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More Than Numbers: Native American Actions at the Battle of the Little Bighorn

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Abstract

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: More Than Numbers: Native American Actions at the Battle of the Little Bighorn

Author: Major B.C. Vickers, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: Factors, other than sheer numerical superiority, led to the Indian victory over the 7th Cavalry at the Little Bighorn on 25 June 1876.

Discussion: There can be no argument that the numerical advantage the Indians held during the battle of the Little Bighorn was a decisive factor in their overwhelming victory. However, numbers alone did not solely guarantee that the Indians would be able to annihilate five companies of the 7th Cavalry, kill over one third of the soldiers in another three companies, and seriously threaten the destruction of the entire regiment. The mere fact that the Indians, who were supposedly wild savages, were able to kill over 260 well-armed soldiers while only losing between an estimated 30-40 of their own, with at least eight of these being non-combatants, indicates that the Indians did not defeat the 7th Cavalry by simply throwing bodies at them. Rather, the Indians earned their victory with good leadership and savvy tactical actions.

In Sitting Bull, the Indians found the leader that possessed the qualities to amass the largest High-Plain's Indian gathering in history. He also motivated them with the vision of a great victory over the soldiers. Moreover, the Indians approached that purpose with extraordinary morale and esprit derived from their belief in Sitting Bull, his vision's mandate that the Great Spirit foretold a great victory, their recent victory over General George C. Crook's column at the Rosebud, and the sheer power of the amassed tribes. At the tactical level, the Indians were led by warriors who led from the front, made superb decisions during the battle, and were instrumental in rallying the warriors whenever a situation arose that might have made them lose the combat concentrations their numbers enabled them to achieve.

In the actual fighting, the Indians consistently used the terrain in expert fashion and combined fires and maneuver that overwhelmed the troopers' ability to react to each new and developing threat. The Indians combined bases of fire (with many Indians using weapons far superior to that of the cavalry), infiltrated, and penetrated to isolate units on the battlefield and then pressed their attacks to a total tactical victory - literally annihilating Custer's detachment. Although the cavalry did achieve complete surprise in their attack on the village, the Indians were able to quickly meet each new threat posed by the soldiers during the course of the battle and then react faster than the troopers during every subsequent event.

In the final analysis, it is reasonable to assume the Indians' numerical superiority made a 7th Cavalry victory impossible; they were not in a position to drive the Indians from their village and burn it, as they had at the Washita River. However, considering the soldiers and firepower that Custer had at his disposal, the complete annihilation of his force cannot be accepted as a foregone conclusion. If the Indians had been a disorganized mass of savages, Custer possessed the combat power to fight his way out or establish a successful perimeter defense as Captain Benteen and Major Reno did.

The reason he was not able to accomplish either course of action owes to the fact that the 7th Cavalry was tactically outperformed during the Battle of the Little Bighorn; the unrelenting pressure of the Indian attacks caused Custer's five companies to lose the discipline, organization, and control that might have saved them. The popular American perception that Custer was defeated only because of the sheer number of warriors engaged in the fighting completely ignores the superb leadership and tactical prowess that ensured an Indian victory and, therefore, cannot be accepted as inevitably leading to the massacre of Custer and his entire command. Such an erroneous view detracts from the true nature of the Indian victory and discounts the leadership, martial prowess, and valor the Sioux and Cheyenne warriors displayed in their annihilation of Custer and his five companies – a victory that has become an integral and important part of American history in general and the U.S. military tradition in particular.

Conclusion: The Sioux and Cheyenne warriors were able to outperform the 7th Cavalry in all war-fighting functions during the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

“CUSTER AND THE LITTLE BIGHORN – THE POPULAR IMAGE”

For most Americans, the Battle of the Little Bighorn is epitomized during the final minutes of the film “They Died With Their Boots On.”¹ In this account, the noble and dashing Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer, played by Errol Flynn, and the U.S. 7th Cavalry are pitted against an enormous band of savage and bloodthirsty Indians. Custer realizes that his command is hopelessly outnumbered and an attack on the Indians will certainly lead to its annihilation, but he also knows that if he fails to attack the army column led by General Alfred Terry will be doomed to destruction. In the grand tradition of military sacrifice for the greater good, Custer purposely leads his loyal men into an ambush prepared by thousands of Sioux braves. Within moments, the cavalymen are completely encircled by hordes of horse-mounted Indians, who rain scores of arrows and spears on the beleaguered troopers. The brave soldiers kill many Indians as they ride “carousel like” around the troopers, but the sheer number of Sioux warriors dwindle the number of cavalymen standing until only Custer and several loyal men remain valiantly fighting. Finally, the mounted Indians charge in an overwhelming attack and slay the last man standing, George Armstrong Custer.

This view of Custer’s defeat has only been rivaled by later theories that Custer was either mad or sufficiently egomaniacal enough to place his unit in a position where they could be overwhelmed by a mass of savages. Whichever view of the reasons for Custer’s defeat is accepted, both focus on sacrifices or mistakes made by the 7th Cavalry and discount actions taken by the Indians to secure a great victory. In short, it is

¹ *They Died With Their Boots On*, (Warner Brothers, 1942), starring Errol Flynn and Olivia de Haviland, directed by Raul Walsh.

generally believed that the 7th Cavalry was defeated at the Little Bighorn solely due to the numerical superiority of their foe.

The purpose of this paper is to determine what factors, other than sheer numerical superiority, led to the Indian victory at the Little Bighorn on 25 June 1876. In order to accomplish this analysis, a brief historical review of Indian military culture and pertinent historical events prior to the Battle of the Little Bighorn will be presented. Then, Indian actions will be assessed within the context of the six Battlefield Operating Systems (BOS) or war-fighting functions: command and control, maneuver and movement (tactics), fires, intelligence, logistics, and force protection, with conclusions drawn on the extent those actions effected the outcome of the battle.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

THE PLAINS INDIANS

The Plains Indian culture was nomadic, with tribal groups relying on buffalo hunting for survival. Tribes established territories within which they would hunt buffalo and gather foods indigenous to the region, and they contested encroachment in their territory by other tribes with organized violence. This way of life created a society that held warriors who were brave on the hunt and in combat against rival tribes in great esteem. Elders were also revered for their wisdom, and Indians were extremely protective of the elderly, women, and children. As with any nomadic culture, tribal bands remained relatively small to enable them to sustain themselves on the wandering herds of buffalo, with bands of the same tribe infrequently joining together for certain ceremonies

or when meeting within the territory. No one, not even the Indian scouts, had ever seen a Sioux/Cheyenne encampment of more than 600-800 warriors.²

The Sioux were the most numerous and powerful tribe on the northern plains, and they thought nothing of removing other Indians from their traditional territories by force. The Sioux did not form alliances with other tribes, with the exception of the Cheyenne and Arapahos, with whom they intermarried. Black Hawk, a Lakota warrior, explained it: “These lands once belonged to the Kiowas and the Crows, but we whipped those nations out of them, and in this we did what the white men do when they want the lands of Indians.”³

Because horses were essential to prosecuting the buffalo hunt, they became the primary measure of a warriors’ wealth. Hence, most military clashes between bands of different tribes usually resulted from war parties sent to steal horses from another tribe. In these “great” battles, there were generally very few casualties. During a battle, it was a more respected feat to count *coup*, tapping another warriors’ body with a stick or other implement, or otherwise humiliate an opponent, than to kill him. Therefore, although Indians could be extremely brutal in their combat actions when they did kill their foes, the way of war on the plains involved small unit actions with few fatal casualties. Male children were often allowed to become warriors as early as twelve to thirteen years of age, and young men could generally be expected to attempt dangerous, if not foolhardy, acts to prove their worth and gain status as a warrior. The pre-reservation High-Plains Indians, being members of a warrior society, lived according to rules designed expressly to perpetuate qualities that made for better warriors. Among these were highly

² Colonel Richard M. Bereit, “Light, Lean, and Lethal – Logistics Lessons from the Little Bighorn,” *Air Force Journal of Logistics* 24, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 36.

aggressive behavior, strong independence of personal actions, insensitivity to those outside the defined band or tribe, and concepts of property limited only to those within the tribal society itself.⁴

CONFLICT OVERVIEW

The conflict between whites and Indians of the Northern Great Plains was essentially initiated with the westward expansion to settle California and Oregon during the 1840s. As whites pushed into this Indian territory, attacks on wagon trains and homesteads became more frequent, precipitating the introduction of the United States Army to protect Americans moving west. The Homestead Act of 1862, the construction of the Union and Northern Pacific Railroads, and the opening of the Bozeman Trail, which opened a direct route to Montana goldfields through the heart of Indian lands, exacerbated tensions and greatly increased violent engagements between Indians, and American civilians and the U.S. Army.

The Indian War on the northern plains between the U.S. Army and Plains Indians began in earnest when the army attempted to establish a series of forts to protect the Bozeman Trail, railroad right of ways, and increasing number of settlers moving onto and through the Great Plains. From 1866 through 1868, Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho Indians led by Red Cloud, Crazy Horse, Dull Knife, and others often defeated army units in the area.⁵ The most famous Indian victory occurred in 1866 when Crazy Horse lured

³ James Welch with Paul Stekler, *Killing Custer* (New York, NY: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1995), 99.

