

THE U.S. ARMY'S SIOUX CAMPAIGN OF 1876:
IDENTIFYING THE HORSE AS THE
CENTER OF GRAVITY OF
THE SIOUX

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army
Command and General Staff College in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE
Military History

by

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Fort Leavenworth, Kansas
2003

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 06-06-2003		2. REPORT TYPE thesis		3. DATES COVERED (FROM - TO) 05-08-2002 to 06-06-2003	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE THE ARMY'S SIOUX CAMPAIGN OF 1876: IDENTIFYING THE HORSE AS THE CENTER OF GRAVITY OF THE SIOUX Unclassified				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) Hoyt, Mark, V				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS US Army Command and General Staff College 1 Reynolds Ave Fort Leavenworth, KS66027-1352				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER ATZL-SWD-GD	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME AND ADDRESS ,				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT A1,Administrative or Operational Use 06-06-2003 US Army Command and General Staff College 1 Reynolds Ave Ft. Leavenworth, KS66027-1352					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT During the first half of 1876 the Army conducted three expeditions against the Sioux and Cheyenne Indians. The results of these three expeditions were: the first expedition destroying a small village, the second expedition being defeated in a meeting engagement, and the third expedition suffering the annihilation of five companies. The results lead to questioning the Army's focus on attacking and destroying villages as the primary target of their expeditions. If the Army had a complete understanding of the Sioux they would have realized that the ?hub of all power? or center of gravity of the Sioux was the horse, which every major aspect of Sioux life was augmented and dependent upon. The first three expeditions of the Sioux Campaign of 1876 demonstrate that: senior Army commanders planned their campaigns, expeditions, and organizations around their knowledge of Sioux? mobility, the primary source of power for the Sioux warrior was mobility gained from the horse, Army forces could not bring their advantage in firepower to bear on Sioux warriors. Army commanders understood the mobility of the Sioux village and their warriors, but they failed to take the next step--challenging the old assumption that attacking villages and using a strategy of exhaustion was the correct way to subdue the Sioux. Instead, Army forces should have concentrated their attacks on center of gravity of the Sioux--the horse.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Horses; Army; Sioux Indians; Indians of North America; Center of gravity; Cheyenne Indians; Sioux Campaign of 1876					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:		17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)		18. NUMBER OF PAGES 120	
19. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Buker, Kathy kathy.buker@us.army.mil					
a. REPORT Unclassified	b. ABSTRACT Unclassified	c. THIS PAGE Unclassified	19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER International Area Code Area Code Telephone Number 9137583138 DSN 5853138		
					Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98) Prescribed by ANSI Std Z39.18

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

ABSTRACT

THE ARMY'S SIOUX CAMPAIGN OF 1876: IDENTIFYING THE HORSE AS THE CENTER OF GRAVITY OF THE SIOUX, by MAJ Mark V. Hoyt, USA, 111 pages.

During the first half of 1876 the Army conducted three expeditions against the Sioux and Cheyenne Indians. The results of these three expeditions were: the first expedition destroying a small village, the second expedition being defeated in a meeting engagement, and the third expedition suffering the annihilation of five companies. The results lead to questioning the Army's focus on attacking and destroying villages as the primary target of their expeditions. If the Army had a complete understanding of the Sioux they would have realized that the "hub of all power" or center of gravity of the Sioux was the horse, which every major aspect of Sioux life was augmented and dependent upon. The first three expeditions of the Sioux Campaign of 1876 demonstrate that: senior Army commanders planned their campaigns, expeditions, and organizations around their knowledge of Sioux' mobility, the primary source of power for the Sioux warrior was mobility gained from the horse, Army forces could not bring their advantage in firepower to bear on Sioux warriors. Army commanders understood the mobility of the Sioux village and their warriors, but they failed to take the next step--challenging the old assumption that attacking villages and using a strategy of exhaustion was the correct way to subdue the Sioux. Instead, Army forces should have concentrated their attacks on center of gravity of the Sioux--the horse.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks go to the people that assisted me during the last year in the writing of this thesis. First and foremost thanks go to my wife Tracy who spent hundreds of hours of “taking up the slack” while I worked on my writings. In addition, more thanks to Tracy for allowing and encouraging me to obtain my second master’s degree by writing on something that is one of my true loves, frontier warfare--ISHMYLM. Further thanks to my committee: Dr. Jerold Brown, Lieutenant Colonel Mike O’Bea and Major Jeff Storch, who took the time to help me, discuss my topic, make editorial comments, and keep my thesis on track. Final thanks go to the remainder of my family, D.J. and Isabel for being patient with their father while he worked on his thesis.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE SIOUX NATION

In 1876 the government of the United States assigned the U.S. Army the mission of forcing the Sioux Indians onto their reservations permanently. The Army had emerged from the Civil War in 1865 organized to fight large-scale campaigns and battles against a conventional opponent. Eleven years later, after several force reductions, the Army was adapting its doctrine and tactics to fight an irregular enemy who used unconventional tactics on a non-linear and non-contiguous battlefield.

During the first half of 1876, the Army enforcing U.S. Governmental directives conducted three expeditions against the Sioux and their Cheyenne allies. As part of a campaign, all three expeditions' primary objective was to attack hostile Indian villages to return the Sioux and Cheyenne to the reservations. The results of the three expeditions were: the first expedition destroyed a small village at the Powder River; the second expedition was defeated in a meeting engagement at the Rosebud River; and the third expedition suffered the annihilation of five companies of the 7th Cavalry at the Little Big Horn River. The results of these expeditions lead to questions regarding the Army strategy of attacking Sioux villages as their main goal

What was the center of gravity (COG) of the Sioux Nation? An answer to this question demands answers to several subordinate questions: What was the history of the Sioux? What were the possible center(s) of gravity of the Sioux Nation? What did the Army identify as the target of their expeditions during the 1876 campaign? Did the Army's strategy and operational maneuver adapt and evolve to their enemy? Did the

tactics used by Army officers recognize the enemy's center(s) of gravity? What were the Army's center(s) of gravity? Were Army officers able to use their center(s) of gravity to gain a decisive edge over the enemy? And finally, what factors led to the Army's initial failure in a campaign directed against an enemy with limited resources, no industrial capability, an undisciplined force of warriors, and decentralized leadership?

To answer these questions, this paper will be divided into six chapters. The first chapter will explain the concepts of COG and decisive points and give a brief background of the Sioux Nation while discussing and identifying possible Sioux COGs. The second chapter will give a brief background to the U.S. Army in 1876, discuss campaign strategy and Army COGs. The third through fifth chapters will discuss the first three expeditions that led to major engagements against the Sioux and Cheyenne Indians in 1876. These three chapters will use historical evidence to provide proof that identified Sioux and Army COGs in chapters 1 and 2 are correct. Chapter 6 will provide a summation to the thesis.

There are two major assumptions that underlay this thesis. The first assumption is that the results of the Sioux campaign are evidence that the Army with superior organization, firepower, and logistics did not identify the best strategy and tactics to use against the Sioux. Army officers misidentified the correct Sioux center of gravity, because they failed to challenge the old assumption that attacking and destroying enemy villages was the best course of action. The second assumption is that even though there are hundreds of books and magazine articles detailing these events no author has ever addressed that Army commanders misidentified their enemy's COG.

Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, defines COGs as

what Clausewitz called “the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends . . . the point at which all our energies should be directed.” They are those characteristics, capabilities, or sources of power from which a military force derives its freedom of action, physical strength, or will to fight. At the strategic level, COGs might include a military force, an alliance, national will or public support, a set of critical capabilities or functions, or national strategy itself. COGs also may exist at the operational level.¹

The criticality of identifying enemy COGs is further addressed by JP 3-0,

The essence of operational art lies in being able to mass effects against the adversary’s sources of power. . . . In theory, destruction or neutralization of adversary COGs is the most direct path to victory.²

Carl von Clausewitz, who first defined the concept of enemy COGs, defined multiple examples of differing COGs like an enemy’s army, his capital, and leadership. Clausewitz in *On War* stated,

There are very few cases where this conception is not applicable--where it would not be realistic to reduce several centers of gravity to one.³

Clausewitz’s point is that even though there can be multiple COGs they usually revolve around one central COG.

Clausewitz’s book *On War* was widely read by officers in the Prussian Army, and it was translated into English till 1873, but in 1876, most U.S. Army officers had been taught the principles of war by Dennis Hart Mahan who based his interpretations on the works of Antoine H. Jomini.⁴

Jomini described decisive points which are somewhat similar to Clausewitz’s concept of the COG. Jomini states that attacking decisive points are the underlying principle of war. JP 3-0 defines decisive points as:

By correctly identifying and controlling decisive points, a commander can gain a marked advantage over the adversary and greatly influence the outcome of an action. Decisive points are usually geographic in nature, such as a constricted sea lane, a hill, a town. . . . Decisive points are not COGs; they are the keys to attacking protected COGs.⁵

Jomini, though, defined decisive strategic points that occur both in a theatre of war and on the battlefield as a point

whose importance is constant and immense [and further as]...the name *decisive strategic point* should be given to all of those (decisive points) which are capable of exercising a marked influence either upon the result of the campaign or upon a single enterprise.⁶

Even though JP 3-0 explains that decisive points are keys to attacking a COG, Jomini like Clausewitz defined decisive strategic points that would have been roughly equivalent to the concept of a COG in contemporary U.S. Army doctrine.

Therefore senior Army officers in 1876--who were all veterans of the Civil War--understood that operational art was aimed at attacking an enemy's decisive strategic points or decisive points. When the Army was assigned the mission of eliminating the enemy's will to resist and thus forcing him onto his reservations permanently, the Army's leadership made plans that focused on attacking the enemy's decisive strategic points or COGs. In extension, the Army's campaign plan would focus on attacking hostile villages, and thus destroy the Sioux' will to fight.

However, to identify the best strategy in defeating an enemy you must have a good knowledge of that enemy. JP 3-0 states the importance of understanding your enemy in formulating a strategy to attack that enemy:

Identification of adversary COGs requires detailed knowledge and understanding of how opponents organize, fight, and make decisions as well as their physical and psychological strengths and weaknesses.⁷

In summary, to properly identify an enemy's COG you must understand your enemy.

Of the three main branches of Sioux, only the Teton Sioux or Lakota (hereafter referred to as the Sioux) and their principle allies the Northern Cheyenne (likewise the Cheyenne) were the targeted tribes of the 1876 Sioux campaign. The Sioux and

Cheyenne spoke different languages, but they had both migrated from the Great Lakes regions in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries. With similar cultures and common enemies like the Crow, Shoshone, Pawnee, and eventually Euro-Americans, the Sioux and Cheyenne became allies. By 1876, the two tribes had strong ties through intermarriage and several members of each tribe spoke the other's language.⁸

The more numerous of the two tribes were the Sioux whose population was roughly five times the population of the Cheyenne. The Teton Sioux consisted of seven allied subtribes who spoke the Lakota dialect. These seven subtribes were the Hunkpapas, Oglalas, Brules, Sans Arcs, Two Kettles, Minneconjous, and Blackfeet. Each subtribe consisted of a few bands that comprised several villages that followed migratory herds throughout Montana, Wyoming, South Dakota, and Nebraska.⁹

From 1866 to 1868 the Sioux and Cheyenne warriors fought a successful war against the United States sparked primarily by Euro-American invasions along the Bozeman Trail. This war united the Sioux and Cheyenne tribes. The biggest success of the Sioux and Cheyenne warriors occurred in December 1866 when they wiped out Captain Fetterman and his entire command of eighty men in northern Wyoming.¹⁰

One consequence of the Fetterman massacre was that the U.S. Army immediately replaced its muzzle-loading rifles with breech-loading rifles in July of 1867. The replacement breech-loading rifles, although not state-of-the-art weapons, had a much higher rate of fire than the muzzle-loading rifle carried by Fetterman's soldiers. Thus the soldiers were able to deal more adequately the next summer in August of 1867 when the same Sioux and Cheyenne warriors attacked small groups of soldiers at two different locations with the resulting battles being called the Hayfield and Wagon Box Fights. At

each of these locations less than forty men were able to defeat a Sioux and Cheyenne force that outnumbered the small Army commands by over twenty to one. In addition, at both engagements the Sioux and Cheyenne warriors withdrew after taking severe casualties while inflicting minor casualties on the Army.¹¹

Both sides probably learned lessons from these fights. Army officers learned that even a small force with breech-loading weapons could hold off larger numbers of hostiles. The Sioux and Cheyenne warriors learned they could not fight soldiers armed with breech-loading rifles. It can be assumed that if the Sioux had 100 years of experience with fire arms that they also learned that they needed to acquire some of these new more modern rifles.

The Fetterman defeat, continued harassment by the Sioux and Cheyenne along the Bozeman trail and the forts established for its protection, and the progress of the Northern Pacific Railroad led the U.S. Government to agree to Sioux demands. The result was the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. The Army withdrew its military forces from the Black Hills and Big Horn Territory as part of the terms of the treaty. As depicted in figure 1, the Great Sioux Reservation in present day South Dakota was created, and the U.S. Government promised to provide aid so that the Sioux could take up agriculture. In addition, the Treaty gave ownership of the Black Hills to the Sioux along with hunting rights (but not permanent residency rights) in an area north of the North Platte River, and east of the summits of the Big Horn Mountains called the ‘unceded lands.’ The Sioux were the first and last group of Western Indians to win war against the United States.¹²

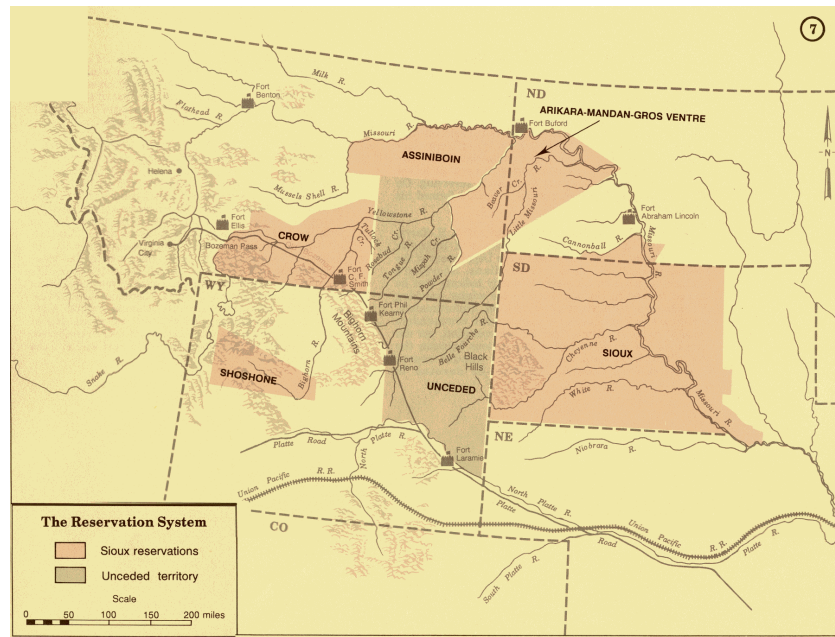


Figure 1. Sioux Reservation System and Unceded Territory. *Source:* Dr. William G. Robertson, Dr. Jerold E. Brown, Major William M. Campsey, and Major Scott R. McMeen. *Atlas of the Sioux Wars*, (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1995), 7.

The reservation system gave the U.S. Government a couple of advantages. First, the Government could impose a system to “civilize” the hostile tribes and move them away from their nomadic existence by teaching them agriculture. This appealed to many groups back east advocating fair treatment for the Indian. More importantly it allowed the Government to use its diplomatic and economic instruments of power rather than military force.

The Government regularly conducted a census of Indian tribes on the reservation through the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). This was necessary to determine annual subsidies. The BIA categorized Indians into four classes. The second and third class Indians were considered partially civilized and civilized respectively (roughly meaning

completely on reservations and sedentary). The fourth class Indians were defined as roamers or “harmless vagrants and vagabonds.” The Sioux and Cheyenne belonged to the first class category who were considered uncivilized or the “wilder tribes.” According to the 1874 Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, of 98,108 Indians in the first class, 46,663 of these were Sioux and another 6,318 were Cheyenne.¹³

In the 1875 Indian census, the population of Teton Sioux (Lakota) came to about 35,800, with the remainder belonging to the Nakota and Dakota branches of the Sioux who lived mostly east of the Missouri River. The actual population of Teton Sioux according to research done by John S. Gray was probably closer to 18,000 Lakota and 3,700 Northern Cheyenne.¹⁴ However, the numbers show that the Sioux and Cheyenne populations comprised about 40 percent of Class 1 Indians.

