaughter. Bury my heart at Wounded Knee is a lovely phrase. It is still a false and misleading sentiment dignifying conspiracy and honoring treachery.⁷⁹

Lieutenant Hawthorne wrote, "The fight was not unexpected except to the troops. We learned that resistance to disarmament was fully determined on during the night; and the warriors took their places before us with arms concealed and for escape in readiness."⁸⁰ Lieutenant Mann with K Company watched the warriors ready themselves for combat: "We were only six or eight feet from the Indians and I ordered my men to fall back."⁸¹ As he saw them draw their weapons, he could not believe his eyes: "I saw distinctly what was coming. I thought, 'The pity of it! What can they be thinking of?'"⁸² According to Captain Varnum of B Company, "There was but one deafening crash as Indians and soldiers fired together."⁸³ Violence enshrouded what had been a fairly routine surrender procedure. Vicious close quarters combat characterized the fighting at this stage. Captain Wallace was killed instantly; Gresham was wounded. One officer would later recall to artist and journalist Frederic Remington that the Sioux worked their Winchesters beautifully.⁸⁴ Big Foot was killed as the bullets flew wildly.⁸⁵ Fire from the rifles of the warriors cut down a number of women and

⁷⁹ Marshall, 255.

⁸⁰ Hawthorne, 186.

⁸¹ Arnold, 20.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ John M. Carroll, ed., *Custer's Chief of Scouts: The Reminiscences of Charles Varnum* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 23.

⁸⁴ Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 213.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

children as the soldiers were between the warriors and the noncombatants.⁸⁶

After firing at the soldiers of B and K companies, the Indians pushed on into their camp.⁸⁷

As the Indians moved the artillery fired on them,⁸⁸ Godfrey with his own D Company and Captain Jackson's C Company was posted to the south of the Sioux encampment. As firing broke out Godfrey remarked to Lieutenant S. R. H. Tompkins, "I'm afraid there has been a mistake. Too bad, too bad."⁸⁹ During the initial melee, the Indians had tried to fight it out with the Seventh Cavalry instead of simply passing through to get to their camp; as a result they suffered heavy casualties.⁹⁰

Godfrey and Jackson moved their troops as well as the Indian scouts. Again, precautions were taken to avoid firing on women and children. Private Jesse Harris of D Company recalled, "Captain Godfrey was telling us not to shoot the women and kids."⁹¹ Godfrey noticed "some Indians escaping up the deep ravine. I sent Lieut. Tompkins with half my men to hold the ravine at all hazards."⁹² Later, as the firing died down, Godfrey took the remainder of his company in pursuit of another group of Indians, but did not make contact.⁹³

⁸⁶ Downey, 268.

⁸⁷ Arnold, 20.

⁸⁸ Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 216.

⁸⁹ Edward S. Godfrey, "Battle of Wounded Knee Creek," *Winners of the West*, 12, No. 2, (January 1935): 2.

⁹⁰ Scott, 14.

⁹¹ Don Rickey Jr. *Forty Miles a Day on Beans and Hay: The Enlisted Soldier Fighting the Indian Wars* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 289.

⁹² Godfrey, 2.

⁹³ Ibid.

Except for scattered skirmishing, the bloody Battle of Wounded Knee was over, but the controversy would not end. Whether it was a genocidal massacre committed by racist soldiers, or a battle fought by heroic soldiers against treacherous Indians, was reflected in the first news reports. Dale Van Every wrote that the Seventh Cavalry were butchers of women and children.⁹⁴ Colin Calloway wrote that Seventh massacred more than 200 men, women and children.⁹⁵ Richard Dillion concedes that the Seventh Cavalry did not deliberately set to massacre Big Foot's Miniconjou; he writes that it had been a real skirmish and that most of the Seventh's casualties were from friendly fire.⁹⁶ Dee Brown writes that the soldiers received twenty-five dead and thirty-nine wounded, and claimed most of the army's casualties were from their own weapons.⁹⁷ The charge that the army had caused most of its own casualties echoed through the years. Robert M. Utley, author of the most definitive account of Wounded Knee, stated that "although it was apparent that on occasion troops had been endangered by the fire of other troops, it could not be shown that friendly fire had caused a single casualty."⁹⁸ Regimental Surgeon John Hoff would later testify as to the possibility of friendly fire being a factor in the Seventh's casualties: "I have not the slightest reason to think so; it was possible, but I have no reason to

⁹⁴ Dale Van Every, *The Day the Sun Died* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), 294.