⁴ Richard G. Hardorff, *Hokahey! A Good Day to Die! The Indian Casualties of the Custer Fight* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 12.

⁵ Herman J. Viola, *It Is a Good Day to Die: Indian eyewitnesses tell the story of the Battle of the Little Bighorn* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers Inc., 1998), 90.

Captain William Fetterman and eighty soldiers out of Fort Phil Kearney, Wyoming and massacred the entire detachment in an ambush.⁶

The Indian successes along the Bozeman Trail led to the United States government initiating peace talks that resulted in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. This treaty ended the Red Cloud War and was a victory for the Sioux. The terms included abandonment of the forts and provided for the creation of the Great Sioux Reservation; the latter encompassed that part of the present state of South Dakota west of the Missouri River and a vast tract of land vaguely limited to “that country north of the North Platte River and east of the summits of the Big Horn Mountains.”⁷ The treaty was to remain in effect for “as long as the grass grows and buffalo roam.” The Great Sioux Reservation contained enough area to support the Indians’ traditional way of life and, more importantly, the Black Hills; the Lakota peoples’ most sacred area because they believed it to be the birthplace of the tribe.

However, the treaty of 1868 was doomed to failure because of continued American westward expansion. As the American population grew, the west afforded farm and grazing lands necessary to sustain the growing nation. More importantly, the American economy fell into a deep depression in 1873. The alluring west was filled with the resources that could fuel the rejuvenation of the economy; gold was particularly critical to the U.S., which, like all western countries, based its monetary policy on the gold standard. Finally, railroads were pressing forward to link the country’s east and west coasts, and these railroad lines encroached into the Indian territories. They brought

⁶ For a detailed account of the Fetterman Massacre, see Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars, The United States Army and the Indian 1866-1899* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), 104-107.

⁷ Robert M. Utley, *Custer and the Great Controversy* (Pasadena, CA: Westernlore Press, 1980), 18.

the hunters who decimated the great buffalo herds to acquire skins and sell the meat to the railroad to feed its workers. Also of great significance, the railroads ensured that a continuous flow of white men would continue to move onto the Great Plains, and their demand for farms, ranches, and towns continued to increase the tension and conflict with the indigenous people.

Inevitable conflicts between Indians and Americans began to occur on reservation lands, and the United States reacted to violent clashes by reintroducing large U.S. Army formations into the territory. The American incursion that most inflamed the Indians was the military and scientific expedition led by George Armstrong Custer into the Black Hills in the summer of 1874. According to Private Charles Windolph, it was a major excursion that included ten companies of the 7th Cavalry, two companies of infantrymen, a three-inch artillery piece, two Gatling guns, a detachment of Indian scouts, numerous white guides, interpreters, civilian teamsters, packers and herders, and a sixteen-piece all-German band which every morning played Custer's favorite tunes.⁸ This large expedition also found gold, ensuring white miners would swarm the Indians' most sacred place and guaranteeing imminent conflict.

The United States attempted to buy the Black Hills from the Indians in 1875, but the Sioux refused to sell. On 6 December 1875, President Grant then issued an order that all free-roaming Indians must report to reservation agencies before 31 January 1876 or be considered hostile.⁹ Even though chiefs such as Sitting Bull, Gall, and Crazy Horse had no intention of leaving the plains, delays in communication and severe winter weather would have precluded their meeting the deadline had they been inclined to comply with

⁸ Welch, 81.

the order. Regardless, the stage was set for the engagement that would result in a great Indian victory at the Little Bighorn.

Inherent in the historical record of the conflict are the strategic goals of each side. The Indians entered it to maintain a way of life that defined their culture and belief system. The United States became a combatant because the Indians were an impediment to the economic growth and unification of the nation, and the belief that manifest destiny required the subjugation of savages to achieve the rightful potential of the country and its people. Therefore, this clash of cultures created a conflict that dictated the end of one of the two ways of life; the ensuing escalating intensity of combat reflected these high-stakes.

Before analyzing the Little Bighorn campaign and the Indian actions at the battle, a brief synopsis of Indian and U.S. Army combat is warranted. In campaigns to attack warriors on the plains, the cavalry were completely ineffective because they failed to draw the Indians into engagements that allowed the soldiers to employ the European tactics and advantages in firepower that gave them their greatest combat advantages. Stated another way, the army was generally unable to draw warriors into fixed engagements that allowed them to utilize the organization, drill-oriented discipline, and “total war” ruthlessness that characterized the United States Army at the end of the American Civil War. Instead, the Indians fought using their traditional tactics, primarily employing raids or ambushes, and then withdrawing before they could become decisively engaged.

⁹ For more information regarding this change in U.S. policy, refer to: Robert M. Utley, *The Indian Frontier of the American West 1846-1890* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 180.

Indicative of the army's inability to deal with these guerrilla tactics is the 2d Cavalry's 1867-1868 report to the Secretary of War detailing five thousand miles worth of patrols looking for hostile Indians. In a year's time, they recorded wounding one Indian, burying three murdered settlers, and recovering a single stolen horse. During the same time period, 809 soldiers deserted and nearly as many were court-martialed.¹⁰

Because units were so unsuccessful in combating warriors on the plains, volunteer units and the U.S. Army gravitated to winter campaigns designed to attack vulnerable Indian villages. Although these attacks meant the preponderance of casualties would be the elderly, women, and children, the army was finally able to decisively engage the Indians with often devastating results. Furthermore, after surviving Indians had fled the attacked villages, the troops would burn all the Indians' shelters and stores, leaving the survivors to die of exposure, disease, and starvation during the brutal plain's winter, or surrender and be sent to a reservation. A precursor to this change in army tactics was the 2d Volunteer Colorado Cavalry's controversial attack on Black Kettle's Cheyenne encampment at Sand Creek, Colorado in 1864.¹¹ Thereafter, such attacks were successfully, if brutally, prosecuted at the Washita River, Montana by Custer and the 7th Cavalry in 1868, and on the Powder River, Montana by General Crook's column on 17 March 1876, part of the Little Bighorn Campaign. For the Indians, these tactics meant that when they fought the soldiers they would literally be fighting for the lives of their families and possessions. Therefore, the Indians' strength resided in their superior ability as horsemen and warriors, and their critical vulnerability was the logistic shortfall of a

¹⁰ Welch, 292.

¹¹ An excellent account of the Sand Creek massacre can be found in: Utley, *The Indian Frontier of the American West 1846-1890*, 86-93.

nomadic and hunting society that tied them to fixed villages so they could survive the hardships of the northern plain's winter.

LITTLE BIGHORN CAMPAIGN

General Phil Sheridan originally planned to campaign during the winter of 1875-1876, but its severity and attendant logistical problems caused him to postpone operations until the spring of 1876. At his Chicago headquarters, he mapped out the grand strategy of the campaign. A three-pronged attack would converge on the Indians where he thought they were massed near the mouth of the Little Bighorn River. General Alfred Terry would strike west from Fort Abraham Lincoln, Dakota Territory. General George Crook would push north from Fort Fetterman, Wyoming. General John Gibbon would move southeast from Fort Ellis, Montana. All resistance on the part of the Indians would be crushed, and the combined military forces would escort the red men back to their reservations.¹²

General Sheridan must have had information indicating that the Indians were forming into larger groups than normal, but he would also have been confident that no bands would be larger than any one of his individual columns could handle. As previously discussed, tribal and band differences precluded the Indians from massing, and band size was also limited because of the nature of nomadic buffalo hunting. In short, the northern plains was not an environment conducive to supporting large concentrations of people living off the land. Furthermore, the Indians had also not demonstrated the degree of cooperation between bands that would be necessary to sustain

¹² David H. Miller, *Custer's Fall: The Indian's Side of the Story* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1957), 39-40.

such a gathering in the face of those environmental challenges. The final proof that Sheridan underestimated the size of the Indian force the campaign would face is apparent in his statement to Crook and Terry prior to its commencement, assuring them of “the impossibility of any large numbers of Indians keeping together as a hostile body for even a week.”¹³

The three columns under Terry, Crook, and Gibbons deployed during March and May 1876. Crook successfully attacked a Cheyenne village on the Powder River, Montana, on 17 March, but this began the process of Indian bands consolidating for mutual protection. On 17 June, General Crook’s column was attacked at Rosebud Creek by a large group of Indians led by Crazy Horse. Exhausted from heavy fighting, Crook’s force retired from the field, while Gibbons and Terry advanced without the knowledge that he would no longer be a participant in the campaign. This removed a force of over 1000 men that would have been in a superb position to link-up with or support Custer’s attack on the Indian village at the Little Bighorn.

7TH CAVALRY ACTIONS AT THE LITTLE BIGHORN

On 25 July 1876, Custer led the 7th Cavalry, which had split from Terry’s main column, in an attack on the Indian village on the Little Bighorn River. This resulted in the total annihilation of five companies under Custer’s personal command and the desperate fight for survival of the six companies (two battalions) and pack train under the command of Major Marcus Reno and Captain Frederick Benteen. Although the primary purpose of this paper is on Indian actions and not to delve into what Custer and the 7th Cavalry did or did not do, a brief overview of the regiment’s actions on 25 July is warranted.