Regular contact with the Sioux allowed the Government to maintain virtual peace around the Sioux territory for nearly eight years from 1868 to 1876. The exposure of the Sioux to government aid, along with the efforts of Indian agents and the safety granted by the reservation system, had a tremendous impact on the Sioux. By analyzing data on Indians that returned to the reservation during the Sioux Campaign of 1876, along with population growth rates, Gray was able to point out that only about 8,000 members of the two tribes participated in the Sioux war while roughly 13,700 remaining on the reservations.¹⁵ The U.S. Government’s creation of a Sioux reservation, along with its subsidization of Sioux Indians, kept over 60 percent of the Sioux out of the war.

There are several possible COGs for the Sioux in 1876. These COGs by definition must be a source of power or strength that provides freedom of action, physical strength or a will to fight. The first source of power that provided both a physical strength and will

to fight was the village. The Sioux and Cheyenne lived in villages made of mobile teepees (lodges) which could be broken down and carried by horses. The village was the center of Sioux social life and provided the Sioux warrior with a home for his family and possessions. The majority of items in a village, to include the teepees, was made from game animals. In addition, the village represented the warrior's social and religious life.¹⁶

Was the village the primary source of power of the Sioux Nation on which everything depended on? If the population of a village could escape when the Army attacked a village, did that defeat the villagers' will to resist? If a village could be reconstructed within a season by aggressive hunting and trading or gifts from other tribes is this the true hub of all power? Many military officers during the period believed that the village was indeed the center of Indian life and power.

Another source of physical strength for the Sioux nation was its large population in comparison with other Plains Indian tribes. As noted earlier, the Sioux vastly outnumbered any other tribe on the Great Plains. To take advantage of this strength, the Sioux would gather together for collective defense or raids. It was rare for all the tribes with their respective bands to come together except for special occasions like the annual Sun Dance. The need for abundant game to feed all the villagers and pasturage for horses usually limited large tribal gatherings.¹⁷

If the Sioux gathered together they could potentially mass thousands of warriors. This raises the question as to whether the alliance was their primary center of gravity. If the government had convinced over half of the Sioux to not participate in the Sioux war of 1876 then the alliance must have been severely impacted. All Indian groups had decentralized leadership and the alliance was no different. This impacted its ability to

establish common goals. Compared to the U.S. Army, however the Sioux nation was small.

The ability to hunt and live off the land was a source of power. Hunting gave the Sioux freedom of action and physical strength. The Sioux and Cheyenne bands were nomadic and followed the annual migration of buffalo herds (correctly called a North American Bison) and subsisted mainly off of buffalo along with other game animals. In addition, women gathered wild berries, roots, and grains to augment their diet. The buffalo provided the Indian with the majority of his clothing, food, and shelter. The need to track, follow, and find game along with the ability to kill it created a cultural society in the Sioux and Cheyenne that emphasized hunting skills.¹⁸

In 1876 the buffalo population was sufficient to meet the needs of the Sioux and Cheyenne Nations. Self-sufficiency was a source of strength, but was it the hub of all power? Could the Army attack buffalo herds and eliminate the food source of the Plains Indian tribes? However, hunting and killing buffalo herds would not have produced timely results and would not have been acceptable to Indian allies, western civilians profiting from the buffalo hide trade, and eastern philanthropists.

The Sioux obtained physical strength by having an established gun culture which they brought onto the plains from the northeast through trade with white traders and other northeastern tribes. As the Sioux were forced westward and onto the plains by rival tribes to the east, the Sioux acquired and traded for the guns that had been used to displace them.¹⁹

By 1876, the Sioux were well armed. Based on an archaeological examination from the Custer Battlefield in 1984-1985, which included ballistic tests on recovered

cartridges and bullets, archaeologists identified 116 different repeating rifles that were used during the battle. With statistical projections based on a comparison of identified Army firearms, they projected that between 340 to 403 repeating rifles were used by the Indians during the battle. This projection does not take into account another 90 identifiable cartridge firing weapons. A combined projection of all cartridge based firearms leads to the suggestion that perhaps 593 to 693 cartridge based firearms were used by the Indians at the Little Big Horn. This does not include muzzle-loading firearms and their bullets which cannot be independently identified by ballistics although numerous lead balls were found. With several observers of the day stating that the Sioux had an equal number of repeating rifles and muzzle-loading firearms and single shot firearms, one can conclude that at least 800-900 Indians at the battle of Little Bighorn were armed with guns of some type; about 75 percent of these were modern firearms.²⁰

Sioux and Cheyenne warriors found ways to acquire rifles and ammunition. They traded with reservation Indians, U.S. Indian Agents, authorized or unauthorized trading posts, traders, and other tribes. For currency the Sioux used ponies and buffalo hides. By 1840 an estimated 150 trading posts operated on the plains, where one buffalo robe could buy twenty-five rounds of ammunition or thirty-six iron arrowheads. In addition, one or two ponies could be traded for a rifle.²¹

The Sioux and Cheyenne acquired bullet molds and lead and could mold bullets for their muzzle loaders. In the Battle of the Washita in 1868, after capturing a village of fifty-one lodges, Lieutenant Colonel George Custer noted that he had captured ninety bullet molds, forty-seven rifles, and thirty-seven revolvers. Reports stated that some Indians could recast cartridges with one example of a reloaded cartridge found in the

archaeological dig on the Little Bighorn battlefield. Responding to assumed ability of the Indian to recast shells, the Army issued General Order 13 in February of 1876, stating that officers would remove empty shells “after firing, either in action or at target practice.”²²

If the Sioux and Cheyenne could not stand up to Army units in linear fire fights, is this the Sioux hub of all power? The gun trade adequately armed the Sioux and Cheyenne, but it probably did not give them a decisive edge in battle. If the Sioux required overwhelming numbers to defeat an Army unit, this infers that their firepower was inferior in comparison to Army units.

Another source of power for the Sioux and Cheyenne were their warriors. For reasons of survival, cultures like the Sioux and Cheyenne emphasized not only horsemanship and hunting skills, but warrior skills. In the Northern Cheyenne tribe when a boy reached manhood (around fourteen years old), he was invited to join either the Elk warriors, Crazy Dog warriors, or the Fox warriors. These three warrior societies had a total of thirty chiefs along with another forty tribal chiefs who comprised the ruling organization of a village of the Cheyenne. However, all tribal chiefs were also members of one of the three warrior societies.²³

The Sioux would gather for self-defense in times of war, but the warriors fought tactically with little or no organization on the battlefield. Although plans could be developed for battles before hand, after the battle started Sioux and Cheyenne warriors fought as individuals or followed one of a multitude of their chiefs. This lack of centralized command was caused by the great number of chieftains and individualistic fighting methods used by the warriors. This decentralized fighting method hindered

Sioux and Cheyenne efforts to defeat Army forces. If the Army present in the field outnumbered the Sioux and Cheyenne warriors and these same warriors needed to outnumber an Army force to defeat is this the COG?

The horse was a source of power that gave physical strength, freedom of action, and will to fight. The horse used by the Indians--sometimes called the Indian pony--was a descendent of Spanish horses. Thomas E. Mails writes in *The Mystic Warriors of the Plains*:

Due to an inbreeding process begun in Spain, the Indian stallion had become a much smaller animal than the larger United States Cavalry horse the Indians were to encounter in the post-Civil War days. . . . As it developed on the rigorous Plains, the little pony came to have amazing speed and stamina. It won many a race against the White man's larger horses, and could often double the distance other laden horses could travel a day, sometimes, say authorities, covering as much as sixty or eight miles.²⁴

The advent of the horse on the northeastern plains in the late eighteenth century dramatically changed the ability of Plains Indian tribes like the Sioux to follow the migrating buffalo and other game animals. The increase in mobility provided by the horse also affected Sioux village life. Prior to the horse most villages moved by human power and large dogs, but the advent of the horse which was called by some tribes "seven dogs"--referencing their hauling ability--doubled the mobility of the village. A horsepower village could now travel twelve miles on an average day and up to thirty miles in an emergency. Village mobility was necessary for the Sioux to follow the migratory buffalo and other game animals. An average teepee took three horses to move. Two horses would pull the dozen plus poles and family goods while the third horse carried the buffalo hides used to cover the lodge. The number of horses varied by family

wealth with one horse used for a poor family with a very small lodge to up to six horses for a very wealthy family with a large lodge.²⁵

A Sioux warrior's wealth was indicated by the number of ponies he owned. The pony had become the primary currency of the Sioux and Cheyenne who lived in a barter economy and used the pony to trade for goods, rifles or ammunition. The horse alone is thought to have increased trading tenfold on the plains.²⁶

The Sioux warriors--like other Plains Indian warriors--were extraordinary cavalymen. Observers like George Caitlin, and George Crook, site the incredible riding skills of the Plains Indian warriors and describe them as the "greatest horseman" or "light cavalry" in the world.²⁷ The mobility from the horse gave Sioux and Cheyenne warriors the ability to mass on the battlefield and dictate where fights would take place.

The increase in mobility for both the village and the hunters also increased conflicts with neighboring tribes. The Sioux arguably was the first major tribe to obtain the horse culture and gun culture together. The Sioux being the largest tribe on the Northern Plains dominated their region through continual wars of expansion. The Sioux drove off several rival tribes, and by 1850, the Sioux had occupied large portions of the Northern Plains to include most of Montana and large portions of Wyoming and the Dakota Territory.²⁸

Every Sioux possible COG is linked to the horse. The Sioux village could not move without the horse. To live off the land by hunting and following the buffalo required horses for both the hunters and village to follow migratory game. In addition, Sioux trade and wealth was based upon horse ownership. Additional hides for trading were only available because the Sioux had the horse which gave them an increased

hunting range and ability. The horse gave the Sioux warriors mobility which gave them the ability to overwhelm and defeat smaller Army forces which were superior in firepower. The alliance and being able to combine and mass villages required the horse to not only bring the villages together but to give their hunters sufficient range to hunt enough game to feed the large gathering. As depicted in figure 2, the horse was critical in all aspects of Sioux life.

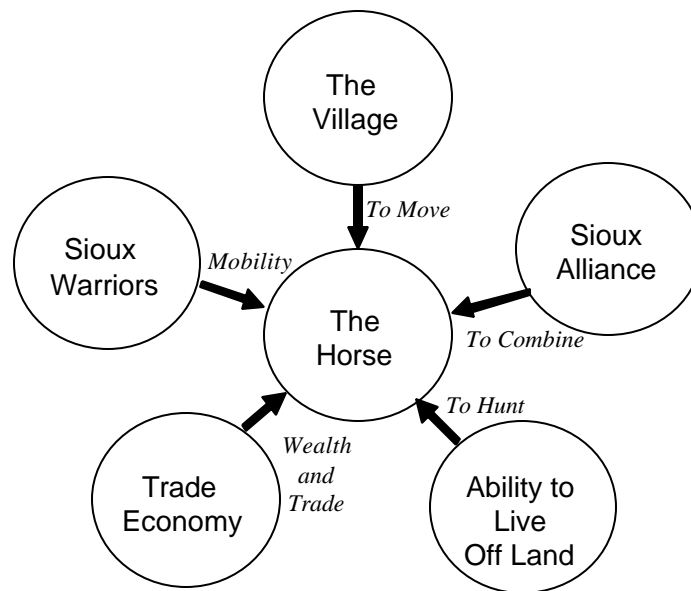


Figure 2. The Horse as the Sioux' Center of Gravity

If a COG is the hub of enemy power, for the Sioux and most other Plains Indians it the horse was the main source of power. This thesis will provide a background to the Army in 1876. The first three engagements of the 1876 Campaign provide evidence that

the COG of the Sioux and Cheyenne was the horse, Army strategy evolved due to enemy mobility provided by the horse, the Army could not bring its tactical COG of linear firepower to bear against their opponent, and Army leadership failed to change the focus of their strategy to attack the source of power of their opponent.

¹Department of Defense, Joint Publication 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, September 2001), III-22.

²*Ibid.*, III-23.

³Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, 8th ed. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 595-597.

⁴*Ibid.*, 33-34; Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1860-1941*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, Center of Military History United States Army, 1998), 17-18, 21.

⁵Department of Defense, Joint Publication 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, III-23.

⁶Antoine H. Jomini, *Roots of Strategy: Book 2, The Art of War*, ed. Brig. Gen. J. D. Hittle (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1987), 461, 466-467.

⁷United States Department of Defense, Joint Publication 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, III-22.

⁸Jerome A. Greene, *Lakota and Cheyenne: Indian Views of the Great Sioux War, 1876-1877* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), xiii-xiv.

⁹John S. Gray, *Centennial Campaign: The Sioux War of 1876* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 319; and Jerome A. Greene, xiii-xv.

¹⁰Roy E. Appleman, "The Fetterman Fight," in *Great Western Indian Fights* (Lincoln Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, A Bison Book, 1966), 120-121, 130.

¹¹Roy E. Appleman, "The Hayfield Fight," in *Great Western Indian Fights*, (Lincoln Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, A Bison Book, 1966), 137, 144, 147; Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, A Bison Book, 1984), 123-125.

¹²*Ibid.*, 132-137; Benjamin Capps, *The Indians: The Old West Series*, rev. ed. (New York: Time-Life Books, 1974), 197.

¹³United States Secretary of the Interior, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior for the Year 1874* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1874), 3-4, 6.

¹⁴Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 317-319.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 317-319.

¹⁶Wooden Leg, *Wooden Leg: A Warrior Who Fought Custer* interpreted by Thomas B. Marquis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, A Bison Book, 1931), 76-77.

¹⁷George E. Hyde, *Spotted Tail's Folk: A History of the Brule Sioux* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961) 34,37; and Chief Standing Bear, *My People, The Sioux*, ed. E. A. Brininstool (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1928), 113-114.

¹⁸Wooden Leg, 87- 88; Chief Standing Bear, 49-51; and Capps, 67, 69.

¹⁹Frank R. Secoy, "A Functional-Historical View of Plains Indian Warfare: The Process of Change from the 17th to the Early 19th Century" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1950), 134-138.

²⁰Douglas D. Scott, Richard A. Fox Jr., Melissa A. Connor and Dick Harmon. *Archaeological Perspectives on the Battle of the Little Bighorn* (Normon and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 112,119.

²¹Capps, 62.

²²Charles J.Brill, *Custer, Black Kettle and the Fight of the Washita* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 310; and Scott, Fox, Connor, and Harmon, 163.

²³Wooden Leg, 56.

²⁴Thomas E. Mails, *The Mystic Warriors of the Plains* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972), 218.

²⁵Capps, 54-56; and Chief Standing Bear, 13.

²⁶Chief Standing Bear, 13; and Capps, 55.

²⁷Mails, 219; and Capps, 64.

²⁸Secoy, 149-151.

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND TO THE U.S. ARMY IN 1876

In 1876, the Army was under a dual chain of command called the “coordinate system.” The administrative direction came from the Secretary of War, William W. Belknap. Belknap was responsible for the Army administration and reported to the President of the United States, Ulysses S. Grant. Belknap directly or indirectly controlled all the military divisions during peacetime. However, upon the commencement of military operations, orders would be directed through the headquarters of the Army led by Commanding General of the Army, William T. Sherman. The Army chain of command is depicted in figure 3 (note not all divisions and departments shown).¹

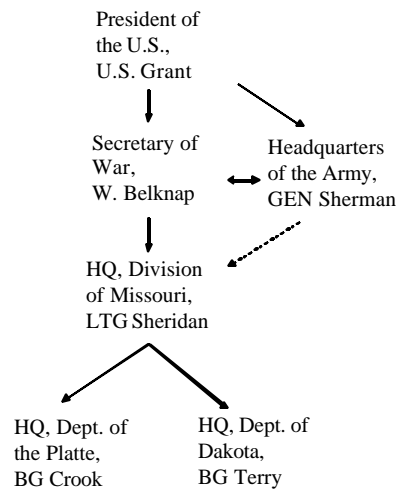


Figure 3. Coordinate System--Army Chain of Command in 1876

The Army made several adaptations during its shift from the conventional warfare of the Civil War to the unconventional warfare on the western frontier. These adaptations were in reaction to three primary factors: a large scale and continual force reduction; securing vast areas of land; and engaging a highly mobile enemy. The Army adapted to these three factors predominately by changing its organization and force structure.