⁹⁵ Colin G. Calloway, *First Peoples: A Documentary Survey of American Indian History*. (Boston: St. Martin's, 1999), 296.

⁹⁶ Richard H. Dillion. *North American Indian Wars* (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 250.

⁹⁷ Brown, 444. The exact numbers of Indian dead is unknown, but Utley gives the number buried at Wounded Knee as 153, broken down to 84 men, 44 women, and 18 children, and seven dying of wounds later, although undoubtedly several must have died some distance away. Utley, *The Last Days of The Sioux Nation*, 227-228.

⁹⁸ Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 246.

believe it."⁹⁹ There was a much greater chance that the Indians themselves either fired on their own people by mistake, or drew fire on their noncombatants. Lt. James Mann noticed, "After the first fire the Indians broke and ran back among the women and children, and some secreted themselves, in the tents."¹⁰⁰ When the Indians initially fired their weapons, it was probable that some of their weapons fired into their camp.¹⁰¹ There is also the possibility that not all the Seventh Cavalry troopers fired their weapons.

There was an instance when a recruit did kill a wounded Indian, whom he thought was still dangerous, but he had been found to have been motivated by "sudden fear and the instinct of self-defense."¹⁰² Dr. Hoff responded to charges of inhumanity by stating, "I saw none. All the field which was open to active operations came under my observation . . . a considerable number of wounded bucks and squaws brought in had their wounds dressed by company bearers."¹⁰³ The records of the official investigation of Wounded Knee reveal that the Seventh made great efforts at every opportunity to avoid noncombatant casualties.¹⁰⁴

General Nelson Miles was furious when he heard of what happened at Wounded Knee, and subsequently at Drexel Mission the following day, where the Seventh Cavalry was ambushed and briefly besieged by hostile Indians until it

⁹⁹ Scott, 20.

¹⁰⁰ Arnold, 20.

¹⁰¹ Smith, 191.

¹⁰² Godfrey, 2.

¹⁰³ Scott, 20.

¹⁰⁴ Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 246.

was relieved by the Ninth Cavalry.¹⁰⁵ The fighting had disrupted Miles's diplomacy with the remaining hostiles. Miles found fault with Colonel Forsyth's dispositions at both Wounded Knee and Drexel Mission on December 29-30. Miles saw Forsyth as a desk soldier who had criticized Miles's friend George Custer some years before.¹⁰⁶ Forsyth was relieved of command on January 4. Miles withheld a letter of congratulations to the Seventh Cavalry from Army commanding general John M. Schofield.¹⁰⁷ Miles was determined to be clear of any controversy coming from Wounded Knee, which could hurt his presidential ambitions. President Benjamin Harrison was also anxious to avoid trouble with Indian reform groups.¹⁰⁸ Miles appointed a court of inquiry, composed of three officers to investigate charges against the Seventh Cavalry involving charges of casualties from friendly fire and indiscriminate killing of women and children.¹⁰⁹

Miles stacked the deck against Forsyth by his appointment of his own staff officers Captains Jacob Kent and Frank Baldwin (a Miles protégé) to the court of inquiry. Colonel Eugene Carr, the ranking officer, was unable to take part in the proceedings as he was needed with his regiment.¹¹⁰ Kent and Baldwin were both experienced officers. Baldwin had been awarded the Medal of Honor for services on the southern plains in the 1870s. They made a thorough investigation, and in the end they cleared Forsyth and his regiment of any fault

¹⁰⁵ Wooster, 186.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 188.

¹⁰⁷ Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 244.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 245.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Wooster, 188.

“Unavoidable and unfortunate circumstances” had caused the high number of noncombatant dead.¹¹¹ Not satisfied with the findings of the court, Miles, in a classic display of command interference, had Baldwin and Kent reconvene the court to arrive at the conclusions Miles intended. Baldwin and Kent were both officers of a high degree of professionalism and integrity. They had come to sympathize with Forsyth and the Seventh; although they did find fault with Forsyth’s deployment of the regiment at both Wounded Knee and Drexel Mission, this was criticism of a purely tactical nature.