¹³ Robert Wooster, *The Military and United States Indian Policy 1865-1903* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 165.

During the early afternoon of 25 July, Custer's column approached a large Indian village on the west bank of the Little Bighorn River. Near the divide between the Rosebud and Little Bighorn watershed, Custer, fearing the Indians would escape and disperse, formed the 7th Cavalry into 3 battalions for the advance on the village. He sent Captain Benteen with three companies of 125 men to scout a line of ridges that blocked his view of the Bighorn Valley to ensure the Indians did not escape to the southeast, while he and Reno proceeded up Reno Creek, with Custer on the right bank and Reno on the left. The pack train was left to follow behind Custer's route.¹⁴

In his assault on the village, Custer sent Major Reno and three companies of 140 men to attack its south-end, while he proceeded with five companies along the high ridges to the east of the Little Bighorn. At approximately 3 P.M., Major Reno's detachment attacked the village, but this advance was stopped several hundred yards short of the village itself by stiff Indian resistance. Within the hour, the Indians routed Major Reno's unit, and his three cavalry companies retreated to high ground east of the river and established hasty perimeter defensive positions on the crest of a ridge. At approximately 4:30 P.M., Captain Benteen, who had linked-up with the pack train, reached Major Reno's position and reinforced the defensive perimeter with his three companies. The six companies did follow Lieutenant Thomas Weir to the high ground west of their original position, Weir Point, in an attempt to see what was happening to Custer, but warriors attacking from the north soon forced the soldiers back to their

¹⁴ Robert M. Utley, *Little Bighorn Battlefield, A History and Guide to the Little Bighorn* (Washington, DC: Division of Publications, National Park Service, 1988), 51-53.

original defensive perimeter.¹⁵ The Indians then besieged these six companies and their pack train until the Sioux retired on 26 July.

In Custer's advance, two companies were sent down Medicine Tail Coulee to attack the center of the Indian village while he proceeded along the ridgeline east of the river with the other three companies, apparently to assault the north-end of the village and close the Indians' avenue of retreat. Warriors repulsed the two companies sent to attack the village's center prior to their crossing the river. These cavalymen then fought a withdrawal in an attempt to reunite with the three companies under Custer now engaged on the ridgeline. Between 4:00 and 6:30 P.M., Custer's five companies were annihilated by concerted Indian attacks, most notably on Calhoun Ridge, Last Stand Hill, and the final pursuit into Deep Ravine.

These facts are all part of the historical record. However, the reason for the catastrophic defeat has most often been completely attributed to the sheer number of warriors involved in the battle. Therefore, Indian actions during the Battle of the Little Bighorn, as well as certain actions at Rosebud Creek, must be assessed to determine other factors that enabled them to gain such a stunning victory. The war-fighting functions of command and control, movement and maneuver (tactics), fires, intelligence, logistics, and force protection can provide a valuable assessment framework to evaluate Indian actions at the tactical and operational level.

COMMAND AND CONTROL

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP – SITTING BULL

As part of the evaluation of Indian command and control, it is first necessary to determine the impact that leadership and the esprit, or morale, of the people played at the

¹⁵ For an interesting account of this action, refer to Utley, *A History and Guide to the Little Bighorn*, 69-70.

Battle of the Little Bighorn - and any analysis of Indian leadership must begin with Sitting Bull, who was the highest leader of the Hunkpapas, the largest Sioux tribe. He had been a renowned warrior in his younger days, especially in fights with the Crows. As he grew older, he became revered as a man of great wisdom. During the development of the Laramie Treaty of 1868, Sitting Bull had refused to participate in any part of the negotiations, believing that any interactions with white men would be catastrophic for the Indians. He wanted to ensure that his tribe remained separate from the whites and adhered to the traditional Sioux way of life. In his own words, Sitting Bull proclaimed: "I am a red man. If the Great Spirit had desired me to be a white man, he would have made me so in the first place. It is not necessary for eagles to be shut up in a corral. All reservation Indians I have seen are worthless. They are neither red warriors nor white farmers. They are neither wolf nor dog."¹⁶ He further stated that:

I never taught my people to trust the Americans. I told them the truth – the Americans are great liars. I never went to the reservation or accepted rations or other gifts from the white man government. My people were wealthy in food and clothing and lodges, in everything necessary for being an Indian. The land belonged to my people. It was a gift to us from the Great Spirit. The Great Spirit gave us the game in this country. It was our privilege to hunt the game in our country. The white man came here to take the country from us by force. He brought misery and wretchedness into our country. We were here killing game and eating, and, all of a sudden, we were attacked by white men. We were not out there to fight; we had to fight because we were attacked.¹⁷

Thus, in extremely strong fashion, Sitting Bull verbalized a distinct call for Sioux nationalism, rejected any consideration of the reservation lifestyle, and enjoined all Indians to take up arms and fight the Americans in the rightful defense of their lands and culture.

¹⁶Viola, 7.

¹⁷ Viola, 19.

Because the Indian agencies often failed to provide the goods, supplies, housing, and land provided for in treaties, Indians on the Sioux and Cheyenne reservations became increasingly convinced that the U.S. government consistently reneged on treaty provisions. They also began to lose respect for the Indian chiefs, such as Red Cloud, who had negotiated with the whites in the first place and continued to pursue interactions with white men despite their perceived duplicity. For Indian tribal bands that had refused to move to the reservations, the plight of Indians on the reservation and the actions of the white men, most notably their desecration of the Black Hills, validated Sitting Bull's negative views of the whites. From this environment of conflict and dissatisfaction, Sitting Bull emerged as the most credible Indian leader for Sioux and Cheyenne both on and off the reservation.

After General Crook attacked the Cheyenne village on the Powder River on 17 March, the Cheyenne and Sioux began to gravitate toward each other's camps for mutual protection. During this time, Sitting Bull began a general call for the mobilization of all Sioux, including those on the reservation, to unite for a battle to drive the white man out of the Black Hills and Indian territory. In particular, he sent runners to all the agencies of the Great Sioux Reservation with the message: "It is war. Come to my camp on the Big Bend of the Rosebud. Let's all get together and have one big fight with the soldiers!"¹⁸

As greater numbers of Indians began to assemble, Sitting Bull conducted a Sun Dance ceremony (an annual religious ceremony that was the centerpiece of Sioux spiritual life) in early June 1876.¹⁹ In Sitting Bull's own words:

¹⁸ Welch, 73.

¹⁹ For more information on the importance of the Sun Dance in Sioux life, see Utley, *The Indian Frontier of the American West 1846-1890*, 243.

Early summer is the season for the Sun Dance among the Sioux people. I had pledged one hundred pieces of flesh to the Great Spirit, and I fulfilled my vow. My brother Jumping Bull cut tiny pieces of skin – fifty from each arm – using an awl and a sharp knife. I danced two days and two nights. God sent me a vision. I saw white soldiers and enemy Indians on horseback falling into the Sioux camp. They were coming down like grasshoppers, head first, with their hats falling off. Just then I heard a voice from above, saying, “I give you these because they have no ears!”²⁰

With this vision, Sitting Bull had provided the assembling Indians the promise of a great victory. News of the vision encouraged other Sioux, both on and off the reservation, to join Sitting Bull’s gathering. Furthermore, because Sitting Bull’s vision came during the Sun Dance, it gave his leadership a certain divine approval in the eyes of the assembling tribesmen, for this meant his vision came from the Great Spirit, the Sioux’s principal deity.

As the tribes gravitated to Sitting Bull’s camp on the plains, each tribe or band would normally have continued to recognize their own chief as their supreme leader. However, when the gathering was almost complete, a Minneconjous Indian named Beard remembered the camp as being the largest he had ever known. The Minneconjous were led by Hump, Fast Bull, and High Backbone. Crazy Horse led the Oglalas, Inkpaduta led the Santees, and Lame White Man and Ice led the Cheyennes. Yet, when they were camped together, all acknowledged the Hunkpapa Sitting Bull as the leader. The Indians rallied around him because he stood for freedom and the old way of life.²¹

Therefore, Sitting Bull was instrumental in organizing one of the largest groups of Indians ever assembled on the Northern Plains, with many estimates totaling eight thousand Indians, including up to two thousand warriors. He had also foreseen that the

²⁰ Viola, 23.

gathered Sioux would win a major engagement against the United States Army and instilled that vision in his followers. He was able to accomplish this despite the fact that the tribal bands involved were generally not disposed to extensive cooperation, and the Indians had to assemble in the face of orders from a formidable American Army that required them to permanently move to or stay on the reservation. That Sitting Bull was able to mobilize such a force for battle indicates the power of his leadership prior to the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

THE PEOPLE – INDIAN MORALE

The Indians that gathered at the Little Bighorn possessed an extraordinarily high level of morale. They were gathered in numbers far superior to anything they had accomplished in the past, and that strength afforded them the security to focus on the hunting that would strengthen the tribes and prepare them for the privations of winter. Antelope Woman, a Northern Cheyenne, described Indian actions prior to the battles at the Rosebud and Little Bighorn as follows: “All of us traveled together to the west side of the lower Powder River, on the west of the Tongue River, and then to the Rosebud valley where the grass is high and our ponies became strong. Our men killed many buffalo, and we women tanned the hides and dried the meat as we moved from place to place up the Rosebud.”²² In the same vein, Wooden Leg, a Cheyenne warrior, described Indian actions prior to the battles as follows: “Many young men were anxious to go for fighting the soldiers. But the chiefs and old men all urged us to keep away from the white men. They said that fighting wasted energy that ought to be applied in looking only for food and clothing, trying only to feed and make comfortable our families and ourselves. Our

²¹ Gregory F. Michno, *Lakota Noon: The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat* (Missoula, MT: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1997), 29.

combination of camps was simply for defense. We were within our treaty rights as hunters. We must keep ourselves so.”²³ Therefore, the tribes were in very high spirits because they were able to hunt freely, confident in the belief that their numbers would preclude attacks by the soldiers. However, if the soldiers did choose to attack them, combat would occur during the summer, the season when they were the most fit and prepared to fight. Furthermore, they strongly believed in the visions of someone of Sitting Bull’s stature, and his vision at the Sun Dance ceremony promised them a great victory against the soldiers.