After the Civil War the Army was forced to deal with the large-scale demobilization of 1,034,000 militia and volunteers. A 95 percent force reduction reduced manpower to a maximum authorized strength of 56,815 in 1867. The force reduction continued until 1874 when Congress authorized a total strength of 2,203 officers and 25,000 enlisted soldiers.²

To deal with the continuous force reductions with an expanding mission over a large territory the Army changed its organizational structure. The new structure was a change from the Civil War Army which consisted of corps, broken down into divisions, brigades, and regiments to an organizational structure that was territorial in nature, which was similar to the Army's organization prior to the Civil War. At the start of 1876, the Army divided the United States into four territorial areas: the divisions of the Pacific, Missouri, South, and Atlantic. Divisions were subdivided into departments with each department having multiple outposts and forts located throughout to control the adjacent area. For example, in 1876 the Division of the Missouri consisted of five departments with seventy-six camps and posts spread throughout these departments. The northernmost department was titled the Department of Dakota, which consisted of the State of Minnesota and the Territories of Dakota and Montana. The departments were sometimes further divided into districts usually the size of a state.³

The Army spread its soldiers thinly throughout numerous garrisons and outposts based on mission requirements. This manning of numerous outposts allowed the Army to establish a forward security presence with the capability of conducting numerous patrols, scouting, and escort missions throughout the frontier. These small garrisons would normally number from fifty men in a small outpost to around 200-300 or more at larger outposts.⁴ The division, department, or district commander collected forces at a centralized post near the Army's objective (e.g., hostile village) if he wanted to conduct a large-scale offensive campaign. The Army commander would then either appoint a commander or command this force and draw logistical support from nearby posts.

Even though the Army was recruited under a regimental system, the Army shifted away from the Civil War regimental organization for campaigns. The limitations of a small force and large amounts of territory dictated that force composition would usually be based on proximity to the objective versus regimental organization. For example, during the 1876 Sioux Campaign at the Battle of the Rosebud, Brigadier General George Crook had ten companies of the 3rd Cavalry Regiment, five companies of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment, three companies of the 9th Infantry Regiment and two companies of the 4th Infantry Regiment. Not one company operated within a complete regiment, since cavalry regiments in 1876 had twelve companies authorized while infantry regiments had ten companies. Units in the same regiment could be stationed and operate in multiple departments simultaneously. While Crook was fighting near the Rosebud River with five companies of the 2nd Cavalry, another four companies of the 2nd Cavalry were in the field with Brigadier General Alfred Terry commanding the Department of Dakota.⁵

The Army was forced to adapt to the reduced force structure and numerous mission requirements, but the Army's third adaptation came from Army commanders learning how to engage an enemy that was extremely mobile. The Army adapted its force and operational structure to meet enemy mobility in three ways: by adding specialists to Army forces, by altering the makeup of the force, and by altering its strategy.

The Army's first adaptation to enemy mobility was to add specialists to its organization during campaigns. The Army hired experienced guides, usually white civilians, to navigate its forces through unknown territory with little or no infrastructure. In addition the Army would hire translators for the Army scouts or for the enemy. Finally, the Army enlisted scouts from various Indian tribes. Although the job of a guide was navigation, the job of the scout was normally to find or detect the enemy. On rare occasions the Army encouraged Indian tribes to fight as auxiliaries.⁶

The Army's second adaptation to enemy mobility was to sacrifice the less mobile infantry forces as the Government continually forced manpower cuts. Field commanders like General William T. Sherman in 1867--then commanding the Division of the Missouri--noted in the 1867 Report of the Secretary of War that he had only four cavalry regiments. Of those four cavalry regiments, one was engaged in New Mexico, one was still enlisting soldiers, and the other two were forced to cover the cavalry missions for a region encompassing nearly one-third of the United States.⁷

To increase the mobility of their limited force, the Army continually increased the percentage of cavalry strength in comparison to infantry strength within the total authorized manpower. In 1869 the Congress reduced the number of authorized Army infantry regiments from forty-five to twenty-five while the cavalry was not reduced. In

addition, enlisted strength for the cavalry companies remained stable so that in 1876 even though the Army had ten authorized cavalry regiments versus twenty-five infantry regiments the authorized enlisted strength for the cavalry was 11,381 versus 12,886 for the infantry. Compared to the Army in 1867, the total enlisted cavalry strength had decreased by only 569 men over nine years, while the infantry had been reduced by twenty regiments and within the twenty-five remaining regiments had lost another 11,034 men.⁸ Army commanders were adapting to the mobility of the enemy by retaining the more mobile cavalry while keeping within the congressional manpower constraints.

The third adaptation to Plains Indian mobility was to alter how expeditions which this thesis explains in detail in chapters 3 through 6. Army commanders aggressively tailored their forces and organization directly as a result of the enemy's mobility.

The Army's tactics for defeating hostile Indian tribes changed little since the founding of the Army in 1775. The standard strategy for defeating hostile Indian tribes was based upon exhaustion (not annihilation) as the Army simply sought to wear the enemy down by eroding the hostile tribe's will or means to resist. The strategy was expensive and time consuming as the Army continually attacked and harassed the hostile tribe until they capitulated.

The Army targeted the hostile tribe's village because it could destroy or disrupt the enemy's resources, logistical base, and families simultaneously. In addition, it might force enemy warriors into a fight where superior Army firepower would normally prevail. If the Army was successful and defeated or drove off the opposing warrior force and then destroyed their village it should weaken their will and ability to resist. With the

Army applying continual pressure, eventually the Indian tribe should capitulate and move onto a reservation.

Although the strategy for defeating hostile Indian tribes by destroying their villages had not changed markedly since the inception of the U.S. Army, the standard Indian opponent had. With the emergence of horse culture on the Great Plains, the Plains Indian warrior achieved a mobility that was superior in comparison to the Eastern Indian warrior. In addition, Plains Indians like the Sioux had a completely mobile and fast moving village. The combination of being on the Plains and attacking a mobile village created a new problem. For the Army's strategy to work, the attacking column had to remain undetected until the Army force could locate the enemy's village. If the village had a twenty-four hour notice one Army officer stated that the chances of catching that village were less than one in twenty.⁹

Most Army columns had a high probability of being detected by hostile Indians. Hunting parties were constantly searching for game in all directions away from their village to feed their people. These hunting parties created a primitive reconnaissance screen that created a need for an Army column to move fast when it thought it was within range of a village. By 1880 a typical cavalryman in the Army carried forty-two pounds of equipment less than his European counterpart. In addition, Army columns were getting rid of wagons in favor of faster moving mule trains.¹⁰

The Army's strategy to attack a village evolved because of the Plains Indians mobility. Since the chance of a single Army column remaining undetected was remote the Army changed its strategy and sent multiple converging columns from several different cardinal directions toward suspected hostile villages. If one column was

detected the idea was that the escaping village would run into another column or that the second column would remain undetected. A clear illustration of this strategy occurred in Red River War of 1874-1875.¹¹ A major problem with this strategy was it forced the Army field commander to divide his forces to increase the likelihood of finding and engaging the enemy village(s). However, as detailed in Chapter 6, senior Army commanders assumed was any Army force of significant size could defeat large numbers of hostile Indians.

The Indians' superior mobility increased the emphasis of attacking their villages. To force the Indian warriors into a fight, the Army had to strike the village. Thus the Army's combination of specialists and cavalry gave the Army the best chance of moving through enemy territory, avoiding detection, finding and attacking the enemy village before the village got away.¹²

The Army's strategy in fighting an irregular enemy identifies several possible Army centers of gravity (COG). The Army had several strategic strengths that were virtually untouchable by the Sioux or other Indian tribes. The Army benefited from support derived from a more centralized government, an organized force, massive logistical resources and manpower reserve that were virtually untouchable by the Sioux.

At the operational level, the Army had one major weakness in relation to the Sioux. Whereas the Sioux could live off the land, Army forces could not. Each soldier required rations and each Army horse required several pounds of feed per day as Army horses could not live off the land either.¹³ As will be detailed, several times during the 1876 campaign the Army lines of communication (supply lines) were so ponderous they decisively constrained and slowed down operations. This forced Army commanders to

organize their forces to increase mobility. Although Indian tribes like the Sioux could interfere with the Army's lines of communication, it seems that the length of the line of communication was a larger problem than possible interdiction by hostile warriors.

At the tactical level the Army had two strengths, linear firepower and centralized leadership. These two tactical strengths dictated how the Army fought in relation to the Sioux and can be reduced to one major tactical COG, organized linear firepower.

The first component of the organized linear firepower COG was the Army's firepower. In 1873 the Army convened a commission to consider several rifles and select one that would best serve the Army's needs. The commission chose the Springfield trapdoor rifle and carbine as its new weapons. Although a single shot weapon, the Springfield was a breech-loader and, in the hands of trained soldiers, could be fired twelve to thirteen times a minute. However, the real advantage of the Springfield was its range and accuracy, especially in comparison with shorter range and underpowered repeating rifles. The combination of long range, high-powered rifles with plentiful and standardized ammunition gave the Army an advantage in firepower over its enemies.¹⁴

The Army's battle formations also provided an advantage in linear firepower. The standard Army formation for frontier fighting was the dismounted skirmish line, whether an infantry or cavalry force. With a disciplined and centrally organized force, the Army was able to increase its concentration of firepower by using linear formations. These formations were able to withstand enemy assaults and deliver devastating fire against any mass of defended forces.¹⁵

However, two things weakened cavalry linear firepower in comparison to infantry firepower, the requirement for horse-holders and a cartridge with a reduced charge. When

the cavalry dismounted, one in four soldiers were designated as horse holders. This immediately reduced the firepower of cavalry formations by 25 percent. Additionally, the cartridge used in the cavalry's carbine was a .45-caliber, 55-grain (.45-55) cartridge in comparison with the rifle's .45-caliber, 70-grain (.45-70) cartridge. The difference in the cartridges came about because of the "lighter weight" of the carbine. Using a rifle cartridge in a carbine increased the recoil by 17 percent (155 pounds to 182 pounds). Even though the cartridges were the same size and interchangeable between both weapons, a standard carbine cartridge would have a cardboard wad in place of fifteen grains of powder in the case. A rifle cartridge had twenty-seven percent more powder propelling the same bullet, which meant the carbine had less range and a lower trajectory in comparison with the rifle. Although these two disadvantages weakened cavalry firepower it was accepted by the Army because of the offsetting advantage gained by the cavalry's mobility.¹⁶

The second Army strength that led to its organized linear firepower COG was organized leadership and centralized control. The Army could command and control its forces and maneuver them precisely using a centralized or evolvable plan. This led Army leaders to focus on how to concentrate their tactical firepower against the enemy. The only recognized way of forcing Indian warriors into an unfavorable fight was to strike their village and thus force them to defend it.

There were probably two primary causes of the Sioux Campaign of 1876. First and foremost, the discovery of gold in the Black Hills led citizens to pressure the U.S. Government to open the Sioux "occupied land" so that they could profit from its resources. Second, the continual raids conducted by Sioux warriors against other Class 1

Indians “the wilder tribes” were creating a problem. The Sioux shared the Great Plains with Crows, Shoshone, Blackfeet, Gros Ventres, and Utes whose combined population was around 19,000 people. While these tribes submitted to Government efforts the Sioux and their allies continued to wage war against these tribes. For obvious reasons, the Bureau of Indian Affairs did not want these Indians in a state of war with the Sioux.¹⁷

Placed in charge of the U.S. Army’s operation against the Sioux was Lieutenant General Phil Sheridan, commander of the Military Division of the Missouri. General Sheridan in turn, delegated the mission to Brigadier General George Crook, in charge of the Department of the Platte, and Brigadier General Alfred Terry, in charge of the Department of the Dakota whose area of responsibility included the Sioux and Cheyenne reservations and the “unceded territory.”¹⁸

As shown in figure 4, the Department of Dakota incorporated several posts strung out along the Missouri River. The posts were generally along the Missouri because it was more efficient to supply them by steamboats. Although the Department of the Platte incorporated Utah and Iowa besides Wyoming and Nebraska, the only manned posts in the winter of 1875 were in the latter two states.¹⁹ The forces in both departments were widely dispersed and any campaign required massing logistics and companies at one location before commencing operations. Distribution of forces in the Department of Dakota and the Department of the Platte in November of 1875, as reported by the War Department are shown in the figure 5. Referring back to figure 4, these forces were located at Fort Laramie, Wyoming.

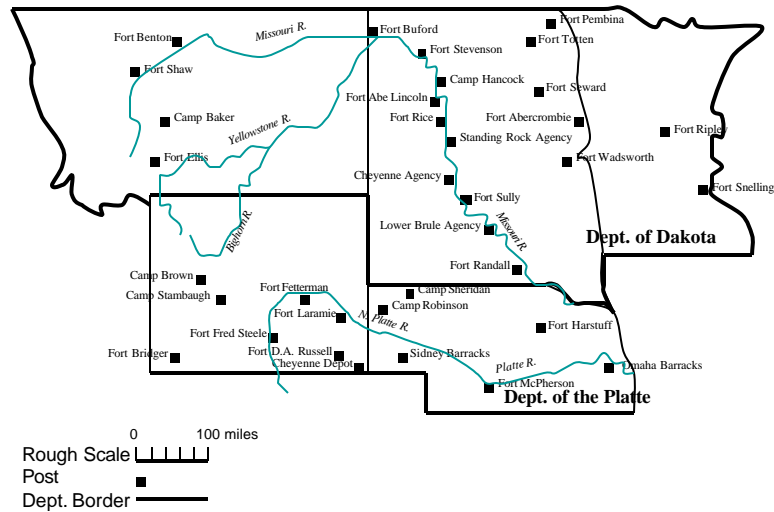


Figure 4. Manned Posts in the Departments of the Platte and Dakota in 1875. Source: U.S. Congress, House, *Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1873* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1873), 35-48; David Nevin, *The Soldiers: The Old West Series* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1973), post locations, 163.

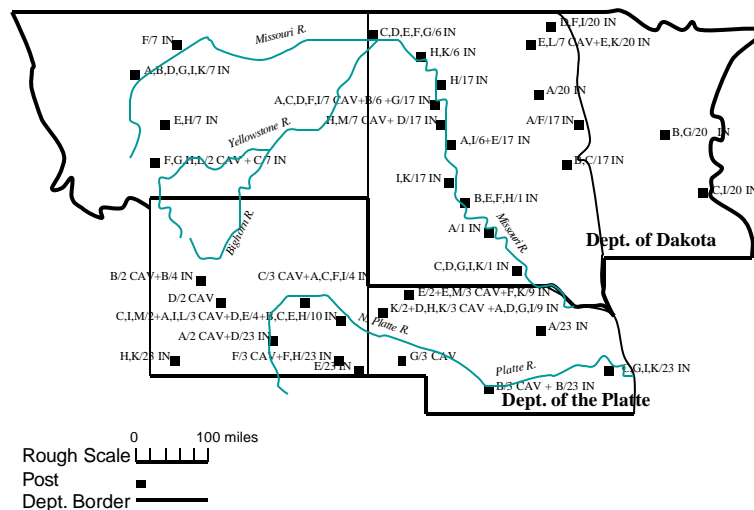


Figure 5. Force Locations in the Departments of the Platte and Dakota in 1875. Source: U.S. Congress, House, *Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1873* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1873), derived from 35-48; David Nevin, *The Soldiers: The Old West Series* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1973), post locations, p 163. [Note, read abbreviation like C,I,M/2+A,I,L/3 CAV +D,E/4 +B,C,E,H/10 IN as, C Co, I Co, M Co of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment plus A Co, I Co, L Co of the 3rd Cavalry Regiment plus D Co, E Co of the 4th Infantry Regiment, plus B Co, C Co, E Co, H Co of the 10th Infantry Regiment.]

Therefore, three primary factors forced General Sheridan to decentralize the 1876 Sioux Campaign and direct Crook and Terry to operate independently. First and foremost factor was that both Crook and Terry were of equal rank and position since they were both department commanders. The second reason, as detailed in Chapter 6, is the Army assumed either department commander had the sufficient force necessary to accomplish the mission of forcing the Sioux onto their reservation. Finally the distance and space between the two commanders and their respective forces would make coordination, communication, and massing forces between the two departments difficult if not impossible. With the “unceded” lands (see figure 1) occupied by the Sioux acting as a buffer between the two departments it would be difficult to move the forces between the two theatres in a timely manner.

On 10 February, General Crook rapidly finished up the preparations for an expedition to take the field prior to the end of winter. Crook’s command assembled at Fort Fetterman and would be the first column in either department to take the field. This command would fight the first engagement at an Indian village on the Powder River.²⁰

By 1876, the Army had restructured and reorganized itself to wage campaigns with a small force over a larger area. The Army had structured its organization and commands by territory much like the combatant commands a hundred years later. However, the number one factor that drove adaptation was recognition of the superiority of the Plains Indians’ mobility. The Army adapted to enemy mobility by adding guides, scouts, and Indian allies to help Army units find enemy villages. The Army preserved its cavalry force--due to enemy mobility--even though its formations were “weaker in firepower” due to their shorter ranged carbines and requirement for horse-holders. In

addition, it was more expensive to maintain the cavalry with its horses than the infantry force. The Army had then developed a strategy of attacking villages by using multiple columns to attack a highly mobile enemy village.