Baldwin and Kent submitted their final report on January 18, 1891, more critical of Forsyth and his disposition prior to the battle, and for allowing his troops to get too close to the Indians before the outbreak of fighting.¹¹² The Secretary of War, Redfield Proctor, accepted the court’s conclusions and restored Forsyth to command of the Seventh Cavalry; he would eventually retire as a major general. To further demonstrate a vindication of Forsyth, the War Department approved eighteen Medals of Honor to soldiers who had been at Wounded Knee.¹¹³ The Ghost Dance conflict and the Indian wars came to an end with the surrender of Kicking Bear on January 15.¹¹⁴

Final responsibility for the events at Wounded Knee can be placed on the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and on a misguided Indian policy which provoked the Ghost Dance religion. The loss of control by the political appointee Daniel Royer

¹¹¹ Ibid., 189.

¹¹² Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 247.

¹¹³ Ibid., 249.

¹¹⁴ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 409.

at Pine Ridge was certainly a factor in the final tragedy. The Indians must take their share of the blame, as Big Foot's band was clearly divided between those who wanted peace and war. To the frustration of the U.S. government, Big Foot's authority, like those of other chiefs, was severely limited. Big Foot's band was simultaneously warlike and peaceful, and also ambiguous. This had been the way it had always been, as Plains Indian chiefs had very limited authority. The failure to surrender their weapons at the outset only provoked the army's suspicions. Red Cloud's warning not to turn over the band's weapons became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Robert Utley's final verdict on Wounded Knee seems appropriate: "The vast majority of both Indians and soldiers were--within their differing cultural frameworks--decent, ordinary people. They suddenly found themselves thrust into battle, and they reacted with behavioral extremes that battle from time immemorial has induced in ordinary people."¹¹⁵

During the fight at Wounded Knee, panic had broken out at the Pine Ridge agency as the sound of gunfire was heard. Some Brules rode to Wounded Knee ready to participate, but encountered the Seventh Cavalry troops led by Captains Jackson and Godfrey just west of the Wounded Knee battlefield.¹¹⁶ The Indians, who had considered giving up altogether, now found their motivation to fight. The Pine Ridge agency was attacked by hostile Indians and was defended by the Indian police.¹¹⁷ Kicking Bear withdrew his warriors from the agency, and the

¹¹⁵ Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 230.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 231.

¹¹⁷ Downey, 270.

following led an attack on the Drexel Catholic mission; this drew out Forsyth and the Seventh Cavalry.¹¹⁸ Kicking Bear's warriors set fire to outlying cabins, and as the cavalry approached, the Sioux ambushed the advancing Seventh.¹¹⁹ An estimated number of three or four hundred warriors opposed the Seventh.¹²⁰ Kicking Bear's Sioux had the high ground,¹²¹ while Forsyth held the low ground. Forsyth had failed to send out flankers to secure the high ground on both sides of the valley. This error would cost him dearly.¹²² A covering force under Captain Ilsley had been cut off from Forsyth's main body. As the battle developed, the Seventh Cavalry found itself taking small arms fire from three directions.¹²³ Private Andrew Flynn remembered, "Shots were fired at us from all directions as we left our horses in a sheltered place up the side of the mountain."¹²⁴

The Hotchkiss mountain rifles were ineffective against the Sioux, while Forsyth attempted to send out a skirmish line against the Indians holding the high ground. According to a veteran of the fight, ammunition began to run low.¹²⁵ The Seventh was fortunate that the Sioux were firing at long range and were poor shots.¹²⁶ Private Flynn recalled, "Major Whitside called for sharpshooters to get their guns loaded. Then someone put his hat on his gun so that they could see

¹¹⁸ Lalire, 32.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ernest A. Garlington, "The Seventh Regiment of Cavalry," *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States*, 16 (1895): 664.

¹²¹ Lalire, 32.

¹²² Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 239.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Flynn, 5.

¹²⁵ Slaughter, 4.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

where the shots were coming from. As soon as they found out, they fired two volleys and there were no more shots from the Indians."¹²⁷ Forsyth sent Lt. Preston of the Ninth Cavalry, who was leading a detachment of Indian scouts assigned to the Seventh Cavalry, to locate Major Guy Henry and his battalion of the Ninth Cavalry, and bring it to assist the Seventh Cavalry. Forsyth's regiment was desperate; he had two companies cut off from the regiment.