The confidence the Sioux and Cheyenne possessed was strongly indicated by their decision to attack General Crook’s 1300 men at the Rosebud with approximately one-half that number of warriors. When that attack resulted in Crook’s retirement from the field, the warriors’ confidence increased. Wooden Leg’s statement was indicative of the tribes’ morale:

We moved over to the Little Bighorn after we had beaten the white men soldiers at the fight at the Rosebud. Our scouts had followed them far enough to learn that they were going farther and farther away from us. We did not know of any other soldiers hunting for us. If there were any, they now would be afraid to come. On the bench-lands just east of us our horses found plenty of rich grass. Among the hills west of the river were great herds of buffalo. Every day, big hunting parties went among them.²⁴

Clearly, prior to the battle of the Little Bighorn, the Sioux and Cheyenne were flush with their major victory at the Rosebud, in addition to being at the numerical, physical, and spiritual heights of their combat power.

²² Viola, 22.

²³ Viola, 24.

²⁴ Viola, 24-25.

During the actual Battle of the Little Bighorn, the aggression and initiative displayed by Indians throughout the day reflected the fighting spirit and high morale with which they entered combat. Their fighting spirit will be very apparent in subsequent portions of this analysis, and the warrior spirit the Indians exhibited during the battle became a significant combat multiplier. Warriors thus entered combat with the 7th Cavalry with extraordinary morale based on the belief that they would win a great battle.

Finally, this warrior spirit was also exacerbated because the Indians were fighting in the immediate defense of their families, with Indian women and children being the first to be fired upon when the battle commenced. At the conclusion of the battle, the importance of this sentiment, as well as confidence in the battle's outcome, was expressed by Black Elk, a thirteen-year-old Oglala who killed his first enemy during the attack by Major Reno's companies on the southern end of the camp. The Indians were gathering up the last of their dead and Black Elk tired of the affair. He could smell nothing but blood and gunpowder, and he was becoming sick of it. Yet he wasn't sorry. He was a happy boy. He knew beforehand what was going to happen. He had seen it all in his visions. His people were relatives of the Thunder-beings, and he had known the soldiers were going to be wiped out. Contented, he returned to his tipi.²⁵ Furthermore, he stated those white soldiers had come to kill our mothers and fathers and us, and it was our country.²⁶

TACTICAL COMMAND AND CONTROL

Indian command and control at the tactical level was very different from what is found in a European modeled military organization. The Native Americans did not fight

²⁵ Michno, 288.

²⁶ Viola, 64.

in the same formal manner as the white man. War chiefs could not normally make tactical dispositions because they possessed no formal command authority, as understood in western military organizations. In combat, the warrior functioned as an independent unit and obeyed a particular chief only so long as it suited his fancy.²⁷

That being said, Indian chiefs continually led groups of warriors by example and often provided guidance that was followed by them on the battlefield. In one striking example, Crazy Horse's ability to command and control a large group of Indians was directly responsible for the successful surprise attack of Crook's column at the Battle of the Rosebud. During the evening of 16 March, Indian scouts returned to the main village on the Little Bighorn and reported the bivouac of General Crook's column on the Rosebud. The chiefs and members of the tribal police society, the akecita, were successful in stopping the younger warriors from exiting the camp to attack the soldiers in a completely disorganized fashion. Crazy Horse then led 750 warriors, with akecita manning the flanks to keep younger warriors from racing ahead, on an all night movement covering approximately twenty miles. They crossed the Wolf Mountains and placed the party in an attack position by dawn on 17 March.²⁸ The ability of Crazy Horse and his subordinate chiefs to control the night movement of a 750 man force composed of units without a habitual working relationship and deliver that force to the right location at the right time indicates that the Indians were capable of significant command and control feats. Furthermore, Crazy Horse's and other chiefs' command authority was derived from their demonstrated prowess as warriors and leaders; warriors voluntarily followed men who they believed had earned the right to lead them.

²⁷ Utley, *Custer and the Great Controversy*, 87.

²⁸ Welch, 115-117.

Other examples of chiefs taking command on the field, bestowed by their earned status as warriors and leaders, are apparent from the heavy fighting that took place when Reno had fallen back into a position in the timber south of the Indian camp. The Minneconjou Chief One Bull's battlefield leadership is evidenced in his following statement:

There was a big hill where the Indians were standing, and I crossed the creek and came up to the Indians. At that time the soldiers were leaving their horses among the trees and were shooting as fast as they could. I called to the Indians to get off their horses and kneel on the ground and to shoot back and try to scare off the soldiers. All the Indians dismounted and commenced to shoot. In a few minutes, I told the Indians to get on their horses and chase the white men, and we all got on our horses.²⁹

Numerous Indians remarked that Reno's position in the timber was a strong one, and, had Reno held the position, he might have continued to keep the Indian forces split and between two fires. If so, this could have given Custer a possible chance for survival later in the battle. One group of Indians even stated frankly that had Reno not retreated, they would have fled.³⁰ Interviews with Red Feather, an Oglala warrior, confirmed his view that Reno's battalion held a strong position: "The soldiers would be wise to stay in the woods. They could shoot from there and the Indians would have a tough time dislodging them without taking many casualties. There was still no effective way of getting close to the soldiers from this open side of the valley."³¹ Although Reno's command was in dire straits, it is possible that a dogged defense of the defensive position in the timbers might have influenced the outcome of the battle. The Indians certainly placed incredible pressure on the battalion's defensive position, but they also

²⁹ Hardorff, 37.

³⁰ Utley, *Custer and the Great Controversy*, 92.

³¹ Michno, 74.

had a societal aversion to accepting heavy casualties. If the soldiers could have held, they had the capability to inflict large numbers of casualties while still threatening the village; past actions indicate the Indians may have then been more concerned with fighting a tactical withdrawal to protect their women, children, and elderly than pressing an attack where they were losing large numbers of warriors. Regardless, the fact that Reno chose to flee resulted in a retreat where the majority of the soldiers he lost in the battle were killed, and it also allowed the Indians to bring all of their forces to bear on Custer and his five companies.

During this critical juncture in the battle, Black Elk's recollections of the actions of Gall and Crazy Horse immediately before Reno's full retreat are enlightening. Black Elk stated: "I think this was when Gall rallied the Hunkpapas, who had been running away, and turned them back. Then another great cry went up out in the dust: "Crazy Horse is coming! Crazy Horse is coming!"³²

He Dog, an Oglala warrior, also reinforced the importance that Indian leadership played during this part of the Reno fight: "Reno had been pushed into the timber, but now the problem was how to get him out. Indians from all tribes were arriving - all that could get to their horses. They waited only for someone to give them the word and lead them in another charge."³³

A Hunkpapa named Iron Hawk also remembered Crazy Horse's contribution in driving Reno from his position in the timber. Having finally collected his warriors, the Oglala war leader made a dash for the soldiers in the timber and crashed into them. The warriors that had assembled along the banks saw the movement and heard the shouts of

³² Viola, 38-39.

³³ Michno, 73.

Crazy Horse's men. They too "advanced furiously with great yelling, coming down on the flank."³⁴

Although the story of Reno becoming rattled after being splattered with gore when the Crow scout Bloody Knife was killed by his side has been most often accepted for his panicked withdrawal, the decision to abandon a relatively defensible position also coincides with the massed attacks led by Indian chiefs. Their ability to rally determined counterattacks at a time when many Indians were disorganized or fleeing the field due to the surprise of Reno's attack on the village was the first decisive step in the Indian victory.

After Reno's troopers had been routed in the timbers and fled to their defensive position southeast of the village, they posed a potential threat to the Indians who were engaged in combat with Custer's units. A Minneconjou warrior named Red Horse remembered directions given by Indian leaders as follows: "Sioux men, go watch the soldiers on the hill and prevent their joining the different (Custer's) soldiers." Some of the Indians stripped the clothing off the dead troopers, dressed themselves in it, and went back and attacked Reno's command. Warriors headed for the soldiers on the Weir Point skyline, a commanding saddle on high ground south of Last Stand Hill and Calhoun Ridge, *before* the Custer fight was over.³⁵ The Indians that responded to this battlefield direction drove back the remnants of the two battalions following Weir from the Reno perimeter before they could support Custer, protected the rear of the warriors involved in the Custer fight, and freed those Indians to complete the destruction of the five cavalry companies. While Weir's disorganized column was probably incapable of saving Custer

³⁴ Michno, 75.