The Army had changed its strategy and force structure due to enemy mobility, but it did not change tactics or the focus of the attack. The Army sacrificed the massing of forces in favor of a multiple column attack strategy. The Sioux Campaign of 1876 shows a three-pronged envelopment that ended with two prongs defeated, while the third prong was avoided. The Battles of Powder River, Rosebud, and the Little Bighorn demonstrate the Army's method of fighting Indians on the Great Plains and the inherent weakness in the Army's system. The Army leadership adapted to enemy mobility, but did not change the focus of their attack.

¹Utley, 29-31.

²Fairfax Downey, *Indian-Fighting Army* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), 19; Utley, 12; U.S. Congress, House, *Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1874* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1874), table A.

³U.S. Congress, House, *Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1873* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1873), preface to the report of the adj. general, 23; U.S. Congress, House, *Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1867* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1867), 49-51.

⁴David Nevin, *The Soldiers: The Old West Series* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1973), 28.

⁵J. W. Vaughn, *With Crook at the Rosebud*, 2d ed. (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1994), 10-11; and Utley, 11, 252-253.

⁶Thomas Dunlay, *Wolves for the Blue Soldiers: Indian Scouts and Auxiliaries with the United States Army, 1860-1890* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 78; Nevin, 118; Dunlay, 77; and Vaughn, *With Crook at the Rosebud*, 31.

⁷U.S. Congress, House, *Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1867*, 35.

⁸Utley, 15; U.S. Congress, House, *Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1873*, 23; U.S. Congress, House, *Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1867*, 425, table A.

⁹Utley, 50; and Birtle, 70.

¹⁰Birtle, 71-72.

¹¹Utley, 50-51.

¹²Birtle, 73.

¹³Utley, 48, 50.

¹⁴United States Army, Ordnance Department, *Description and Rules for the Management of the Springfield Rifle, Carbine and Army Revolvers, 1874*, comm. by Ray Riling (Meriden, CT: The Meriden Gravure Company, 1960), 4, 29; Nevin, 104; and Utley, 72.

¹⁵Perry D. Jamieson, *Crossing the Deadly Ground* (Tuskaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), 43-44.

¹⁶United States Army, *Description and Rules for the Management of the Springfield Rifle, Carbine and Army Revolvers, 1874*, 30; and Utley, 50.

¹⁷Utley, 245-246; and United States Secretary of the Interior, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior for the Year 1874*, 3.

¹⁸Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 36-37; and Utley, 248, 251.

¹⁹U.S. Congress, House, *Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1873* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1873), 35-48.

²⁰Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 36-37, 56.

CHAPTER 3

THE BATTLE OF POWDER RIVER

In the Department of the Platte, Crook, in response to the commencement of operations order, massed troops at Fort Fetterman. Crook's forces for this expedition came from at least six different posts. His total forces comprised roughly 700 men divided into ten companies of cavalry and two companies of infantry. Also accompanying the expedition were thirty-five scouts, guides, and herders along with 156 civilians divided between the five pack trains, wagon train, and ambulances accompanied the expedition.¹

Crook had leaned forward in the planning and anticipation of the commencement order. If Crook had not started his planning ahead of time he would not have been able to organize and mass forces in the middle of winter (see figure 6).

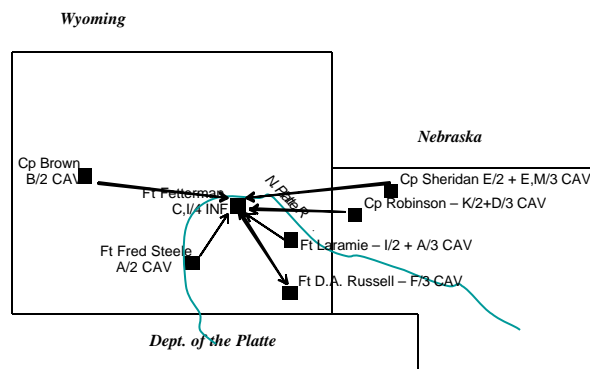


Figure 6. Initial Force Movements for Powder River Expedition

Crook initially divided his force into six battalions (see figure 7); each was comprised of two companies with the infantry battalion of two companies being put in charge of the wagon train. Each of the five cavalry battalions was assigned a pack train.²

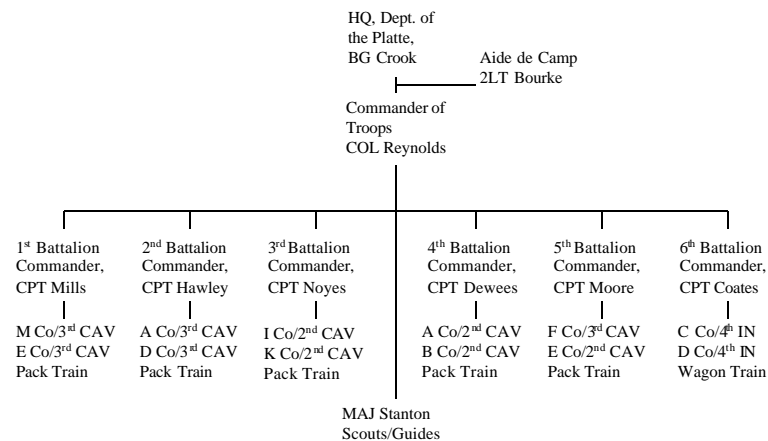


Figure 7. Organization of Crook’s Powder River Expedition

These battalions were temporary organizations based upon mission tasks. Crook’s organization shows he designed his cavalry battalions for mobility since they were accompanied by pack trains while the slower infantry would move with the less mobile wagons. Thus Crook tailored his force in case battalions had to pursue different trails or be detached to move with greater speed than the main column.

General Crook was not the troop commander. Crook stated that he was accompanying the expedition in his capacity as the department commander only. Crook

placed Colonel J. J. Reynolds, the current commander of the 3rd Cavalry Regiment, in charge of the expedition's troops.³

Of the ten companies of cavalry, five came from the 2nd Cavalry Regiment, and five from the 3rd Cavalry Regiment, about fifty percent of the troops in each regiment. However, not one of the two lieutenant colonels or the six majors assigned to these two regiments accompanied the expedition. This seems incredible since these officers comprised the next eight senior officers in both regiments. The expedition therefore had a flat command structure with little or no organizational level leadership as the senior company commander of the two companies in a battalion assumed the role of battalion commander. For example, Captain Anson Mills, commanding M Company 3rd Cavalry, was also commanding the expedition's 1st Battalion along with one pack train.⁴

Finally Major Stanton, an Army paymaster was assigned the position of chief of scouts. Stanton, being the third ranking officer in the Army column, held a position where he held no command over any soldiers.⁵

The column started out on 1 March, with a large logistics tail. Supporting the 700 troops and 656 horses (mostly mounts for the cavalry and civilians) were 892 mules pulling eighty-five wagons and comprising the five pack trains. The mounts of the expedition required 200,000 pounds of grain for the projected forty-five day campaign, since cavalry mounts and mules could not survive on the plains without grain rations.⁶

As the column ventured north it met its first disaster on the second day. On the night of 2 March, one cattle herder was slain by two Indians and the expedition's cattle were stampeded or ran off--in either event they were not recovered--and two-thirds of the

meat ration for the expedition was lost.⁷ This loss of meat would later impose a serious hardship on the expedition.

The column continued north by northwest heading toward the Powder River covering around eighteen miles per day. By 5 March, it had made the bank of the Powder River opposite old Fort Reno (abandoned by the Army as part of the Fort Laramie treaty of 1868) where it again ran into an unknown number of Indians who the command thought were trying to capture some of its animals. The result of the encounter was one non-commissioned officer wounded and no loss of animals. Neither the theft of the cattle, nor the Indian's attempt to steal the horse herd prompted a pursuit by Crook.⁸

The column continued heading north another twenty-one miles until Crook made a decision to send the wagon train and the two companies of infantry back to old Fort Reno to set-up a base camp. After being detected twice by hostiles, Crook probably knew that he needed to eliminate the less mobile portion of his column--the wagons. To protect the wagons, he assigned the less mobile portion of his command, the two infantry companies.⁹

At this point, on 7 March the remaining ten companies of cavalry along with pack trains and the scouts took fifteen days rations ($\frac{1}{2}$ ration of bacon due to the loss of the cattle herd) and continued the march north throughout the night of 7 March until early morning on 8 March, covering thirty-five miles. Without the wagons Crook's force was able to move with more speed and he rested for five hours on the morning of 8 March, then covered another five miles to move his camp.¹⁰

For the next six days, the command moved through snow storms, rough terrain, and endured temperatures that sometimes dipped below the readings of the command's

thermometers or less than -26 degrees Fahrenheit. As depicted in figure 8, the command followed rivers looking for enemy villages while only averaging fourteen miles per day because of the difficult conditions. Getting water could be a chore and sometimes required breaking through two feet of ice.¹¹

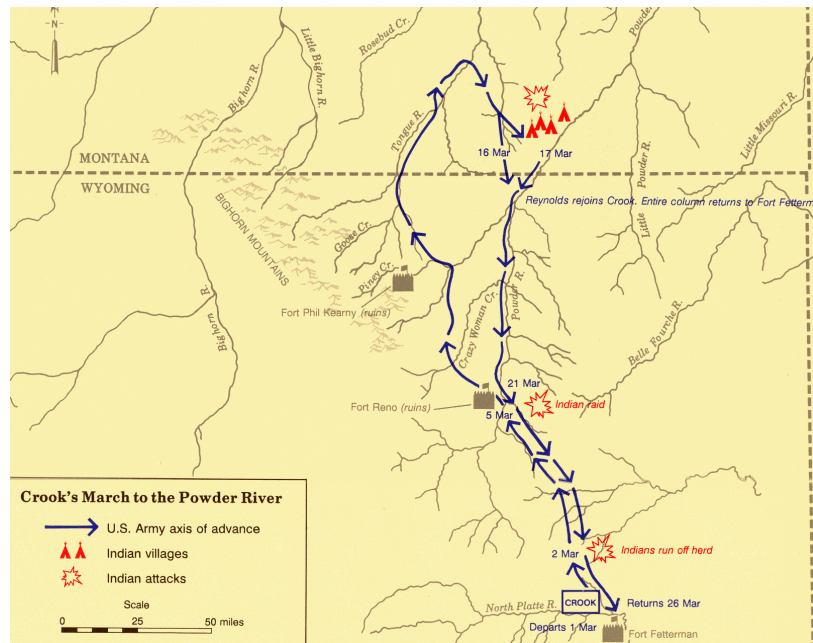


Figure 8. March Route of Army Forces for Powder River Expedition. Source: Dr. William G. Robertson, Dr. Jerold E. Brown, Major William M. Campsey, and Major Scott R. McMeen, *Atlas of the Sioux Wars* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1995), 9.

On 15 March the expedition halted, and having observed signs, sent out scouts to the west to search for hostile villages. After the scouts detected no sign of villages to the west the expedition turned east on 16 March. The column moved another eighteen miles and arrived into the valley of Otter Creek. At this point the scouts observed two Indians

riding away from the column. The scouting party--which Crook was riding with in advance of the column--thought that the Indians had not detected the main column.¹² Crook decided to send a force to follow the trail left by the two Indians. He divided his command into two elements. Colonel Reynolds was assigned three battalions (organized as figure 9) to follow the Indian trail that night. Crook personally took the remaining two battalions (four companies) along with all five pack trains and moved on 17 March towards the Powder River by a different route. The plan was that Reynolds would meet Crook at the mouth of Lodge Pole break on the Powder River. Colonel Reynolds's troops were given a one-day ration of hard tack (bread) for the men and one feed for the horses.¹³

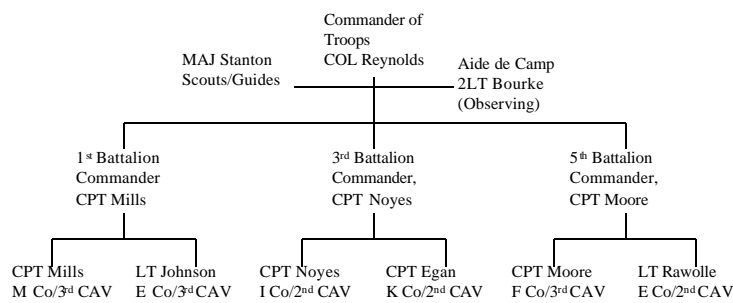


Figure 9. Reynolds's Organization for the Battle of Powder River

Frank Grouard, the principal guide, was assigned to Reynolds's command along with the majority of scouts underneath Major Stanton. Tagging along with the column were Second Lieutenant John Bourke (Crook's personal aide and in extension observer) and Mr. Strahorn a newspaper correspondent from the *Rocky Mountain News*.¹⁴

The column followed their guide Frank Grouard as he tracked the trail of the two Indians through the snow toward a probable village site on the Powder River. The conditions on the night of 16 March were harsh. Lieutenant Bourke describes the horses as suffering from the cold, their exertions over the rough terrain, deep snow, and lack of water. However, even in the pitch dark, Frank Grouard found the Indian village on the banks of the Powder River, and Reynolds's command moved toward it during the early morning hours on 17 March, St. Patrick's Day.¹⁵

The hostile village itself was composed of about 100 lodges of Cheyenne with a couple of lodges of Ogallala Sioux with a probably population of around 700 of which about 200 were warriors. The village occupied an area of about 200 yards by 200 yards (using Michno's research on village size as a guide) and sat alongside the frozen Powder River.¹⁶

The Cheyenne in this village had been aware that the Army was operating in the area. A couple of Cheyenne chiefs had arrived with their bands and had joined another band of Cheyenne sitting along the Powder River. This new band included three Cheyenne chiefs from the reservation. The new band was there to trade and eventually hunt when the winter ended. The three chiefs counseled the bands to go to the agency because soldiers were out to fight them. After the council, the chiefs decided they would not go into the agency, but if the soldiers got close they would steal their horses away. At

this point every hunting party was on the lookout for white soldiers or their trail and the women and old people were prepared for immediate flight.¹⁷

After the council, the Cheyenne relocated their village where they thought it would be safe on the Powder River. Another hunting party had seen an Army column over on Otter Creek, but the Cheyenne still thought they were safe. To ensure the Army force did not surprise them, they sent a party of about ten warriors to observe the Army column. However, the party of appointed warriors that went to Otter Creek missed running into Reynolds's column. When they hit the expedition's trail, they discovered it was moving rapidly toward their village. The warriors turned around and galloped toward their village, but did not make it in time to give the warning.¹⁸

After being notified that the village was nearby, Reynolds called the officers of his command over one by one as their battalions came marching by his position in the column. To speed up the deployment process, Reynolds laid out his plan of attack to each officer individually as they moved up. He did not assemble his officers in mass to discuss the plan. Colonel Reynolds broke his forces into five parts. Captain James Egan with K Co. (Company), 2nd Cavalry (47 men) would charge the village with his pistols to drive the Indians out. Captain Henry Noyes with I Co., 2nd Cavalry would capture as much of the horse herd as possible to deprive the Indians of their mobility. Captain Alexander Moore with his battalion comprised of F Co., 3rd Cavalry and E Co., 2nd Cavalry were ordered to dismount and occupy a ridge opposite the direction of Egan's charge. Moore's battalion was to catch the escaping Indians in a trap between the two forces. Captain Anson Mills with M Co., 3rd Cavalry was to dismount and support Moore's battalion.

First Lieutenant Johnson with E Co., 3rd Cavalry was to remain in reserve with Reynolds.¹⁹ The proposed disposition of troops is depicted in figure 10.