Preston found Henry and his battalion of Buffalo Soldiers one mile from Drexel Mission.¹²⁸ The Ninth Cavalry battalion had already completed a very rough march and had already fought an engagement against the Indians. Henry's battalion had ridden over 100 miles and would fight two pitched battles against the Sioux.¹²⁹ Upon his arrival, Henry found that Forsyth had suffered casualties of one dead and five wounded. Henry deployed half his battalion as mounted skirmishers on the high ground to the east, and the other half as dismounted skirmishers on the high ground to the west. This deployment allowed Ilsley's two companies to rejoin the rest of the regiment.¹³⁰ Kicking Bear and the Sioux began to withdraw toward the end of the day; as the combined forces of the Seventh and the Ninth swept through the valley, the Cavalry returned to the Pine Ridge agency after dark.¹³¹

On January 15, 1891, all resistance in the Ghost Dance War ended as a

¹²⁷ Flynn, 5.

¹²⁸ Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 239.

¹²⁹ Downey, 270.

¹³⁰ Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, 240.

¹³¹ Ibid.

result of the tactful diplomacy of General Miles.¹³² The remaining hostiles under Kicking Bear were disarmed, and returned to their reservations without incident.¹³³ Except for the controversy over Wounded Knee, the Ghost Dance campaign was over. The Drexel Mission fight faded into the background, overshadowed by Wounded Knee. Colonel Forsyth's conduct at Drexel Mission was overlooked. His actions there were far more questionable than at Wounded Knee. According to Robert M. Utley, "Ignoring an elemental maxim of military tactics, he marched into a cul-de-sac manned by no more than fifty Indians. Then after battling all day he had to be rescued by an exhausted command half his strength."¹³⁴ At Drexel Mission the Seventh Cavalry fought with its customary valor even if its leadership was questionable.

Unfortunately, the heroics of the Seventh at Drexel Mission had been overshadowed by the events at Wounded Knee the day before. In the words of historians Richard E. Jensen, R. Eli Paul and John E. Carter, "In short order, Wounded Knee entered the realm of myth. It came to symbolize the entire wretched history of failed Indian-White relations."¹³⁵ Wounded Knee, like Little Bighorn, thus became part of the mythology of American Indian history and the settlement of the West. Over a century later, the events of December 29-30, 1890, are still shrouded in controversy, often evoking high emotions.

¹³² Wooster, 187.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Utley, 240.

¹³⁵ Richard E. Jensen, R. Eli Paul and John E. Carter. *Eyewitness at Wounded Knee* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1991), 25.

For the American Indian, the Ghost Dance was a major watershed. Resistance to the government's edicts had failed, and now the American Indian had to give in for better or worse. Wounded Knee was the final verdict of the Indian Wars. "Within the month," wrote military historian John Keegan, "Native American resistance to white power in the continent was over forever."¹³⁶ The Census of 1890 revealed that there was no longer a frontier line of settlements as there had been from the beginning of the republic.¹³⁷ At the time few realized that the Ghost Dance War would be the last major conflict. "Contemporary army officers," wrote Perry D. Jamieson, "did not perceive Wounded Knee to be an Appomattox or Guadeloupe Hidalgo marking a final, decisive end to a well defined war. They understood the Indian wars as a long-running open-ended conflict, without a clearly marked beginning or end."¹³⁸

The tragic fight at Wounded Knee marked the end of the frontier mission of the U.S. Army, although few realized it at the time. Just as Little Bighorn had highlighted the vanishing frontier, so did Wounded Knee.

¹³⁶ John Keegan, *Warpaths: Travels of a Military Historian in North America* (London: Houghton and Stoddert, 1995), 332.

¹³⁷ Utley, *Frontier Regulars*, 410.

¹³⁸ Perry D. Jamieson, *Crossing the Deadly Ground: United States Army Tactics, 1865-1899* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 121.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

After the Wounded Knee campaign the Seventh Cavalry returned to Fort Riley, Kansas. In June 1891, the Seventh Cavalry was redeployed to Arizona, where it spent the balance of the decade of the 1890s. In 1896, the Seventh Cavalry fought in one of the last skirmishes against the American Indian. Under the command of First Lieutenant Sedgwick Rice, a detachment of the Seventh attacked an encampment of renegade Apaches on May 17 in Guadeloupe Canyon just south of the U.S.-Mexico border. The brief fight resulted in one Apache fatality. After the Guadeloupe Canyon fight, there was a brief mobilization along the border and further patrols to locate Apache renegades. It was one of a series of incidents in the Southwest which provided a postscript to the Apache Wars and the conclusion of the Seventh Cavalry's Indian Wars service.