³⁵ Michno, 240.

and his five companies, the incident illustrates that Indian leaders, at least those around Red Horse, were cognizant of the tactical situation throughout the entire battlefield and capable of organizing warriors for missions outside of the current engagement.

In the fighting with Custer's troops on the ridgeline, a Cheyenne named Wooden Leg described a successful counterattack by troopers that had driven the Indians into disarray: Just then, Lame White Man rode onto the scene. The old Southern Cheyenne chief had been nearby watching the Indian's retreat. There was no cause for it. Sitting tall on his horse, he shouted to all the warriors within earshot to come back and fight. With a bit of admonition and a large helping of brave-up talk, the warriors responded enthusiastically. Then Lame White Man raised his arm and called out that now was the time. "Come," he cried. "We can kill all of them."³⁶

In another attack that created penetrations in the cavalry defensive line on Calhoun Ridge, Two Moon, a Cheyenne war chief, described two successful assaults as follows: Two Moon and his Cheyenne warriors broke through the soldiers and crested the ridge to the river side. Jubilant, yet somewhat disorganized after the charge, Two Moon rode back through his men telling them to get ready once more. Looking north, he could see the company with gray horses on the far end of the ridge, apparently still in the position where they had repulsed Two Moon's band earlier. He told his men that once more they would have to shoot good. "I rode my horse back along the ridge again," he said, "and called upon my children to come on after me." Some Cheyennes had already been killed, but this would not be the end of it. "I whipped my horse and told them to come on, that this day was the last day they would ever see their chief." After that brave-

³⁶ Michno, 196-197.

up talk, Two Moon sped off toward the Gray Horse troopers on the hilltop. The Indians followed him, yelling and firing.³⁷

SITTING BULL'S INFLUENCE DURING THE BATTLE

The leadership offered by Sitting Bull during the Battle of the Little Bighorn, while not having the impact of chiefs directly involved in the tactical fighting, warrants discussion. At forty-two years of age, Sitting Bull was not expected to actively engage in combat. However, there were many accounts of him in the village rallying warriors into battle with brave-up talks and seeing to the evacuation of the elderly, women, and children.

When Major Reno first attacked the southern-end of the camp, there were numerous accounts of Sitting Bull giving a shield to one of his subordinate chiefs, One Bull, that bestowed Sitting Bull's leadership authority on the bearer of the shield. One Bull recounted Sitting Bull ordering: "You will take my place and go out and meet the soldiers that are attacking us. Parley with them if you can. If they are willing, tell them I will talk peace with them."³⁸

Another account of Sitting Bull's leadership involvement during the battle is reflected during the actual engagement with Reno's companies. One of the more prominent casualties was the Hunkpapa, Knife Chief, an older man who was Camp Crier of Sitting Bull's band. He was in the act of shouting Sitting Bull's commands near the skirmish line when he received a gunshot that severely wounded but did not kill him, fired by a soldier from behind the bank.³⁹

³⁷ Michno, 220-221.

³⁸ Michno, 39.

³⁹ Hardorff, 39.

Through the use of subordinates and symbols to delegate his authority, Sitting Bull had the capacity to exert his influence on the battlefield. While these actions certainly did not have a decisive effect on the battle's outcome, the mere fact that many Indians remembered his involvement during the battle indicates the combatants felt and were motivated by his leadership.

COMMAND AND CONTROL SUMMARY

Indian command and control did exist at the Battle of the Little Bighorn and was a decisive element in their victory. There were numerous occasions during the battle when the Indians were disorganized and many could have easily fled the field or at least not pressed the attack. Although greatly outnumbered, the 7th Cavalry had the capability to organize a successful defense; theoretically, trained troopers could fire a Springfield up to seventeen times per minute, projecting a slug farther than 1000 yards, with accuracy at 250 yards.⁴⁰ The inability of the troopers to become sufficiently organized to take advantage of their substantial firepower owes greatly to the front-line leadership of Indian chiefs, who consistently organized enough warriors at the right time and place to shatter the cohesion and discipline of the 7th Cavalry companies attempting to organize a credible defense. By leading from the front, chiefs were able to quickly rally warriors to exploit any opportunities they observed on the battlefield and, as their separate exploitations achieved cumulative effects, destroy the 7th Cavalry's ability to maintain a defense.

The fact that warriors primarily believed to be motivated by personal accomplishments in battle would so often remember the influence and actions of their leaders reflects the importance of those leaders during the battle. That leadership,

combined with the skillful maneuver used by the Indians, quickly destroyed the organization and discipline of the 7th Cavalry.

MOVEMENT AND MANEUVER (TACTICS)

The predominate American view of Indian movement and maneuver at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, as reflected in films such as *They Died With Their Boots On*, has been one of sheer masses of horse-mounted warriors overwhelming the 7th Cavalry, with the Indians exercising no coherent tactical order. In analyzing Indian actions before and during the battle, it is apparent that their tactical approach in combat was an essential ingredient in their overwhelming defeat of an enemy greatly inferior in numerical strength but still possessing substantial combat power.

MASS MOVEMENT

Although the Indians' movement in mass formation did not have a direct bearing on the outcome of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, it does offer an excellent point of departure for understanding the organizational successes of the amassed tribes. When the Indians moved in march column to establish the village on the Little Bighorn River, their formation included front and rear guards with scouts screening the flanks. They moved in orderly procession, with the Cheyennes in the lead (this honor was bestowed on them because they had exhibited great courage in the attack on their village) and Sitting Bull's Hunkpapas, the largest group, protecting the rear.⁴¹ In a testament to the sophistication of the Indians' movement, Major Reno offered the following account of their retirement on 26 July: "Between six and seven P.M. the Indians came out from behind the clouds of smoke and dust and we had a good view of them as they filed away in the direction of the

⁴⁰ Michno, 49.

⁴¹ Welch, 65.

Bighorn Mountains, moving in almost perfect military order. The length of their column was fully equal to that of a large division of the Cavalry Corps of the Army of the Potomac, as I have seen it on its march.”⁴² For a professional officer in the United States Army to compare the Sioux and Cheyenne’s movement to the most sophisticated military organization of his country illustrates that the Indians, far from being a rabble of savages, were a very organized and effective group.

TACTICAL MANEUVER

The tactical maneuver used by Indians at the Battle of the Little Bighorn was radically different from the general popular perception of the mounted “carousel” of warriors circling and charging the 7th Cavalry until their final defeat. Instead, the Indians executed excellent fire and movement techniques, infiltrations, shock attack penetrations, and decisive pursuit.

In training infantrymen, a common technique used to introduce soldiers to close assault movement is to have them think – “I’m up, they see me, I’m down” – so that they will learn to maintain a forward advance on an enemy position while limiting their exposure to enemy fire; this is one of the essential elements of close fire and movement. Throughout the Battle of the Little Bighorn, Indian accounts demonstrate that the warriors used such fire and movement to great effect. In describing the attack on Custer Hill, Wooden Leg, a Cheyenne warrior, stated: “All around, the Indians were jumping up,

⁴² Welch, 186.

running forward, dodging down, jumping up again, down again, all the time going toward the soldiers.’⁴³

Gall described his and other warriors steadily closing in on Calhoun’s Knoll, with a large number of them dismounting and advancing up the slope far enough to be able to see the soldiers while standing, but protected when lying down. They jumped up, fired quickly to expose themselves only for an instant, and then ducked back down. Thus they drew the soldier’s fire and made them waste their ammunition.⁴⁴ During the Indian advance up Deep Coulee to Calhoun Ridge, Gall believed no Indians were hit because they hid too well, jumping up for a second to fire, and then ducking down again.⁴⁵ Also on this portion of the battlefield, Antelope, a Cheyenne woman, remembered hundreds of warriors shifting from shelter to shelter, each trying to get close enough to count coup on a living enemy.⁴⁶

The warriors also combined fire and maneuver with their exceptional individual movement actions. As Indians stopped Major Reno’s initial advance south of the village, One Bull moved to a hill beyond Reno’s left flank where some warriors had started to congregate. One Bull then established a support by fire position by calling to them to dismount and shoot back at the soldiers. As the Indians held this position, Black Moon, a Hunkpapa chief, brought up a large force of Hunkpapa camp police, swept away the Ree scouts fighting on Reno’s far left, and began to get beyond the soldiers’ exposed left

⁴³ Viola, 58.

⁴⁴ Michno, 208.

⁴⁵ Michno, 283.

⁴⁶ Michno, 235.

flank.⁴⁷ Reno's battalion was then forced to withdraw to their stronger defensive position in the timbers.

In another engagement on Calhoun Hill that demonstrated thoughtful Indian maneuver and battlefield leadership, Runs The Enemy, a Two Kettle chief, described an engagement where Lakota warriors had been forced to retreat by stiff return fire from the soldiers. Runs The Enemy then explained that he pulled back his Two Kettle followers because the soldier fire was strong and he would have to find out another way to get at them without directly exposing his men to the volleys.⁴⁸ Hence, the Indians successfully used a common sense approach to tactics in lieu of official western style training.