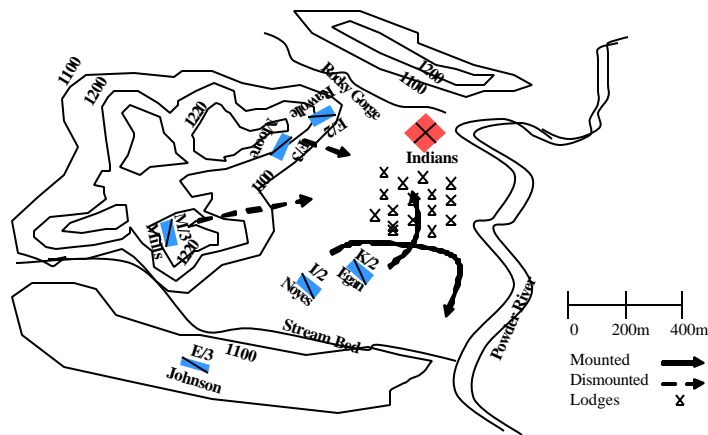


Figure 10. Reynolds's Plan of Attack for Powder River

As the forces deployed for the upcoming assault, Moore with his two companies occupied the crest of the ridge southwest of the village. For several reasons, Moore failed to occupy a position that would prevent the Indians from fleeing out of the village to the northwest. Moore positioned his battalion out of rifle range from the edge of the village. In fact, his positioning was so bad that he couldn't prevent the Indians from fleeing the village as propped in Reynolds's plan. Both Major Stanton, the chief of scouts (whose scouts were now under Noyes's command), and Mills both saw that Moore's battalion was out of position and told Moore he needed to move to his left (north). However,

Moore did not budge his unit for fear of alerting the Indians before Egan's men could charge the village.²⁰

Frustrated with Moore's refusal to move forward with his battalion, Mills took his dismounted company to the right of Moore's battalion to help support Egan's charge. However, before Mills could get forward far enough to provide support, Egan launched his charge toward the village. As Egan charged the forces were positioned as depicted in figure 11. After Egan's company charged, Noyes's mounted company swung behind Egan's and went to capture as much of the horse herd as possible. Due to the winter conditions the horse herd was very spread out (grazing purposes) and Noyes broke his company into squads along with the scouts to get as many of the horses as possible.²¹

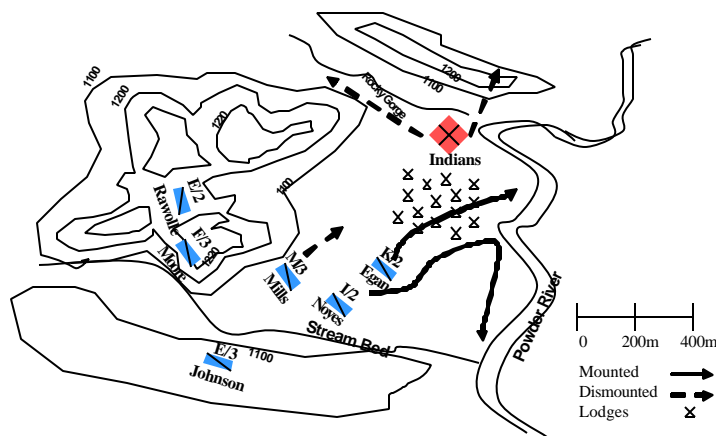


Figure 11. Actual Disposition of Reynolds's Forces at Start of Battle

Instead of charging through the village from south to north, Egan's company charged at an angle southwest to northeast and attacked the bottom half of the village. This action is inferred from Bourke (who accompanied Egan on his attack) who later stated that if Noyes had stayed to the left of Egan and accompanied the charge they would have killed a lot of Indians. As Egan's charge ended next to the river, his company had obviously angled to their right or the east. Egan dismounted his company and had them put away their pistols and use their longer-range carbines.²²

As Egan arrived at the river, Mill's dismounted force started to attack the village from the southwest and swept through the upper half of the village (see figure 12). This explains, Mill's comment that the village was not empty of Indians when he saw Egan dismounting his force. This was because Mills was striking the northwest half of the village that Egan's forty-seven men had not charged through (Egan had charged through the southeast half and forced east). At this point the Indians who had escaped with little or no casualties fled across the rocky gorge north and northwest of the village.²³

After driving through the northwest half of the village, Mills positioned his company facing north and linked up with Egan to his right (or east) and whose right flank was anchored on the Powder River. Seeing that he was out of position, Moore moved his battalion of two companies up and occupied a position to the west or left of Mills. At this point Reynolds's command had captured the enemy village, and Noyes's company was headed south with the majority of the horse herd. Reynolds then ordered Johnson and his company to capture some of the horses that Noyes's company had left behind. Although the Indians had all escaped they were starting to exchange shots with the soldiers on the north side of the village (see figure 12).²⁴

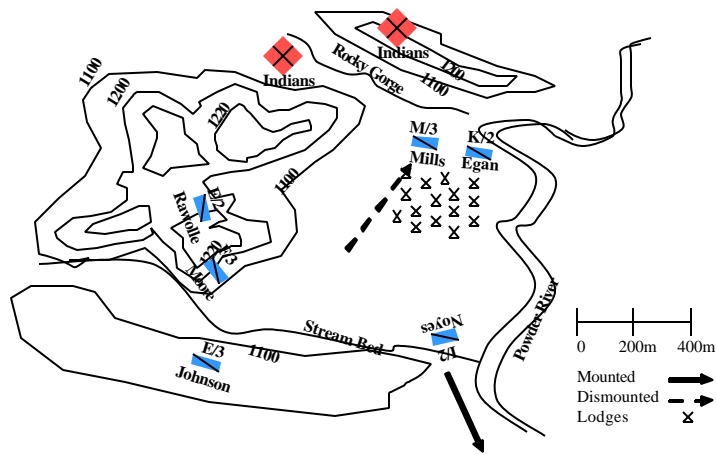


Figure 12. Mills and Egan take the Village

During Egan's charge not one Indian was reported killed or wounded. Cavalry soldiers were not trained to fire from a mounted horse. Egan's charge had surprised the Indians who retreated with their weapons and minimal belongings and fled away across the rocky gorge toward the hills to their north. With Noyes's company grabbing most of the horse herd, most of the warriors could not get their ponies. Instead they were forced or chose to see to the safety of their women, old people, and children. After securing their families, the warriors started skirmishing from the high ground north of the village. As soldiers started returning effective fire, the warriors hid behind trees and skirmished with the soldiers.²⁵

Reynolds's command then started to raze the village. At least two officers requested that they either use the village as a base camp or at least procure all the meat

and buffalo robes they could. The request was based on the one day's bread ration (which had been eaten) and the freezing cold. Reynolds refused the requests since he wanted to destroy all Indian property immediately and return to link-up with Crook as ordered. However, several of the soldiers on the skirmishing line along with several soldiers who were sent to destroy lodges in the village were instead grabbing buffalo robes and all the meat they could carry. Included in this group was Crook's aide, Bourke, who stole a buffalo robe. The destruction of the village was difficult, not only because the lodges were wet, but the presence of a large amount of loaded and unfixed ammunition inside of the lodges. As the lodges were set on fire some of the ordinance was exploding. Destroying the 100 plus lodges took four hours to complete.²⁶

During the destruction of the village, Johnson and his company were sent to augment Mills's company on the central part of the skirmish line (see figure 13), but they also helped in razing the village.²⁷ Reynolds now had the better part of five companies (250 men) in a skirmish line north of the village. The skirmish line's manpower was reduced by thirty men assigned as horse-holders, several men destroying lodges and some men looting lodges. The officers had obviously lost control of the command. At the same time the force opposing the command started to increase as warriors having seen to the safety of their families were now positioning themselves on the forested high ground. As the battle continued the warriors started flanking the soldiers to their west and headed toward the horse holders. Reynolds ordered the horse holders to tie the horses to trees and repel the attack, which they did.²⁸

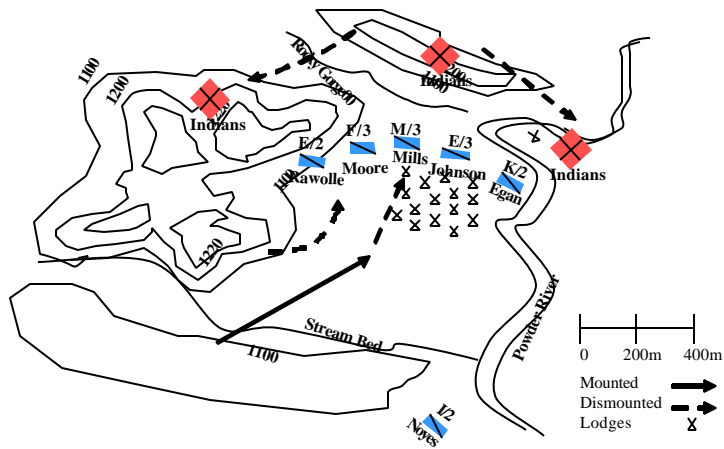


Figure 13. Reynolds's Destroys Village

Around 1:30 p.m. the village was finally destroyed and Reynolds started to withdraw all of the companies to the rear. During the withdrawal one man was mortally wounded. As the soldiers withdrew the pressure from the Indians seemed to escalate. In fact, one wounded soldier, Private Ayers, was abandoned. At this time Reynolds's force had suffered a total of four dead and six wounded.²⁹

Reynolds had his force form into column and it withdrew with Rawolles's company acting as rearguard. Stanton was then given his scouts back, and depending on which account you read, was either ordered to or on his own initiative drove the horse herd behind the retreating column. With only about six or seven scouts (the rest were in the front guiding the column) to herd 700-800 ponies, horses, and mules, Stanton's few men had difficulty driving the herd and keeping in front of the rear guard. However, the

warriors without their mounts could not pursue the soldiers and the herd got away unmolested.³⁰

For the remainder of the day, Reynolds's men traveled up the Powder River about twenty miles toward the Lodge Pole River to join up with Crook's command. Not finding Crook at the expected meeting point, Reynolds's men went into camp. They had been up for over thirty-six hours and traveled fifty-four miles in freezing temperatures with high winds. During that time Reynolds's soldiers had fought more than four hours. All of this was accomplished on one day's bread ration.³¹ The men were exhausted.

These conditions allowed for the final disaster of the expedition. On the night of 17 March, a few warriors who had been able to get their ponies before Noyes's men attacked, tracked Reynolds's force to their camp. During the night these warriors recaptured 500 of the 700 or so ponies taken earlier in the day. Notified the next morning that the majority of the captured horse herd had been recaptured, Colonel Reynolds did not order a pursuit of the loss herd. This angered several officers who wanted an immediate pursuit. However, Reynolds felt that his men and horses were worn out by the hard journey and the warriors had a big enough lead not to be caught. In addition, Reynolds was waiting for Crook's arrival.³²

About noon on 18 March, Crook arrived with the pack trains and linked up with Reynolds's force. Crook was initially happy with the results of Reynolds's fight, but after he found out that the Indians had recaptured their horse herd and Reynolds had fail to pursue, his approval turned toward preferring court martial charges.³³

The next day the column headed south to the supply base located at Old Fort Reno. After arriving on 21 March 21 the column rested one day and then returned to Fort

Fetterman, which it reached on 26 March. The expedition had traveled 485 miles, on subnormal rations in subfreezing conditions for twenty-six days.³⁴ It had also failed in driving any Indians onto their reservations.

Army columns trying to strike the Sioux in the start of 1876 were deliberately comprised mainly of cavalry units. Crook's column was 80 percent cavalry and the two companies of infantry served as escort and guards for the wagon train. As such the eighty or so infantry probably rode in the eighty-five wagons along with the eighty-nine drivers for those wagons. Even though over half of Crook's available forces in the Department of the Platte were infantry, he kept them in garrison during this operation.

Typically, an Army column when it closed upon a village would sacrifice numbers and firepower for mobility. This occurred three times during Crook's expedition. Crook first sent his wagon train with the two infantry companies to old Fort Reno to set up a base camp. Then he split his command to strike an enemy village. Crook took all five pack trains (he called them impedimenta) with four companies to allow the remainder of his command to strike with speed. Third, Crook stripped all the extra gear and rations from Reynolds's command in freezing cold to include most of their rations. Finally, this column went out to strike the enemy when their village was least able to move.³⁵ All these measures lead to one conclusion, commanders like Crook were keenly aware of the mobility of the enemy and they knew that when they got within possible range of a village they had to speed up their column to be successful.

The Battle of Powder River resulted in the complete destruction of a Cheyenne village with the capture of most of their horse herd. The capture of the horse herd had paralyzed the Cheyenne warriors, who dismounted, had very little mobility. The warriors

had difficulty inflicting casualties on the soldiers even though they held cover on the high ground and could see their village being burned. In fact, the majority of Army wounded happened in Egan's company during the initial charge (three of six wounded).³⁶ The command only suffered an additional four dead and three wounded in the next four hours after that occurrence. The engagement ranges between the two sides were therefore at long range.

Although, Crook considered the Powder River expedition a failure because of the loss of the horse herd. Crook stated in his report that if Reynolds had not destroyed the village and horse herd, he would have used these supplies to stay in the field. However, Crook still had 200 ponies that had not been stolen and needed only ninety-six to remount his command. Additionally, this had not been the guidance given to Reynolds when he left to attack the village. Crook had not issued orders as regards capturing the horse herd.³⁷ By Army strategy Reynolds's attack should have been considered a success. The number one strategic goal of an Army column was to destroy an enemy's village. Every strategic operation in the 1876 Sioux Campaign was aimed at finding and attacking enemy villages. In this regard, Reynolds's force accomplished its mission.

The loss of the horse herd was catastrophic to the Army's efforts. The horse herd and not the village was the center of gravity for Plains Indians. According to Wooden Leg the recapture of the horse herd caused great joy in the people who fled north to an Ogallala Sioux village underneath Crazy Horse. These Sioux took the Cheyenne tribe in and helped them rebuild their lives. Although the ponies would have been irreplaceable, the Cheyenne hunters who had their mounts were able to hunt buffalo and reestablished their village completely within three months. Although the Cheyenne had lost the

majority of their fixed and unfixed ammunition and about twenty buffalo robes per lodge, the village was a renewable resource.³⁸ The Cheyenne would have required 300 ponies just to move their 100 lodges. An interesting thought is that if the Army had left the village in tact, and just taken the horses would the Cheyenne chiefs who had counseled a return too the reservation have won their argument at the next council?

The Powder River shows that the COG of the Sioux and Cheyenne was not their village or buffalo, since the Cheyenne reconstructed their village from hunting buffalo, gifts and trade in less than three months. In addition, the Cheyenne warriors though outnumbered could not drive off the soldiers even though their homes and more importantly their horses were at stake. The Powder River expedition had fallen in line with typical Army strategy, the tactics employed were not to pursue or destroy the Indians or their horse herd, but to destroy villages. The Battle of Powder River shows that it was feasible to capture an enemy horse herd (of at least a small village). However, even though the Army recognized the superior mobility of their enemy, they had still not changed their tactics to target the decisive point of that mobility--the horse.

¹U.S. Congress, House, *Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1875* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1875), 35-48; Joseph J. Reynolds, Colonel, *Official Report of Operations of the Bighorn Expedition to Assistant Adjutant General's Office*, Omaha NE, 15 April 1876 (National Archives, microfilm, Reel 238, RG 666), 1-2.

²Reynolds, 1-2.

³George Crook, Brigadier General, *Official Report of Operations of the Big Horn Expedition to Assistant Adjutant General, Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri*, Chicago, IL, 7 May 1876 (National Archives, microfilm, Reel 238, RG 666), 4.

⁴Reynolds, 1-2; U.S. Congress, House, *Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1875*, 35-36, Table A.

⁵Reynolds, 2; Major T. H. Stanton, *Stanton's Official Report on the Battle of Powder River to Asst. Adjutant General, Dept. of the Platte*, Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory, 29 April 1876 (National Archives, microfilm, Reel 238, RG 666), 6.

⁶Reynolds, 3.

⁷Ibid.; John G. Bourke, *On the Border With Crook* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, A Bison Book, 1971), 256.

⁸Reynolds, 3-4; Bourke, *On the Border With Crook*, 257-258.

⁹Reynolds, 4; Bourke, *Diary of John Gregory Bourke* (West Point, NY: The Library, U.S. Military Academy, 1876), 62-63

¹⁰Reynolds, 4; Bourke, *On the Border With Crook*, 259.

¹¹Reynolds, 4-5; Bourke, *On the Border With Crook*, 265.

¹²General George Crook, *His Autobiography*, ed. and annotated by Martin F. Schmitt (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1946), 191; Reynolds, 6.

¹³Reynolds, 7.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Bourke, *Diary*, 102-104.

¹⁶Bourke, *On the Border With Crook*, 276-277; Gregory F. Michno, *Lakota Noon: The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat* (Missoula, Montana: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1997), 3-20; and Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 357.

¹⁷Wooden Leg, 161, 163-164; Greene, 8-9.

¹⁸Wooden Leg, 163-164; Greene, 9.

¹⁹Bourke, *On the Border With Crook*, 272; Reynolds, 9-10.

²⁰Anson Mills, Captain, *Official Report on the Battle of Powder River, to Lieutenant C. Morton, Adjutant Big Horn Expedition*, Fort Fetterman, Wyoming Territory, 27 March 1876 (National Archives, microfilm, Reel 238, RG 666), 3-4; Major T. H. Stanton, 2.

²¹Mills, *Powder River*, 5; Bourke, *On the Border With Crook*, 274; Captain Henry E. Noyes, *Official Report on the Battle of Powder River to Adjutant, Big Horn Expedition*, Camp of Company 2nd Cavalry on Powder River, March 1876 (National Archives, microfilm, Reel 238, RG 666), 2-3.

²²Bourke, *On the Border With Crook*, 274-275; and Mills, *Powder River*, 5.

²³Bourke, *On the Border With Crook*, 274-275; and Mills, *Powder River*, 5.

²⁴Mills, *Powder River*, 5; Captain Alex Moore, *Official Report on the Battle of Powder River to Commanding Officer, 5th Battalion Big Horn Expedition*, Old Fort Reno, Wyoming, 22 March 1876 (National Archives, microfilm, Reel 238, RG 666), 2; Bourke, *On the Border With Crook*, 274-275; Reynolds, 12.