In 1898, during the Spanish-American War, the Seventh Cavalry remained in Arizona to keep watch over potentially hostile Apaches. Hugh Scott, an officer of the Seventh Cavalry, recalled, "The Seventh Cavalry was designated to remain in Arizona on account of Apaches. The Eighth Cavalry was likewise designated to remain in Dakota on account of the Sioux." However, the Apache threat was overstated. Scott observed, "The Apaches were much incensed at having their loyalty doubted and volunteered their young men to fight in Cuba."

Thus the Seventh Cavalry missed the Cuban campaign. When the war ended, the Seventh was sent to occupation duty in Cuba, thus ending its long Western service.

Over the following years, the Seventh Cavalry served in the Philippines, as well as in General John J. Pershing's punitive expedition into Mexico in 1916, futilely chasing Pancho Villa during the last horse cavalry campaign of the U.S. Army. During World War I, the horse cavalry was made obsolete by the advent of the machine gun, barbed wire, the tank, and the airplane. The horse cavalry was destined for extinction in the twentieth-century age of industrial warfare. The Seventh patrolled America's southern border during World War I, as Mexico was still unstable.

Yet the Seventh Cavalry remains best known in American military history for the Little Bighorn and the Indian Wars. In the years after the Little Bighorn battle, the Seventh Cavalry seemed to be associated with various "Last Stands" of the American Indian. In 1877, the Seventh Cavalry was instrumental in the pursuit of the Nez Perce. Except for Little Bighorn, the Seventh Cavalry fought its bloodiest battle at Bear Paw Mountain against the Nez Perce, losing 53 men out of 115 engaged. The Seventh aided in the interception of Dull Knife's Cheyenne in 1878, preventing another war on the Northern Plains. In 1881, the Seventh was present at the final surrender of Sitting Bull. In 1890, the year of the closing of the frontier, the Seventh Cavalry was at Wounded Knee and Drexel Mission, the last stand of Plains Indians. Wounded Knee would be to the

American Indian an event of mythic proportions, just as Little Bighorn was to the white man.

The Seventh Cavalry was created after the Civil War to serve on the Western frontier. Its association with Custer assured it of dubious immortality, but few have drawn attention to its recovery and subsequent service. During the late 1800s, the Seventh was a part of the closing of the American West, symbolized by its part at Little Bighorn and Wounded Knee. The Seventh Cavalry returned to the field only months after Little Bighorn as a reconstituted unit. Its participation in the Nez Perce and Wounded Knee campaigns were bloody sequels to the drama of the Little Bighorn. From the mid-1870s to the 1890s, the Seventh participated in every major Indian campaign except for those against the Apaches. The Seventh Cavalry found itself at the center of controversy at both Little Bighorn and Wounded Knee. By presiding over the winning of the West, especially through setbacks such as Little Bighorn, the Seventh Cavalry made itself seem as anachronistic as the Indians it fought against. The Seventh fought its wars at a time when horse cavalry was rapidly becoming obsolete. The Indian Wars are overlooked by military historians, while Western historians often fail to understand the military dimension of the settlement of the West. This creates a gap in understanding the Western military frontier. This thesis has attempted to fill this gap.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY

The study of the Indian Wars has lagged in recent decades. Much work needs to be done. Unlike the American Revolution and the Civil War, there is no central collection of primary source documents. Civil War studies abound in primary sources, such as memoirs, letters and diaries and the grand primary source: *The Official Records of the War of Rebellion*. There are sources such as collected papers and articles, the five-volume *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* and the Southern Historical Society. For the Indian Wars there are fewer sources. Except for the Battle of Little Bighorn, little seems to have been done. Specialist literature, such as Larry Sklenar's *To Hell With Honor* and Robert Nightengale's *Little Bighorn* are well-written and researched, but they are exceptions which are not examined by most serious scholars. Indian Wars studies suffer from neglect, and in the course of researching and writing this project, I have found that easily available sources are too few and scattered geographically.