Artifacts discovered in 1984-85 after fires burned the vegetations covering the battlefield also indicate that the maneuver previously described took place with the support of significant Indian fires. In a rough oval about one hundred to two hundred yards east and south of Calhoun Hill, well within the effective range for 19th century rifles, the concentrated number of .44 Henry cartridges, a weapon only carried by Indians during the battle, indicated groups of warriors had established firing positions to engage the soldiers. From these sites, the Indians were able to fire on the soldiers from long range, using the intervening terrain for protection. Red Horse related that the fight was "carried on at a distance," or continued "at long range." The Lakota Yellow Horse indicated the Indians did not mingle among the soldiers and fight them hand-to-hand. Rather, they kept their distance, the soldiers holding them at bay until all but a handful had been shot down. Only then did they close in.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Michno, 63.

⁴⁸ Michno, 161.

⁴⁹ Michno, 225-227.

A final element in the Indians' decisive victory was their rigorous pursuit of the enemy after they had achieved a tactical advantage. In the engagement south of the village, many of the 53 soldiers killed in Major Reno's three companies died during the retreat from the river to the defensive position on Reno Hill. However, in the developing battle, the Indians were not foolhardy in this pursuit. Low Dog, an Oglala warrior, remembered: "I told my people not to venture too far in pursuit for fear of falling into an ambush,"⁵⁰ a lesson well understood by the Indians from their own tactics, most notably illustrated by the Indians' defeat of Captain Fetterman in 1866.

In the battle against Custer's five companies, warriors surged to annihilate the soldiers as soon as their defensive cohesion broke down. Little Hawk, a Cheyenne warrior, recounted when the soldiers abandoned a position on Calhoun Hill, because of heavy pressure from the attacking warriors, and ran north along the straight ridge: "the warriors chased them like buffalo and as long as they had their backs toward the Indians, the Indians rode right in among them."⁵¹

Officers in the United States Army were well aware of the Indians' prowess while in the pursuit. Colonel Gibbon commented on the folly of troopers' mounted flight when he said: "In running away from an Indian on horseback, the average horseman of the service is almost as much at the mercy of his pursuer as is the buffalo." Col. Richard I. Dodge wrote that the surest form of death on the plains was to turn one's back on an Indian. Capt. Thomas French echoed the statement when he wrote that to turn one's back on Indians is throwing life away. Custer himself knew that the Indians would have "a

⁵⁰ Michno, 89.

⁵¹ Michno, 233.

buffalo hunt” whenever soldiers turned their backs and ran.⁵² Therefore, the Indians were able to place the 7th Cavalry in a tactical situation that forced them to pursue actions they knew to be almost certainly catastrophic. The cavalry leaders realized their advantages in combat were derived from the cohesion, control, organization, and discipline inherent in traditionally trained military units.

The greatest indicator that Indian tactics were extremely effective during the Battle of the Little Bighorn is the minimal number of Indian deaths suffered during it. Most warriors interviewed after the battle estimated that between 30 and 40 Indians were killed during the battle.⁵³ Of this number, approximately ten were old men, women, and children who were slain during Reno’s initial attack on the village. Furthermore, in keeping with the normal behavior patterns of the Northern Great Plain’s tribes, a high percentage of the battle casualties were very young Indians with little or no combat experience who attempted foolhardy acts to gain their reputations as brave warriors. An Oglala named Red Feather, Crazy Horse’s brother-in-law, stated: “The Indians in the lead were the younger men (who) didn’t have enough experience and were reckless. The older ones held off for safety. The younger men were killed mostly, and they took most of the guns.” The Hunkpapa Pretty White Buffalo Woman reinforced this view when she said: “Among the killed were boys of twelve and fourteen, who, in ardor of young warrior-hood, rushed on their ponies and into the thickest of the fight.”⁵⁴

SUMMARY

The fact that the Indians suffered such low casualties, with a significant percentage of those consisting of individuals who would normally be considered non-

⁵² Michno, 239.

⁵³ Hardorff, 130.

combatants, demonstrates they were using relatively refined tactics. Although Custer dispersed his combat power during the course of the battle, all three units still maintained a significant amount of firepower that would have inflicted horrendous casualties on the Indians had they simply attacked on horse and en-mass; the 7th Cavalry possessed rifles and pistols superior to anything carried by soldiers in the American Civil War, so the cavalymen were more than capable of inflicting great carnage. Because the warriors consistently disrupted their formations with overwhelming fire and maneuver, the soldiers lost the organization, cohesion, and discipline that might have enabled them to establish the accurate return fire to drive their foes back and give them time to reunite their units and avoid total destruction.

The Indian way of war did not often result in heavy casualties. Before the Indians sustained mass casualties from the concentrated fire of a well-organized defense, it could be expected that they would leave the field - regardless of their numerical superiority. Indian social dynamics were extremely effected by actual or potential war losses; therefore, incidences of numerically superior Indian forces retiring after suffering significant losses during an engagement were far from uncommon. Thus, size alone was not necessarily the determining factor.⁵⁵

Although the Sioux and Cheyenne possessed the same numerical superiority over the troopers in Reno and Benteen's defensive position that they held in their fight with Custer's companies, the warriors were unsuccessful in overwhelming the position; they did fix the soldiers in place with long-range fires and attempt several attacks by infiltration. The soldiers were able to successfully hold the Indians at bay by organizing

⁵⁴ Hardorff, 40.

a solid defense on good ground, and the Indians recognized the tactical situation and did not expend much combat power toward the soldiers' destruction; rather, their attacks consisted of long-range fires and localized human assaults until their retirement, in the face of Terry and Gibbon's approaching columns, on 26 June.

Throughout the battlefield, the Indians maneuvered to place Custer and his five companies at a tactical disadvantage from which they could not recover. Warriors established rear guard forces to isolate Custer on the battlefield and then broke apart the cohesion of his forces by overwhelming his companies with small unit fires and maneuver. When Custer attacked the village on the Little Bighorn, he and his five companies struck a hornets' nest, and the warriors responded with maneuver and fires that swarmed his command and destroyed any ability he had to save it.

FIRES

In combination with their maneuver, the Indians also used the effects of fires to shatter the cohesion of the 7th Cavalry. While another common popular perception of Indians at the Little Bighorn continues to revolve around arrows, spears, and tomahawks, the fact is a large number of warriors were better armed than the soldiers.

RIFLES

The widespread use of firearms by the warriors, either carried into battle or taken from soldiers during the course of fighting, is reflected in pictographs made by Indian participants shortly after the battle; these have depicted numerous warriors carrying rifles. As already indicated in the discussion on maneuver, many Indians carried the .44 caliber

⁵⁵ The Hayfield and Wagon Box fights on the Bozeman Trail in 1867 are excellent examples of greatly superior Indian forces retiring in the face of small but determined and well-organized defenses.

Henry Repeating rifle, a weapon far superior to the .45/70 caliber Springfield carbines issued to the cavalrymen. Warriors also carried other more advanced rifles of the day; White Bull entered the battle with his Winchester rifle and two cartridge belts.⁵⁶ These repeating rifles gave the Indians a distinct firepower advantage over the single-shot army carbines, an advantage not lost on Sitting Bull. In describing the warriors' repulse of Custer's two-company attack on the center of the village, Sitting Bull stated: "They fired with needle guns. We replied with magazine guns – repeating rifles. Our young men rained lead across the river and drove the white braves back."⁵⁷ Furthermore, Indians without firearms took the fallen soldiers' weapons and ammunition as the battle progressed.

Obviously, these weapons had a decisive impact on their ability to engage the troopers. Warriors used their repeating rifles to great advantage in halting the assaults at the south and central portions of the village, as well as establishing firing positions that were essential in disrupting the maneuver of Custer's five companies during the course of the battle and precluding their ability to establish an organized defense. In one of the most illustrative examples of the Indians using repeaters to achieve decisive effects, Bobtail Horse, a Cheyenne warrior, recounted a ten Indian skirmish line that stopped the two company attack on the village's center at Medicine Tail Coulee: The soldiers charged and Bobtail Horse believed they would cross the river and get into the camp, for they were headed straight for the ford. "The ten Indians were firing as hard as they could and

⁵⁶ Michno, 25.

⁵⁷ Viola, 60.

killed a soldier,” Bobtail Horse explained. The man’s horse ran on ahead and Bobtail Horse caught it. The soldiers finally stopped.⁵⁸

A statement made by Captain Edward Godfrey, an officer in Reno’s command who had been sent with the burial detail on June 28, evidences a final proof of the Indian’s pervasive use of firearms to good effect. In describing the body of Custer, he stated: “When I arrived there General Custer’s body had been laid out. He had been shot in the left temple and the left breast. There were no powder marks or signs of mutilation.”⁵⁹ Rather than being felled by a savage’s traditional weapon, the Indians used modern arms to kill Custer – and from a distance.