²⁵Bourke, *On the Border With Crook*, 274; Wooden Leg, 165-166; Greene, 9-10, 12.

²⁶Mills, *Powder River*, 5-7; Moore, 2-3; Reynolds, 12-14; Bourke, *Diary*, 126-127.

²⁷First Lieutenant J. B. Johnson, Wyoming Territory, 27 March 1876. *Official Report on the Battle of Powder River to Captain Anson Mills, 3rd Cavalry*, Fort Fetterman (National Archives, microfilm, Reel 238, RG 666), 1-2.

²⁸Reynolds, 13-15.

²⁹Reynolds, 15, 18-19; Mills, *Powder River*, 11-13.

³⁰Reynolds, 15-16; Stanton, 4-5; William O. Rawolle, First Lieutenant, *Official Report on the Battle of Powder River to Captain Alex Moore, Commanding, 5th Battalion Big Horn Expedition*, Old Fort Reno, Wyoming, March 22, 1876 (National Archives, microfilm, Reel 238, RG 666), 3-4.

³¹Reynolds, 16.

³²Wooden Leg, 168-169; Reynolds, 17-18; Crook, *His Autobiography*, 191-192; Bourke, *On the Border With Crook*, 279-280.

³³Crook, *His Autobiography*, 191-192; Bourke, *On the Border With Crook*, 280.

³⁴Reynolds, 21.

³⁵Crook, *His Autobiography*, 191.

³⁶Bourke, *On the Border With Crook*, 274.

³⁷Crook, *Big Horn Expedition*, 3-5; Reynolds, 17-18.

³⁸Greene, 12-14. Mills, *Powder River*, 7; Wooden Leg, 169, 172-174, 184-185.

CHAPTER 4

THE BATTLE OF THE ROSEBUD

The Battle of the Rosebud was the second major engagement of the Sioux War of 1876. On 16 June, along the Rosebud, an Army column of more than 1,000 soldiers and 260 allied Crow and Shoshone warriors under the command of General Crook were searching for hostile villages. Instead of finding a village, the column was detected by a Cheyenne hunting party who reported the location of the column to a combined village of Sioux and Cheyenne. The same night, between 750 and 1500 Sioux and Cheyenne warriors rode over twenty miles to attack the Army column.¹ The next day, on 17 June, the Rosebud engagement would demonstrate in several ways the superior mobility of the Sioux and Cheyenne given to them by the horse.

After the failed attempt to force the “winter roamers” onto the reservations during March, Crook led a second column in May. As part of the Division of Missouri’s summer campaign, Crook was to command one of the three different columns that were to operate against the Sioux in the “unceded territory.” The other two columns operating along the Yellowstone were under the overall command of General Alfred Terry, commanding the Department of the Dakotas. All three columns were attempting to find and strike the Sioux at their villages with the hopes that at least one column would be successful. Due to the three columns sweeping in from three different directions with the “unceded lands” in between, Lieutenant General Phil Sheridan, the Commanding General of the Division of the Missouri, gave permission for the columns to operate independently.²

Crook's column assembled at Fort Fetterman throughout May. It consisted of fifteen companies of cavalry and five companies of infantry numbering about 1,000 men (see figure 14). The logistical part of Crook's column included 100 wagons each with six mules along with another 400 pack mules with the addition of roughly 60 horses per company, there were 1,000 mules and 900 horses in the column.³

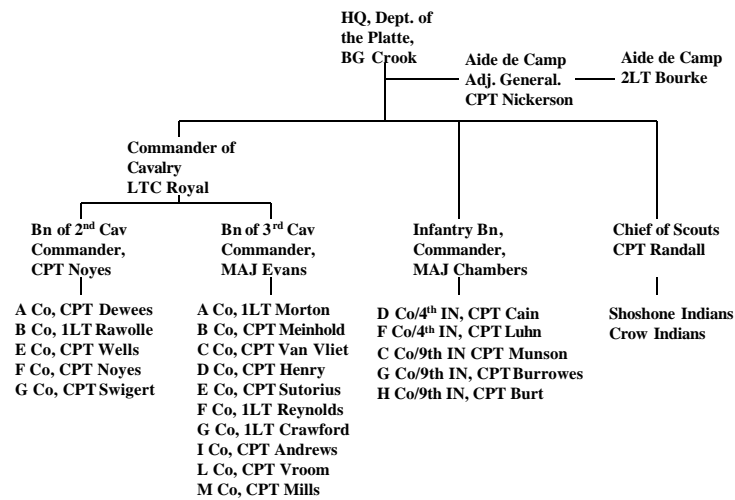


Figure 14. Final Organization of the Rosebud Expedition

Crook's column marched north from Fort Fetterman on 29 May, without Indian auxiliaries or scouts. The column did have the service of a few guides including Frank Grouard. Grouard had tracked the trail left by two Indians--in the middle of the night in sub-freezing temperatures--which led to the destruction of the Cheyenne village at Powder River. Crook sent two cavalry companies under the command of Captain

Frederick Van Vliet ahead of the column to meet a detachment of friendly Crow Indians at old Fort Reno.⁴ The main column followed, making about twenty miles a day due to the wagon trains and dismounted infantry.

The column reached old Fort Reno on the evening of 2 June, but the Crow or other possible allied Shoshone scouts were not present. Therefore, Crook sent his three “reliable half-breed guides,” including Frank Grouard, to the Crow Indian agency over 150 miles away (a newspaperman with the column, John Finerty noting the event, states it was 300 miles, but using maps it is about 150 miles straight-line, maybe 200 miles due to terrain) to the northwest through hostile territory and recruit the requested Crow scouts.⁵

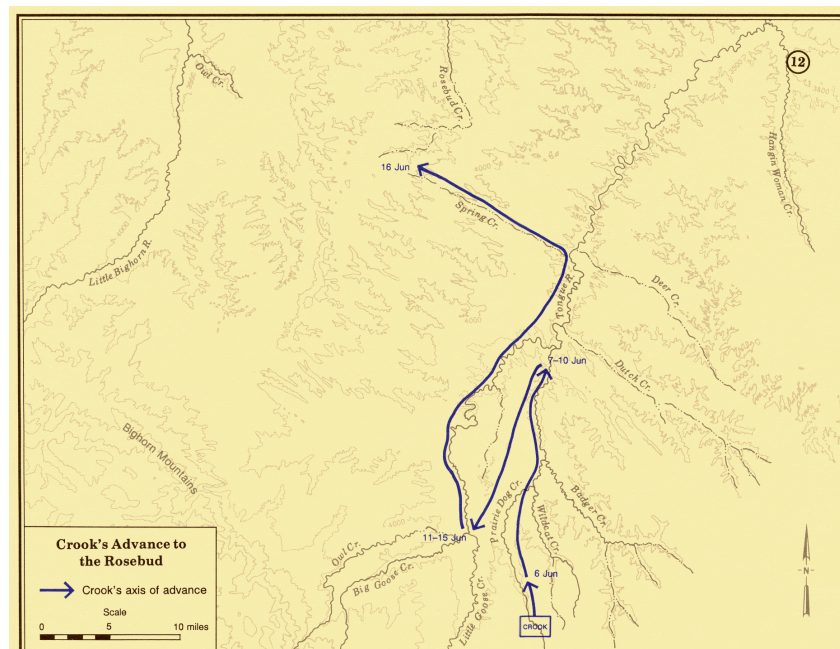


Figure 15. Route of Crook's Rosebud Expedition. Source: Dr. William G. Robertson, Dr. Jerold E. Brown, Major William M. Campsey, and Major Scott R. McMeen. *Atlas of the Sioux Wars* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1995), 12.

Passing old Fort Reno, Crook's column reached the ruins of Fort Kearney on 5 June. On 6 June, Crook planned to move eight miles to a predetermined rendezvous which had been established between himself and Grouard as the future linkup point for the column and the Crows. However, without guides the column took a wrong turn and accidentally traveled down the wrong creek; Crook finally halted the column when he reached the Tongue River on 7 June (see figure 15). Here the column set up camp and waited for the arrival of the guides and Crow warriors.⁶

While still in this camp on June 9, Crook's command was attacked by a small Indian raiding party. Reacting to gunfire coming from the bluffs on the opposite side of the Tongue River, Crook ordered four companies of the 3rd Cavalry under the command of Captain Anson Mills to ford the Tongue River and counterattack the raiders firing from the bluffs. After fording the river under fire, the cavalry dismounted at the base of the bluff with one man out of eight ordered to hold horses. The four companies established a dismounted skirmish line and attacked up the bluff. Upon reaching the top of the bluffs and seeing the Indians at a far distance, John Finerty gives this detailed account:

We could see our late assailants scampering like deer, their fleet ponies carrying them as fast as the wind up the first ascent, where they turned and fired...we could pursue them no farther, as the place was all rock and ravines, in which the advantage lay with the red warriors.⁷

While the four companies of the 3rd Cavalry were attempting to engage the Indians another party of Indians attacked the command from its rear with an assumed purpose of trying to drive off the pack trains. This second party was driven off since Crook had held the rest of his units in place.⁸

After discovering that the command was not where it was supposed to be, on the 11 June, the column broke camp and traveled back south eighteen miles, proceeding to Goose Creek, and set up camp that evening. Goose Creek was the original camp site that Grouard and General Crook had set for the rendezvous. The soldiers set up camp again awaiting the arrival of friendly scouts or guides. Without them, Crook believed, the Army column could not conduct a successful offensive operation.⁹

Three days later, on 14 June, Frank Grouard arrived with 175 Crow warriors. That night, coincidentally, eighty-six Shoshone warriors came in after riding sixty miles the previous day. Having assembled his guides and auxiliaries, General Crook informed his officers and Indian auxiliaries that they would move toward the Rosebud River in an attempt to surprise a suspected hostile village location on 16 June.¹⁰

Crook then reconfigured his column to strike the suspected village. Taking 175 mules from the wagons to provide mounts for his infantry, Crook placed his wagons in a base camp. The base camp was put under the command of the column's quartermaster Major Furey who was assigned 100 men (mostly teamsters with some soldiers) to guard the camp. The remaining soldiers of the column packed four days of rations and 100 rounds of ammunition so that the entire command could be moved by horse or mule. The infantry were given a one-day class in how to ride untrained mules.¹¹ By simultaneously getting rid of his wagons while providing mounts for his infantry, Crook created a column that was logistically light, and built for speed.

Even with the untrained mule borne infantry the column traveled about thirty-five miles on 16 June, without finding signs of a village. The mounted infantry, however, was a little slower than the cavalry, arriving at the bivouac site a couple of hours after them.¹²

Two additional events occurred during the column's march on the 16th. The first event was the discovery of a large herd of buffalo. As Finerty noted: "Far as the eye could reach on both sides of our route the somber, superb buffalo were grazing in thousands. The earth was brown with them"¹³ or, as John Bourke stated: "Buffalo spotted the landscape in every direction."¹⁴ The second event that reinforces the thesis that the horse is the center of gravity for the Sioux or Cheyenne; was that Crook's column was detected by at least one Cheyenne hunting party. This hunting party rode back and warned the combined Sioux and Cheyenne village on the evening of 16 June. After holding councils that night, the Sioux and Cheyenne warriors decided to attack the Army column before it could move closer to the village. That night hundreds of warriors (750-1500) rode out to meet Crook's command.¹⁵

At 6:00 a.m. on 17 June, Crook's column moved north searching for the suspected village. After traveling about four or five miles, Crook called a halt at 8:00 a.m. for breakfast. The scouts found signs of Sioux in the vicinity. Crook set out pickets while his scouts searched for the enemy. Thirty minutes later at 8:30 a.m.--while the trail of the column was closing in--Crow scouts came galloping into camp crying "Lakota" behind the Crow scouts came hundreds of Sioux and Cheyenne warriors (see figure 16).¹⁶

General Crook now faced several problems as the enemy approached. Parts of his column were unsaddled, while other parts of the column were still closing in. Third, he had no knowledge of enemy numbers or disposition having been surprised by the assault. In reaction, Crook immediately mounted his horse and rode toward high ground so that he could assess the situation and give orders.¹⁷

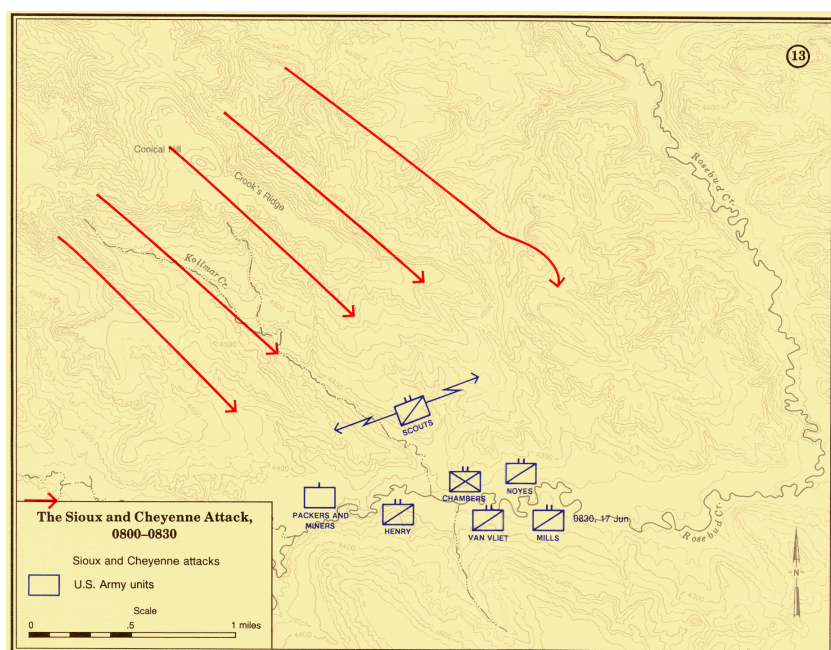


Figure 16. Initial Stages of the Battle of the Rosebud. Source: Dr. William G. Robertson, Dr. Jerold E. Brown, Major William M. Campsey, and Major Scott R. McMeen. *Atlas of the Sioux Wars* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1995), 13.

While Crook was trying to assess the situation, the rest of the command of fifteen cavalry companies and five infantry companies started reacting to the Sioux attack (see figure 17). Major Alexander Chambers under orders deployed two of his five infantry companies in a skirmish line to the northeast to the “edge of the bluffs” with the remainder of his infantry deployed on the north side of the Rosebud at the base of some bluffs that ran west to east. Captain Henry Noyes, without orders, deployed his five companies of the 2nd Cavalry. Taking four companies, Noyes conducted a dismounted advance to secure a ravine north of his position on the north side of the Rosebud. Noyes left one of his companies to watch the 2nd Cavalry’s horses.¹⁸

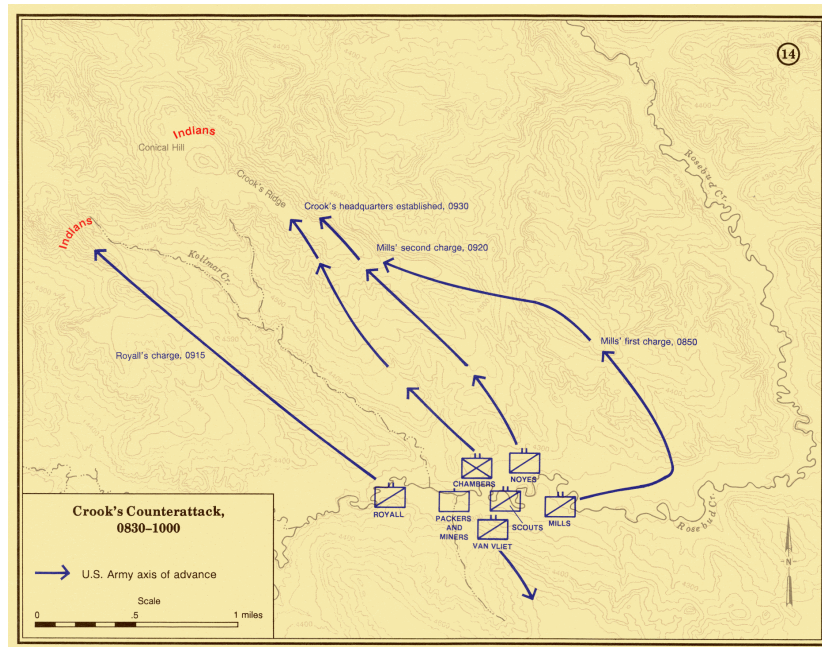


Figure 17 - Army Counterattacks at the Rosebud. Source: Dr. William G. Robertson, Dr. Jerold E. Brown, Major William M. Campsey, and Major Scott R. McMeen. *Atlas of the Sioux Wars* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1995), 14.