For general works on the Indian Wars, Robert M. Utley's *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* remains the standard work on the postbellum Indian Wars. Utley's work is the key to understanding the frontier army, not only from an operational standpoint, but also in terms of doctrine, weapons, and administration. Since its publication in 1973, Utley's *Frontier Regulars* has dominated the historiography of the Indian Wars. Fairfax Downey's *The Indian Fighting Army* is not as comprehensive as Utley,

but it is well-written and focuses on the operational aspects of the Indian Wars. Less satisfactory is S. L. A. Marshall's *The Crimsoned Prairie*, marred with inaccuracies, as is Ralph K. Andrist's *The Long Death: The Last Days of the Plains Indians*. An unexpected source is James Mooney's *The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890*, which explained the origins of the Ghost Dance religion in full detail. Of great help was *Winners of the West*, a newsletter put out by the Order of the Indian Wars, an Indian Wars veterans organization. Unfortunately, this material has yet to be organized for convenience of scholars. Mark Brown, David Lavender, Bruce Hampton, Merrill Beal, and Harvey Chalmers have written thorough histories of the Nez Perce conflict, but they are all to a considerable degree focused on the Nez Perce at the expense of their opponents. Alvin Josephy's authoritative history of the Nez Perce was not utilized because my focus was not on the Nez Perce, but on the Seventh Cavalry. Had my intention been to write a fuller account of the Nez Perce conflict, Josephy's book would have been essential. Jerome Greene's latest history of the Nez Perce War, *Nez Perce Summer 1877*, fills in gaps left by previous historians of that sad conflict, and I could not have written this paper without it.

First-hand accounts of the Seventh Cavalry in the period from 1876 to 1891 are rare. Both Hugh Scott's *Some Memories of a Soldier* and Ami F. Mulford's *Fighting Indians in The Seventh Cavalry* provide vivid descriptions of the post-Custer Seventh Cavalry. The transcripts of the Wounded Knee inquiry

would have been helpful, but an abstract has never been published, as W. A. Graham did with the Reno Court of Inquiry. Benteen's letters are reproduced in Graham's *The Custer Myth*. Ernest Garlington wrote an authoritative history of the Seventh Cavalry in the *Journal of the Military Service Institute* from the 1860s to the 1890s; it was extremely useful as Garlington had been an officer of the Seventh during much of that time. Accounts of the Little Bighorn written by Charles Varnum and Edward Godfrey, as well as William O. Taylor, were of great help in reconstructing the Seventh's great disaster and recovery.

One of the problems in writing a paper on the subject of the Indian Wars is the cultural baggage of contemporary times. As Americans since the 1970s re-examined their history, they have revised old ideas concerning the American frontier experience. Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis was revised and revised again, although in my opinion it remains one of the most powerful works in American historiography. A major problem is time and distance in understanding the American frontier. The use of the social science methods of sociology, psychology, ecology, anthropology, and other modern tools often blots out an understanding of the American West and makes it seem sterile and bloodless. By burying the American frontier in clinical social science terms, modern historians lose contact with their subject. Very often popular historians seem to have a clearer understanding of the frontier in American history.

The transformation of the U.S. Army from a frontier force into a major world power in the twentieth century is often not properly understood. Among the

military works of the frontier period, I found Weigley's *History of the United States Army* to be almost as useful as Utley's *Frontier Regulars*. Perry Jamieson's *Crossing the Deadly Ground* filled in gaps not covered by either Utley or Weigley in terms of weapons and the evolution of doctrine. What is clearly needed is more work on the U.S. Army from the 1890s to the First World War. As yet, there are few biographies of the lesser personalities of the Seventh Cavalry: Benteen, Godfrey, Varnum, Edgerly, and others.

Although Sandy Barnard's biography of First Sergeant John Ryan covers new perspectives, what is needed on Custer is a study similar to Allen Barra's *Inventing Wyatt Earp: His Life and Many Legends*. Barra concentrated on the myths surrounding Wyatt Earp and Earp's place in the American imagination. Although Robert M. Utley, Paul Andrew Hutton, and Brian Dippie have explored the Custer legend, it needs to be updated every decade or so to take account of new material and interpretations.

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