BOW AND ARROWS

The Indians did use bow and arrows during the battle, but their most decisive use of this weapon was not in keeping with the general American popular perception of Indians riding by or creeping up to engage in a direct-line shot. Warriors relied on the advantages of the rifle for their direct fire weapon; however, they ingeniously used the bow and arrow as an indirect fire weapon. Antelope described Indian actions on Calhoun hill as follows: “The Indian could keep himself at all times out of sight when sending arrows. Each arrow was shot far upward and forward, not at any soldier in particular, but to curve down and fall where they were. Bullets would not do any harm if shot in that way. But a rain of arrows from thousands of Indian bows,⁶⁰ and kept up for a long time,

⁵⁸ Michno, 118-119.

⁵⁹ Welch, 175.

⁶⁰ There were certainly not thousands of Indians on the portion of the battlefield that Antelope was observing. The Indians did not display an ability to grasp or be able to express large numbers (Runs the Enemy described thousands of soldiers (Michno, 114)); however, their inability to conceptualize large numbers should not detract from their basic observations; the soldiers were there but in exaggerated numbers.

would hit many soldiers and their horses by falling and sticking into their heads or their backs.”⁶¹

Therefore, as in today’s use of artillery and mortars against infantry, the Indians placed the cavalymen in a situation where they could maintain their position and suffer from a rain of indirect fire, or they could move and expose themselves to rifle fire or close combat with infiltrating Indians. The soldiers did not have any other option because they could not engage the Indians firing arrows from defilade with their line-of-sight carbines.

FIRE (i.e., conflagration)

A final application of fires by the Indians was their literal use of fire in the fight against Reno’s troopers. After the soldiers had withdrawn from their first skirmish line to the relatively defensible positions in the timber, warriors increased the pressure on the soldiers by infiltrating forward and setting the brush and timber on fire. Wooden Leg described this action when he recounted that more and more Lakotas arrived to extend the encircling line around the timber, then continued: “They sent arrows into the trees and were answered with bullets, causing them to hang back out of lethal range. Soon, the soldiers would be surrounded and would not have many hours left to live. Already the Lakotas were creeping forward to set fire to the brush.”⁶²

By setting fire to the area Reno was defending, the Indians added another element to the multiple threats the soldiers were facing – fire, long-range rifle fire, arrows, close combat from infiltrating warriors, and massed counterattacks by mounted Indians. These

⁶¹ Welch, 168. Additionally, an able and indispensable mentor for this paper, Dr. Donald Bittner, related that the film *Escape from Fort Bravo*, starring William Holden, Eleanor Parker, and John Forsythe (1953), depicts an exceptional example of this warrior tactic.

⁶² Michno, 74.

threats then created a cumulative effect with which Reno's command was unable to deal; this crisis drove him to execute his least favorable course of action, a full retreat in the face of mounted warriors.

INTELLIGENCE

One of the more perplexing aspects of the Battle of the Little Bighorn involves Indian intelligence and reconnaissance of the 7th Cavalry. Prior to Custer's attack on their village, the Indians had already displayed excellent reconnaissance and reporting to the tribal council when their scouts located Crook's column on the Rosebud and then guided a war party on a night march that placed them in a suitable position for a dawn attack. Their ability to accomplish this feat was indicative of their habitual use of scouting parties to screen their movements and campsites, and locate potential enemies. Furthermore, because they relied on hunting to provide their main source of food, hunting parties radiating from a village also served the secondary purpose of reconnaissance. Because the Indians demonstrated the ability to conduct effective reconnaissance, the popular American perception that Custer wandered into a great ambush, most notably reflected in the film *They Died With Their Boots On*, would appear to be reasonable; however, Indian accounts of the battle showed this perception to be false. The Indians' failure to anticipate Custer's attack on the village can be attributed to two causes: the lack of any systematic coordination in their reconnaissance effort and the belief that Custer simply was not going to attack them when he did.

It is very apparent that the Sioux knew the 7th Cavalry was in the area prior to the battle; Indians provided numerous accounts of scouting parties bumping into the column or its residue as the soldiers approached the Little Bighorn. A typical account is that of

the Cheyenne warrior, American Horse: American Horse and Magpie Eagle were among the last to bring in their people to the combined village. Magpie Eagle's scouts had seen more soldiers moving up the Rosebud after Three Stars (Crook) had been driven away. They had been camping on Reno Creek when the scouts brought word. The next morning they moved into the big bottomland and joined the Ohmeseheso (Cheyenne) village. The day after, more scouts were back on the Rosebud, watching to see what the soldiers were going to do. Crook's men were going away, but the second group (Custer's) was heading toward the village. A Cheyenne scout returned and reported this news. In the meantime, four or five lodges of Lakotas that had set out for Red Cloud Agency also discovered Custer's troops. They were frightened and turned back. When they reached the main camp, their report caused great alarm.

American Horse was in the Cheyenne camp at the lower end of the village (north). An old man crier rode around the circle shouting the soldiers were coming. As American Horse heard it, the warning stated that soldiers were about to attack the upper (south) and lower ends of the village. The soldiers struck first at the upper end. American Horse quickly dressed for war and, since he kept his horse picketed close by his lodge, he would get there early. He was the only Cheyenne council chief to take part in the fighting on that part of the field.⁶³

Just as American Horse stated that he had to prepare for battle, almost all other accounts described the warriors' quick adjustment from normal routine to combat. Many, including Sitting Bull and Low Dog, said they were asleep at the time of attack, while others were eating or visiting friends. Most, including Crazy Horse, had to go retrieve their grazing horses; this accounted for their late entry into the battle. Warriors that first

engaged Reno's troopers did so without any of the ceremonial preparations that were an essential element in Indian military culture. However, most telling is the large number of women and children that were outside of the village, either doing daily chores or foraging for food. Had the Indians believed an attack by the soldiers was imminent, they would not have risked the lives of their women and children by allowing them to be exposed outside the camp. The Minneconjou Chief Red Horse recounted:

I was one of the chiefs of the council, and my lodge was pitched in the center of the camp. On the day of the attack, I and four women were out about a mile from camp digging wild turnips. Suddenly one of the women called my attention to a cloud of dust rising a short distance away. I soon saw that the soldiers were charging the camp. We ran for the camp, and when I got there I was sent for at once to come to the council lodge. I found many of the council men already there when I arrived. We had no time to talk about what action we should take. We came out of the council lodge and called in all directions: Young men – mount horses and take guns; go fight the soldiers. Women and children – mount horses and go, get out of the way.⁶⁴

The Indians were dedicated to their elders, women, and children, and it is inconceivable that they would conduct an ambush that placed them in such imminent danger. Almost all the initial casualties were women and children, and this was due to the Indians' complete lack of preparation for the battle. They were not expecting an attack and were comfortable in pursuing their normal daily routine.

The Sioux and Cheyenne also believed they were too strong for the soldiers to attack. Low Dog expressed this sentiment when he recounted his belief that the initial alarms of attack were false: "I did not think it possible that any white men would attack us, so strong as we were."⁶⁵ The Indians were aware that their village was larger than any they had previously organized, and that they had defeated General Crook's column at

⁶³ Michno, 30.

⁶⁴ Viola, 33.

the Rosebud only days before. They had no way of knowing the motivations and assessments that were driving Custer to attack, and, therefore, it was reasonable for them to assume that a cavalry attack on the village would be too foolish to be attempted.

It is absolutely apparent that the Indians did not have or benefit from any appreciable organized intelligence effort. They allowed Custer to gain the advantage of complete surprise, resulting in Indian non-combatant casualties and increasing the difficulty of their fight. The surprising lack of Indian tactical intelligence of the 7th Cavalry prior to the battle was best summarized by Pretty White Buffalo, when she said: “I have seen my people prepare for battle many times, and this I know: that the Sioux that morning had no thought of fighting.”⁶⁶

During the battle itself, the Indians achieved a certain advantage in intelligence, primarily derived from their superior mobility and the many small unit leaders and warriors who acted decisively when they received battlefield information. A good example of this was demonstrated by Runs The Enemy’s recollection of events while the Reno fight was ongoing. He noticed more activity to the east, seeing two men in the hills waving blankets as hard as they could. Crossing over with another Indian, they heard the signalers yell that “the genuine stuff was coming, and they were going to get our women and children.”⁶⁷ As when they protected their rear against Reno’s detachment later in the day, the ability of the Indians to identify Custer and act against him before he reached the village was critical. It allowed warriors to isolate the soldiers on the battlefield and then concentrate combat power toward their complete destruction, vice fighting a confused engagement in different parts of the village where the Indians’ combat power would have

⁶⁵ Michno, 24.

⁶⁶ Michno, 23.

been diffused, and the elderly, women, and children would have remained in the thick of the fighting.

Finally, after the battle, the Indians again demonstrated the reconnaissance capability they displayed at the Rosebud by identifying the approaching columns of Terry and Gibbons before the soldiers could attack the village and its inhabitants. Low Dog stated: "Then we heard another force was coming up the river; this was General Terry's command. The chiefs and wise men counseled that we had fought enough and that we should not fight unless attacked."⁶⁸ Black Elk recalled the Indians maintaining reconnaissance on the soldiers for several days after they left the Little Bighorn, recounting that when they finally reached a camp at Wood Louse Creek at the foot of the Bighorn Mountains: "The scouts reported that the soldiers had not followed us and that everything was safe now."⁶⁹ Therefore, following the battle, the Indians developed a good intelligence picture of the enemy approaching them, kept watch on the soldiers' movement, and decided to retire rather than give battle.