The ten companies of the 3rd Cavalry started receiving orders. Captain Anson Mills was ordered to take his battalion (now three companies) of the 3rd Cavalry and conduct a mounted advance to secure the bluffs in front of the infantry. Lieutenant Colonel William Royall received orders to occupy the bluffs to his northwest. Royall took five companies of the 3rd Cavalry and started a mounted advance toward a crest to the northwest and west of Mills. The bluffs between Royall and Mills were separated by a ravine which ran north to south to the Rosebud. Finally, Captain Van Vliet, with the last two companies of the 3rd cavalry, was ordered to occupy a hill on the south side of the Rosebud.¹⁹

Crook's combat forces were now divided into five or six parts, to include Royall's five companies separated from the main command by a major ravine to the west and Van Vliet's two companies being on the bluffs south of the river. Moving around these forces were the friendly Shoshone and Crow Indians, who were skirmishing all over the battlefield.

At the onset of the attack the Sioux and Cheyenne initially ran into the Crow and Shoshone scouts. This initial contact bought time for the soldiers to get deployed. The number of Sioux and Cheyenne continued to increase as groups of warriors made their way to the battlefield. As they arrived, these warriors occupied the bluffs just north of the Rosebud and started to engage in long-range fire with the soldiers. However, this initial assault by the Sioux and Cheyenne caused no immediate casualties on the Army command.

Captain Noyes' four companies continued their dismounted advance and drove the Sioux from the bluffs on the right side of the line. After a brief engagement, the Sioux fled to the west in front or north of the Army line. In the assault on the ridge, the Sioux put up light resistance and two soldiers were wounded. After this brief encounter, Noyes' force awaited for orders on the bluffs on the right (see figure 17).²⁰

Mills's companies, after occupying the first set of bluffs to the northeast, watched the Indians to their front fall back to a second set of bluffs about 600 yards away. Mill still mounted, continued his advance toward the northwest and took the second set of bluffs and watched as the Indians fled to a "large cone shaped mount." At this point Mills received orders from Crook to halt his advance and throw out dismounted skirmishers.²¹

At the same time Royall's five companies on the left side of the line were advancing to the northwest and with minimal resistance took the first ridge and then a second ridge beyond that. At this point Royall received orders to halt, so he deployed his force as dismounted skirmishers. The aide issuing the orders told Royall that the 2nd Cavalry under Noyes would flank the enemy left from the Army's right. At this point Royall's force was engaged with Sioux and Cheyenne firing from bluffs to his front (roughly west to north).²²

Crook had finally gained control of his forces from their initial deployment. Royall and Mills had each advanced to a second set of bluffs since the Indians were retreating in front of them. Unfortunately for Crook this put Royall out of supporting distance of the rest of the command as a ravine and rough terrain separated the two. The gap between the remainder of the command, minus Van Vliet, was minimal. Van Vliet with his two companies were still south of the river on top of a small hill. However, Royall was now separated from the rest of Crook's command by one mile.

The Sioux tried to penetrate the Army line through Mills's command, but Mills, along with an accompanying counterattack by the allied Crow and Shoshone warriors under the direction of Major George Randall the chief of scouts, defeated these assaults.²³

General Crook then sent out his aides with a series of orders. The first order directed Chambers to mount his infantry and replace Mills and his three companies of dismounted cavalry in the center. While Chambers moved up his infantry, Crook personally instructed Mills to fall back behind the infantry and attack a presumed enemy village a few miles downstream on the Rosebud. Simultaneously, Crook sent orders to Royall to close up with the command.²⁴

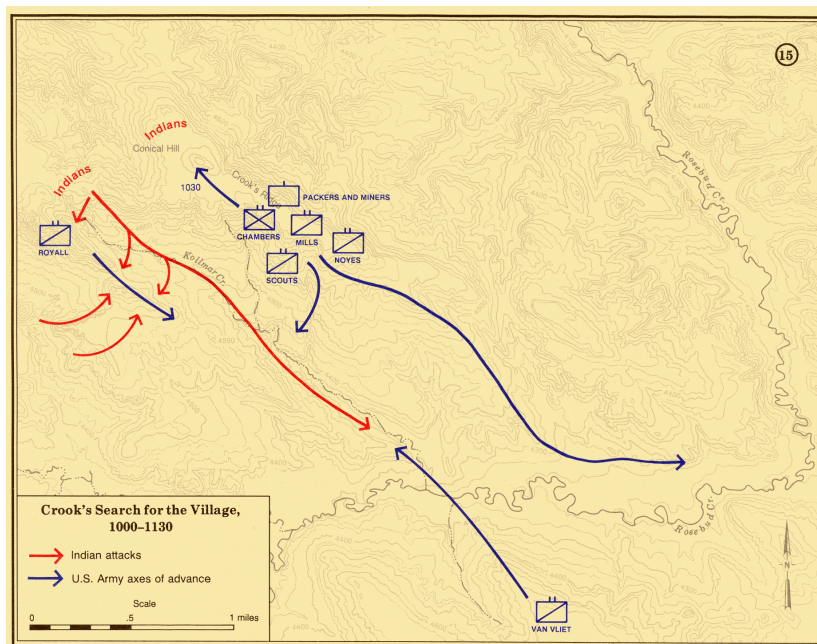


Figure 18. Crook Splits His Forces. Source: Dr. William G. Robertson, Dr. Jerold E. Brown, Major William M. Campsey, and Major Scott R. McMeen. *Atlas of the Sioux Wars* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1995), 15.

As Mills started to disengage, the Sioux again pressed an attack on the soldiers. As the Indians pressed home their attack they closed the range and started inflicting casualties (all wounded) on some of Mills' men.²⁵ Mills had to stop his movement while Major Evans brought forward the two companies under Van Vliet to augment his force. Eventually, Chambers with his infantry came up and formed a dismounted skirmisher line which allowed Mills to break contact to the south while Van Vliet extended the skirmisher line to the east of the infantry (see figure 18).

While Mills was starting his movement, Royall was involved in an increasingly heavy fire fight on the left (or west) flank. Even before Mills movement, Finerty noted that the engagement seemed to be shifting toward the west due to the amount of gunfire coming from that direction.²⁶

Royall's first attempt to extend his right (obeying orders from Crook) and close with the main body was to send one company under Captain Charles Meinhold to Crook's force which was over a mile away. Simultaneously, Mills started to move his three companies to attack the suspected enemy village. Mills proceeded with his force down the Rosebud expecting that Captain Noyes, with his five companies, would be following him.²⁷

Crook had been trying to close up his main body to support Mills in his attack on the suspected village. However, Royall's failure to move his main command and link-up with the rest of his command, frustrated Crook's plan. Crook sent another courier to give Royall precise instructions to withdraw his entire force and rejoin the main body with his remaining four companies. Even though Royall's force had been successfully holding off the enemy charges, Crook felt the need to pull Royall into the main body to eventually support Mills and Noyes as they moved to attack the supposed village location.²⁸

Royall started his withdrawal with a skirmisher screen protecting his horses led by the horse holders. When the Indians witnessed the withdrawal of Royall's force they immediately started to mass and occupied the set of bluffs that Royall had held. Withdrawing to the east his force had to cross a depression that ran between the two sets of bluffs he had occupied. At this point the Indians started pouring an intense fire down on his troops from multiple angles. A couple of the skirmishers were separated from

Royall's main body and cut down. Casualties on Royall's force started to escalate and he still had to cross the major ravine that separated him from the main command to the east. Now facing several hundred Indians massing in the area, Royall decided to leave one company under Captain Peter Vroom to hold a crest and protect the withdrawal of the other three companies.²⁹

Royall's force was now in a bad position and the enemy was starting to flank him while pressing him from the front. As his force withdrew down the bluff and started to cross the ravine, the Indians pressed their attack, more vigorously and charged cutting off Vroom's company. At this point some of the fighting was literally hand to hand as separated soldiers were overtaken and killed. Vroom lost five men dead and three wounded as 500 to 700 Indians started massing on his fifty men. Royall and the officers of the three companies that were withdrawing toward the ravine turned about and formed an impromptu skirmish line and advanced upon the Indians and drove them away from Vroom's company. Royall now saw that it would be impossible to close with Crook's force unless his command mounted and made a dash to the main body. If the command did not mount it might face annihilation. Royall waited for a lull in the fight and then gave the order to rush for the mounts and withdraw toward Crook. The Indians seeing Royall's men running for their horses, again pressed their attack. At this juncture two infantry companies with their long rifles sent by Crook to support Royall's withdrawal made it to a ridge that could cover Royall's withdrawal. In addition several Crow allies swarmed to protect Royall. Both of these events prevented Royall from suffering severe casualties. However, a couple of men who were wounded or dismounted were overtaken and killed.³⁰

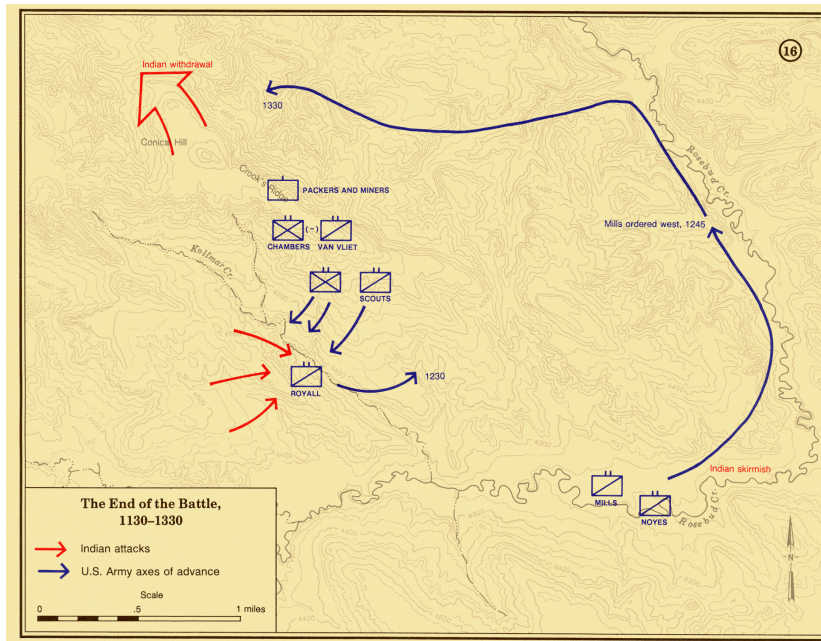


Figure 19. End of the Battle of the Rosebud. Source: Dr. William G. Robertson, Dr. Jerold E. Brown, Major William M. Campsey, and Major Scott R. McMeen, *Atlas of the Sioux Wars* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1995), 16.

As Royall was withdrawing, it was obvious to Crook that he needed to change the orders given to Mills and Noyes. Lacking the ability to support these two commanders he sent one of his aides to countermand the order of attacking the suspected village and to attack the enemy from the flank. Mills and Noyes, with their eight companies, immediately started west over an intervening ridge to take the enemy in the flank and rear. The appearance of these eight companies along with Royall reaching the main body of the command caused the Indians to break contact and move back toward their village (see figure 19).³¹

Whether due to the return of the eight cavalry companies, a shortage of ammunition or Crook's command finally closing up, the Indians started leaving the battle. Although the battle was a tactical draw, the Sioux and Cheyenne had won a strategic victory. Simply put the goal of the Sioux and Cheyenne was to stop the Army column while the goal of Crook's column was to strike an enemy village. Crook's command turned back to his base on Goose Creek and withdrew.³²

Royall's four companies suffered the majority of the casualties during their withdrawal. Specifically, Royall's four companies lost nine men dead and thirteen wounded. In addition, one Indian ally was killed. The other sixteen companies combined only had eight wounded. The Sioux and Cheyenne, who normally would not abandon their dead to the enemy, were forced to leave thirteen men on the field, due to their dead being too close to the Army line. An unknown additional number of dead or wounded were taken off of the field.³³

With two days' rations, twenty-one wounded soldiers and 25,000 rounds of ammunition expended, General Crook had critical logistics problems.³⁴ Being two days from his base camp, Crook was forced to retire back to Goose Creek to restock rations.³⁵ Crook's command remained on the battlefield and withdrew the next morning. After reaching Goose Creek two days later, Crook's command would remain idle for the next seven weeks of the campaign, waiting for reinforcements to arrive.³⁶

Several traits or tendencies of warfare between Army forces and the Sioux and Cheyenne directly caused by the superior mobility of the Plains Indian warrior were demonstrated in the Rosebud campaign. Enemy mobility directly or indirectly dictated

how campaigns were directed against the Sioux, and at least General Crook recognized the enemy's mobility as being a major problem.

An Army column required speed and stealth. If a column was detected by hunters or war parties the hunting party would be able to warn the village, before the soldiers could strike. The Indians, with their superior mobility, could dictate whether there was a battle and where it would be fought. This explains why Crook made no serious effort to find an enemy village before he received his Crow scouts, since he required effective scouts to be able to find the enemy village without being discovered too early. The emphasis on mobility is reinforced by Crook gathering fifteen of the twenty cavalry companies in his department while only taking five of the available thirty infantry companies on the expedition, especially since the infantry required less logistics (no animal feed requirements). In addition, this explains why Crook mounted his infantry on mules, put his wagons in a base camp, and reduced the baggage in his column by having them only carry four days of rations when he made his attempt to find the enemy. Crook had partially dealt with the problem of enemy mobility by tailoring his force to be able to catch mobile hostile villages. However, Crook still had not changed the focus of his attack to attacking the source of mobility.

The Sioux and Cheyenne warriors were more mobile than the Army forces. This point is demonstrated by their ability to rapidly mass on any part of the battlefield against separated forces. Always avoiding the dismounted infantry with their long-range rifles, they massed on more exposed Army units. This explains the casualties suffered by Royall during his withdrawal. The Indians were able to mass before Crook could react to support Royall; at the same time Royall's cavalry could not outrun the enemy warriors. The

Indians again showed their superior tactical mobility by nearly cutting off Vroom's company. In addition, Crook had difficulty bringing several of his companies to bear on the enemy as can be seen by Noyes's and Vroom's seven cavalry companies being relatively unengaged. In fact, Noyes's five companies had fired an average of twelve rounds per man and had suffered only two men wounded--all within the first hour of the fight.³⁷

Another tendency of warfare between the Army and Sioux and Cheyenne warriors was that any Army weakness which leading to a decrease in linear firepower allowed the Sioux and Cheyenne to take advantage of their superior mobility and close the range with the soldiers. At close range the warriors' shorter ranged weapons (like repeating rifles) were more effective. Royall's command witnessed this when they started their withdrawal. Prior to that time, Royall's command had repelled several attacks. During the withdrawal, as soldiers were separated or stranded and the firepower of the command was disrupted, several soldiers were engaged in close combat and killed. No heavy casualties occurred on any other portion of the battlefield since there were no withdrawals with the accompanying disruption of firepower. Several officers at the Rosebud state that the Indians would withdrew out of range when they were confronted by the soldiers in their dismounted skirmisher formation. This is proven by the fact that no soldier at the Rosebud (who lived at least) was wounded from arrows or hand-held weapons. As documented in the official casualty report, all twenty-one men wounded were listed with gunshot wounds.³⁸

The tendency toward long-range engagement was reinforced by the two weaknesses of both sides. The weakness of the Sioux and Cheyenne warriors was that

they fought individually with little or no organized command structure. The lack of centralized command made it difficult for warriors to press home an attack if it met with any serious resistance, since individuals broke off their attack when they felt it was too dangerous. The Army's weakness was that the soldiers had to dismount to effectively use their weapons. When the soldiers dismounted the warriors would not face their superior firepower and simply avoided contact. When the soldiers mounted they could not bring their firepower to bear on the more mobile warriors who would avoid the mounted cavalry formations by outrunning them or dispersing. Therefore, the combination of each side's weakness compounded by warrior mobility led to this battle being fought mostly at long range. This explains the lack of heavy casualties on either side.

Crook's goal was to capture and destroy the enemy village. Even after observing around 1,000 warriors engaging his forces, Crook split his force and ordered eight companies of cavalry to attack an enemy village while four companies of cavalry were out of supporting distance. Crook's order shows that even after observing the Sioux and Cheyenne warriors for a couple of hours and knowing they were going to fight he did not respect their fighting ability. Crook's order shows that he still thought that the Sioux did not have the ability to fight and defeat eight companies of cavalry when they attacked their village. Crook's assumption might have been caused by the enemy staying out of effective range during the early parts of the battle. In that case, Crook clearly wanted to force the Indians to stand and fight by protecting their village.

Two other examples of Plain's Indian mobility are shown during the expedition. First, the Shoshone scouts rode sixty miles--on their ponies--the day prior to their arrival on the Tongue River. This was twice the thirty-mile distance an Army column could

normally travel in the same time period. Second, the night ride by the Sioux and Cheyenne on 16 June, shows that while a fast moving Army column could travel thirty-five miles in a hard day's march an Indian warrior traveling on an Indian pony, could travel twenty-five miles to warn his village, have a council, dress up for war and by late evening start riding back to engage an Army column over twenty miles away all within eighteen hours.