LOGISTICS

The Indians' logistical capability depended on what they could hunt, gather, or trade to support the tribe. The value they placed on horses reflected the important contribution the animals made to the Indian logistics effort; horses enabled them to travel with more possessions while hunting over a wider territory. During the summer, they would reach the peak of their logistic capability, as game and buffalo were more plentiful and their horses would have ample forage.

⁶⁷ Michno, 96.

⁶⁸ Viola, 68.

During the winter, Indian tribes were much less mobile and supplied because their horses were always weakened due to lack of food; the tribes of the plains subsisted on foods they acquired from spring, summer, and fall hunts, or hunters/warriors had to leave the camp for longer periods of time in search of seasonally diminished and scattered game. Also, the Indians needed more permanently available shelter because of the life-threatening weather elements. Therefore, they were logistically dependent on the land and its bounty.

The main impact logistics played prior to the Battle of the Little Bighorn was simply that Custer would be attacking the Indians at the time when they were best-supplied and most capable of fighting. The Indians and their horses were well fed and more warriors were able to be in or very near the village. More importantly, the summer was the only time Sitting Bull's confederation could have supported itself in the numbers amassed on the Little Bighorn.

During the battle, there were no accounts of the Indians running out of ammunition before their destruction of Custer. Also, warriors re-supplied themselves during the course of the battle by stripping fallen soldiers of their weapons and ammunition. Conversely, Indian actions on Calhoun Ridge depleted critical ammunition supplies for Custer's troopers. These soldiers established dismounted skirmishers lines with selected troopers holding the others' horses. Pretty White Buffalo remembered a warrior directing other Indians to try to frighten the horses of the soldiers, which appeared to be held in small bunches and perhaps could be stampeded.⁷⁰ Moving Robe, a Hunkpapa woman who fought in the battle after her young brother was killed in Reno's

⁶⁹ Viola, 69.

⁷⁰ Michno, 161.

approach to the village, saw the horse holders trying to control the reins of eight to ten horses each. “They were not having an easy time. The Indians began waving blankets, frightening the horses. As some of them broke away from the troopers, the scene became chaotic.”⁷¹ In driving away the soldiers’ horses, the Indians deprived the troopers of the ammunition reserves stored in their saddlebags. Thus, the soldiers were left with only the ammunition carried on their persons, and many would run out of ammunition before the end of the battle.

The Cheyenne warrior Big Beaver described to Joe A Blummer, the owner of a general store at Garryowen, the attempt of the last survivors to escape down Deep Coulee from Last Stand Hill as follows: “Now these men were out of ammunition and could not shoot back. They were trying to make it to the brush along the river.” That is the way he (Big Beaver) saw it. He says these men made a run towards the riverbank. My (J.A. Blummer’s) idea is that they used all their ammunition and were making a last effort to get away.⁷² Therefore, during the course of the actual battle, the Indians were able to improve their firepower and ammunition supplies while degrading the soldiers’ ability to do the same. However, the Indians’ inability to reconstitute their ammunition supplies after the battle certainly influenced their decision to retire from the field.

FORCE PROTECTION

Most of the more significant force protection measures used by the Indians at the Battle of the Little Bighorn have already been addressed. Warriors skillfully used terrain to limit their exposure to fire, moved outside the maximum range of the soldiers’ weapons, and reduced friendly casualties by executing intense fire and aggressive

⁷¹ Michno, 179.

⁷² Hardorff, 73-75.

maneuver that rapidly degraded the soldiers' capacity to fight. They also used reconnaissance to their advantage, protecting the village by driving Crook from the field prior to the battle and retiring from it before Terry or Gibbon could engage them.

The Sioux and Cheyenne also displayed a true concern for force protection during the battle by conducting numerous evacuations of wounded Indians, some under heavy fire. During the Reno engagement, One Bull exhibited typical Indian dedication to the wounded in his rescue of a young warrior injured approximately thirty yards from the soldiers' line. One Bull raced back to find Good Bear Boy shot through both legs and trying to crawl to safety. Tying him with a rawhide lariat, he hoisted him up on his horse. Making their way to the rear, the pony took a bullet in the hind leg and screamed out in pain. One Bull tried going backwards to hide himself, involuntarily flinching as the bullets screamed past them.⁷³ Because the rescue of fellow tribesmen was a feat which brought great honor and respect to the rescuer, warriors entering combat could readily expect that, if necessary, their comrades would come to their assistance or remove them from the battlefield should they become wounded.

A force protection failure of the Indians was the casualties that occurred from friendly fire or friendly close combat. Left Hand, one of six Arapahoes who fought at the Little Bighorn, made the following statement: "There was lots of shooting all around, and the Indians were all yelling. Everyone was excited. I saw an Indian on foot, who was wounded in the leg...I rode at him, striking him in the chest with a long lance which went clear through him. He fell over a pile of dead soldiers. Afterwards I learned he was a Sioux."⁷⁴

⁷³ Michno, 65.

⁷⁴ Hardorff, 64.

Because the soldiers employed the services of Indian scouts not friendly to the Sioux and Cheyenne tribes, most notably the Crow, warriors often fought other Indians during their battles with the soldiers - the majority of Sioux killed during the fighting at the village's south end were probably slain by Reno's Ree scouts. There was no uniformity in Indian dress and their tactics were very decentralized, so it was inevitable that allied warriors would injure or kill each other during the course of such a frenzied battle.

However, even under these extremely difficult conditions, the Indians did exercise fire discipline to try to avoid friendly casualties. On Calhoun Hill, Wooden Leg described dismounting but only firing two shots at long distance. He said there were so many Indians behind clumps of sagebrush, crawling near the soldiers, and jumping up and down to shoot that he thought he might hit one of his own men.⁷⁵

Once again, the minimal number of Indians who were killed in action while causing the complete collapse of Custer's force validates their force protection efforts. Throughout the battle, their smart, aggressive tactics protected the warriors while placing extraordinary pressure on the soldiers. Additionally, the care and concern they showed for one another during the battle certainly increased their willingness to engage in combat and made the units that formed on the battlefield more cohesive.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

There can be no argument that the numerical advantage the Indians held during the battle of the Little Bighorn was a decisive factor in their overwhelming victory. However, that numerical advantage did not solely guarantee that the Indians would be able to annihilate five companies of the 7th Cavalry, kill over one third of the soldiers in

another three companies, and seriously threaten the destruction of the entire regiment. The mere fact that the Sioux and Cheyenne, who were supposedly wild savages, were able to kill over 260 well-armed soldiers while only losing between an estimated 30-40 of their own, with at least eight of these being non-combatants, indicates that they did not defeat the 7th Cavalry by simply throwing bodies at them. Rather, the warriors earned their victory with good leadership and savvy tactical actions.

In Sitting Bull, the Indians found the leader that possessed the qualities to amass the largest High-Plain's Indian gathering in history, and who motivated them with the vision of a great victory over the soldiers. Moreover, the Indians approached that purpose with extraordinary morale and esprit derived from their belief in Sitting Bull, his vision's mandate that the Great Spirit foretold a great victory, their recent victory over Crook's column at the Rosebud, and the sheer power of the amassed tribes. At the tactical level, the Indians were lead by warriors who led from the front, made superb decisions during the battle, and were instrumental in rallying the warriors whenever a situation arose that might have made them lose the combat concentrations their numbers enabled them to achieve.

In the actual fighting, the Indians consistently used the terrain in expert fashion and combined fires and maneuver that overwhelmed the troopers' ability to react to each new and developing threat. They combined bases of fire (with some warriors using weapons far superior to that of the cavalry), infiltrated and penetrated to isolate units on the battlefield, and then pressed their attacks to a total tactical victory, literally annihilating Custer's detachment. Although the cavalry did achieve complete surprise in their attack on the village, the Indians were able to quickly meet each new threat posed

⁷⁵ Michno, 234.

by the soldiers during the course of the battle and then react faster than the soldiers during every subsequent event.

In the final analysis, it is reasonable to assume the Indians' numerical superiority made a 7th Cavalry victory impossible; they were not in a position to drive the Indians from their village and burn it, as they had at the Washita River. However, considering the firepower Custer had at his disposal, the complete annihilation of his force cannot be accepted as a foregone conclusion. If the Indians had been a disorganized mass of savages, Custer possessed the combat power to fight his way out or establish a successful perimeter defense as Captain Benteen and Major Reno did. The reason he was not able to accomplish either course of action owes to the fact that the 7th Cavalry was tactically outperformed during the Battle of the Little Bighorn; the unrelenting pressure of the Indian attacks caused Custer's five companies to lose the discipline, organization, and control that might have saved them.

The popular American perception that Custer was defeated only because of the sheer number of warriors engaged in the fighting completely ignores the superb leadership and tactical prowess that ensured an Indian victory and, therefore, cannot be accepted as inevitably leading to the massacre of Custer and his entire command. Such an erroneous view detracts from the true nature of the Indian victory and discounts the leadership, martial prowess, and valor the Sioux and Cheyenne warriors displayed in their annihilation of Custer and his five companies – a victory that has become an integral and important part of American history in general and the U.S. military tradition in particular.

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