Finally, the Battle of the Rosebud demonstrates the real strength of the Sioux and Cheyenne warrior, the horse. The buffalo was still abundant on the plains as seen by observations written down by the expedition's members. Since the buffalo was still numerous the Indians could reconstruct a village even if it was destroyed. The Sioux and Cheyenne warriors had difficulty in bringing their warriors into close combat with the Army forces only because of the Army's firepower, which made it difficult for them to defeat Army forces. It was not repeating rifles or individual warrior skill that defeated the Army at the Rosebud. Rarely would the warriors engage in a stand-up direct fire fight with equal Army forces. Instead, the warriors' ability to shape the battle by avoiding disadvantageous fights and massing at advantageous places was due entirely to their mobility which came from their center of gravity--the horse.

¹Utley, 124.

²Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 94-95; Utley, 251-253.

³U.S. Congress, House. *Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1875*, 35-48; Bourke, *On the Border With Crook*, 289-291.

⁴John F. Finerty, *War-Path and Bivouac: The Big Horn and Yellowstone Expedition* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, A Bison Book, 1966), 66-67.

⁵Ibid., 72.

⁶Gray, 113-114.

⁷Finerty, 94-95.

⁸Ibid., 92-95; Bourke, *On the Border With Crook*, 296.

⁹Gray, 115-116; Bourke, *Diaries*, 371-372.

¹⁰Vaughn, 25; Bourke, *Diaries*, 378-380, 388; George Crook, Brigadier General, *Report on the Battle on Rosebud River, Headquarters Big Horn and Yellowstone Expedition, Camp Cloud Peak to Assistant Adjutant General Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri*, Chicago Illinois, June 20, 1876 (National Archives, microfilm, Reel 271, RG 666), 1-2. Bourke, *Diaries: volume 5*, 386-387.

¹¹Bourke, *Diaries*, 386-387, 393-394; Finerty, 112-115; Vaughn, 227.

¹²Anson Mills, *My Story* (Washington, D.C.: Published by Author, 1918), 402-403.

¹³Finerty, 116-123.

¹⁴Bourke, *On the Border With Crook*, 309.

¹⁵Ibid., 310; Greene, 24-25; Vaughn, 44-45, 135; Wooden Leg, 198-199.

¹⁶Crook, *Crook's Report on the Battle on Rosebud River*, 3; Finerty, 125-127.

¹⁷Finerty, 127; Crook, *His Autobiography*, 194; Vaughn, 219.

¹⁸Vaughn, 219-221; Lieutenant Colonel W. B. Royall, Headquarters Cavalry Battalions, Big Horn and Yellowstone Expedition, Camp South Fork Tongue River, *Report on the Battle on Rosebud River to Acting Assistant Adjutant General, Big Horn and Yellowstone Expedition*, 20 June 1876 (National Archives, microfilm, Reel 271, RG 666), 1-2.

¹⁹Vaughn, 235-236.

²⁰Ibid., 219-220.

²¹Ibid., 236.

²²Royall, 2-3.

²³Vaughn, 218.

²⁴Finerty, 135-136; Vaughn, 221-222, 236.

²⁵Finerty, 136.

²⁶Ibid., 131.

²⁷Royall, 3; Vaughn, 220, 236.

²⁸Vaughn, 233; Royall, 3.

²⁹Royall, 3-4; Vaughn, 233.

³⁰Royall, 4-5; Vaughn, 118-121.

³¹Gray, 122.

³²Ibid., 124. Utley, 256.

³³Royall, 4; Crook, *Crook's Report on the Battle on Rosebud River*, 6; and Finerty, 140.

³⁴Crook, *Crook's Report on the Battle on Rosebud River*, 6; Finerty, 141.

³⁵Bourke, *Diaries*, 386-387, 393-394; Finerty, 112-115, 141; Vaughn, 227.

³⁶Gray, 124.

³⁷Vaughn, 114, 118-119.

³⁸Brigadier General George, Crook, *Return of Killed, Wounded, and Missing of the Troops serving under command of Brig. General Crook with hostile Sioux on Rosebud, Big Horn and Yellowstone Expedition, Camp Cloud Peak, Tongue River, Wyoming to Assistant Adjutant General Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri*, Chicago Illinois, 21 June 1876 (National Archives, microfilm, Reel 271, RG 666), 1.

CHAPTER 5

THE BATTLE OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN

On 17 May 1876, an expedition commanded by Brigadier General Alfred Terry, commander of the Department of Dakota, left Fort Abraham Lincoln, Dakota Territory. Terry's column moved west with the objective of moving the roaming Sioux tribes back onto their reservations. Eventually the column linked up with a column underneath the command of Colonel John Gibbon, a district commander subordinate to General Terry. When the two columns met, General Terry planned a two-prong pincer movement, with the striking column being Lieutenant Colonel George Custer's 7th Cavalry Regiment. Custer's regiment was defeated by the Sioux and Cheyenne at the Little Bighorn River five and a half weeks later. The movement of the expedition and tactical actions conducted by Army officers demonstrate that the center of gravity of the Sioux and Cheyenne was the horse.

Colonel Gibbon, commander of the District of Montana and the Montana Column, left Fort Ellis on 30 March, 1876. Gibbon's command consisted of 450 soldiers in six companies of the 7th Infantry and four companies of the 2nd Cavalry. As the column moved east to patrol the Yellowstone they picked up 25 Crow scouts.¹

On 20 April, after traveling 200 miles mostly down the north bank of the Yellowstone River, the Montana Column reached the mouth of the Bighorn River on the Yellowstone (see figure 20).² At this point, Gibbon decided to set up a base camp. In his words;

I have in accordance with the directions moved my camp alongside Fort Pease, where I am strong enough to defy the whole Sioux nation, should they feel

inclined to come this way. . . . I have today sent scouts to the north of us where some sign was seen yesterday. Will keep my scouts busy every day in various directions.³

To paraphrase Gibbon's mission was to block the Sioux from traveling across the Yellowstone towards the west. His secondary mission was to send out scouting parties to identify village locations.

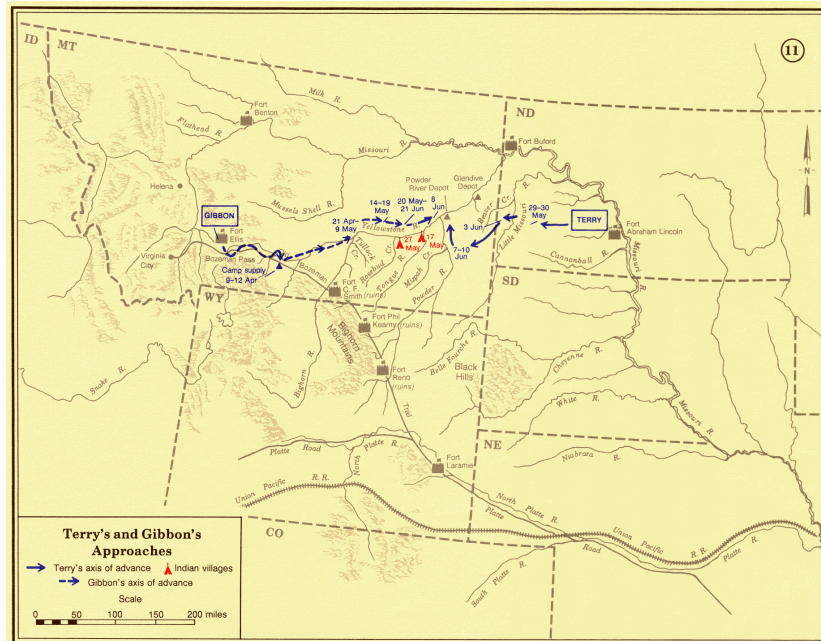


Figure 20. Terry's and Gibbon's Early Campaign Approaches. Source: Dr. William G. Robertson, Dr. Jerold E. Brown, Major William M. Campsey, and Major Scott R. McMeen, *Atlas of the Sioux Wars* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1995), 11.

Through the next month and a half, Gibbon moved his camp about every two weeks down (eastward) the north bank of the Yellowstone. Although launching a series of scouting expeditions up various rivers that merged into the Yellowstone, including

most of the Bighorn and Little Bighorn Rivers, Gibbon found no conclusive proof that there were Indians in the area. By 7 June, Gibbon's scouts had probably detected the main village, but Gibbon himself ignored the report, and as his forces traveled down the north bank of the Yellowstone, he missed the main village of Sioux and Cheyenne which were traveling west but staying south of the Yellowstone River. The Montana Column had spent two months in the field with no positive results. By 8 June, Gibbon ran into General Terry whose command was coming from the east. The mobility of the Sioux and Cheyenne villages had allowed them to remain undetected. With the combined village of the Sioux and Cheyenne moving every four to five days the village had slipped by Gibbon's command even though they were within fifteen miles of each other for over a day.⁴

General Terry had been organizing the "Dakota Column" to conduct operations against the Sioux since receiving the commence operations order from General Sheridan in February. Due to bad weather and trying to mass his forces, Terry was late in getting his expedition into the field. Terry's command consisted of all twelve companies of the 7th Cavalry (the first time the entire regiment had ever served together), two companies of the 17th Infantry, one company of the 6th Infantry, and a detachment of the 20th Infantry serving three Gatling guns, totaling around 925 soldiers plus forty Arikara scouts. The column's logistical tail consisted of 150 wagons (pulled by 900 mules) with 250 pack saddles carried in the wagons in case pack trains were needed later.⁵

By 7 June, the Dakota Column had traveled 200 miles west to the Powder River. Terry decided to travel ahead of his column down the Powder River where it intersected with the Yellowstone River. Traveling in front of the main column, Terry linked up with

the steamboat *Far West* on 8 June (used for Army supply and dispatches) and then met Colonel Gibbon from the Montana Column on 9 June. In a conference on the *Far West*, Terry ordered Gibbon to turn his column around and return up the Yellowstone to the mouth of the Rosebud.⁶ However, after a series of unsuccessful movements and scouting parties over the next twelve days, the Montana Column and Dakota Column finally linked up at the mouth of the Rosebud on 21 June.

At the mouth of the Rosebud, Terry held a conference with the senior officers of both columns to discuss future operations. The emphasis of the conference was how to prevent the Indians from escaping the combined command. The fact that there had been no communication with Crook's column in the south did not significantly alter Terry's plan. Any attack on the Sioux had to be done with the force at hand. Scout reports led Terry to the correct assumption that the main enemy village could be found on the Bighorn or Little Bighorn.⁷

Terry's plan laid out at the conference on 21 June was the following:

Gibbon's column will move this morning on the north side of the Yellowstone for the mouth of the Big Horn. . . . [I]t will proceed to the mouth of the Little Big Horn. . . . Custer will go up the Rosebud tomorrow with his whole regiment and thence to the headwaters of the Little Big Horn, then down the Little Big Horn. I only hope that one of the two columns will find the Indians.⁸

Thus the outcome of the conference was a planned two-prong pincer movement.

Lieutenant Colonel George Custer with the 7th Cavalry Regiment accompanied by a mule pack train would travel up the Rosebud (generally south) until they reached the head of the Rosebud and would then travel west to the head of the Little Bighorn and follow it down to its mouth on the Bighorn. At the same time, Colonel Gibbon with the infantry, three Gatling guns, and the four companies of the 2nd Cavalry would move up

the Yellowstone River (west) to the mouth of the Bighorn and then follow it upstream to the Little Bighorn. Since Gibbon had the wagons and infantry, Terry assumed that he would not be at the mouth of the Little Bighorn until 26 June.⁹ Terry's intent was to trap the Indians between these two forces somewhere on the Bighorn or Little Bighorn River.

Before the two columns separated on 22 June, General Terry transferred six Crow scouts and the guide Mitch Boyer from Gibbon to Custer's column. In the words of the Montana's column chief of scouts, Lieutenant Bradley:

I was directed to detail six of my best scouts to be transferred to Custer, and they joined him at the mouth of the Rosebud. Mitch Bouyer was with him, too. This leaves us without a guide.¹⁰

Terry had now given Custer, Gibbon's chief guide and best scouts to find the enemy.¹¹

At noon on 22 June, Custer's column separated from the rest of Terry's command and after a short march of twelve miles up the Rosebud River (south) set up camp (see figure 21). According to the command's guide, Scout George Herendeen, on 23 June the command broke camp at 5:00 a.m. and four hours later struck a "large lodge pole trail about ten days old and followed it along the Rosebud until toward evening, when we went into camp along the trail." The command had traveled thirty-three miles.¹²

As a side note as the command crossed an old camp site, Chief of Scouts Charles Varnum noticed, "There had evidently been buffalo in the country and frames for drying meat and the remains of camp fires where (*sic*) meat bones."¹³ Buffalo were still available on the northern plains as large camps were still able to congregate and feed themselves.

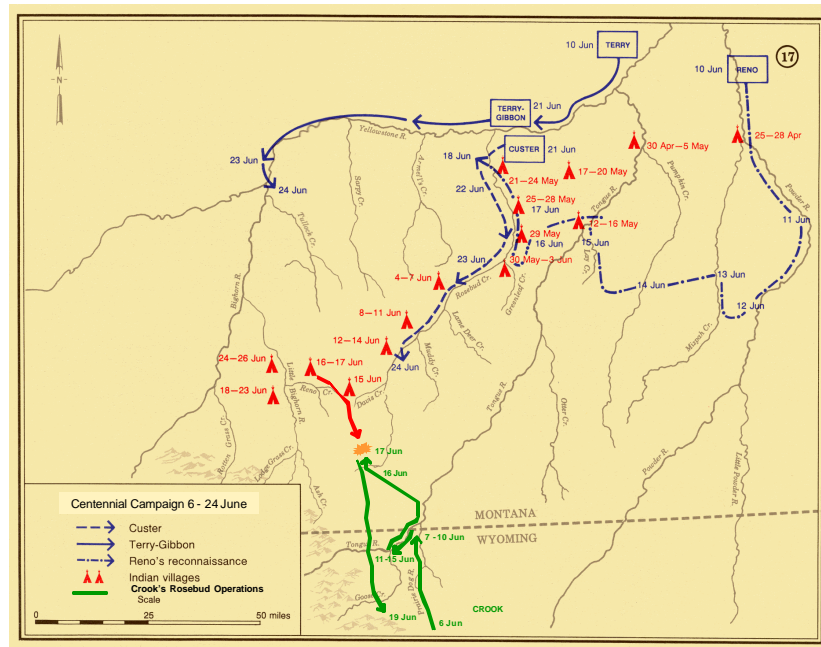


Figure 21. Custer's and Gibbon's Pincer Movement on the Village. Source: Dr. William G. Robertson, Dr. Jerold E. Brown, Major William M. Campsey, and Major Scott R. McMeen. *Atlas of the Sioux Wars* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1995), 17.

On 24 June, the column continued up the Rosebud following the Indian trail. As Custer's column marched, Custer directly supervised the Crow scouts in their efforts to follow the main trail and find the enemy. Custer had Lieutenant Varnum stay far in advance of the command with the Arikara scouts acting as an advance guard. Making about twenty-eight miles, the command halted and went into camp about 7:45 p.m.¹⁴ At 9:00 p.m. that night, Custer assembled his officers and informed them using the words of Lieutenant Winfield Edgerly, an officer at the meeting,

There were indications of a village within a day's march of us and that Custer intended making a night march and hiding in the hills the next day so as to strike the Indians at daylight on the 26th.¹⁵

On the night of 24 June, Custer marched his men for 2 ½ hours from 11:00 p.m. to 1:30 a.m. on 25 June. At this point the men were ordered to lie down and sleep if possible. The column stayed in this position for another 6 ½ hours till 8:00 a.m.¹⁶

While the column was at rest, a group of hand-picked scouts accompanied by Varnum climbed to the crest of some hills at a place called the Crow(s) Nest where the scouts said they could see if there was a village in the Little Bighorn valley. At this point the scouts identified where the village was from smoke and their horse herd. Although Varnum could not see the village, he sent a scout back notifying Custer that the scouts said they could observe the village.¹⁷

After being notified that there was a village in the Little Big Horn valley, Custer moved forward, toward Varnum who was still at the Crows Nest. As the column moved, Varnum from his vantage point observed two different groups of Indians who he thought had seen the column. When Custer arrived at the base of the Crows Nest, Varnum reported that he thought the column had been seen by hostiles (see figure 22).¹⁸

As Custer rejoined his column, Captain Tom Custer his brother and C Company commander, notified him that a patrol sent back to retrieve a lost box of rations had found a couple of Indians looting it. The patrol had fired a few shots, but the Indians got away, last seen heading toward the village.¹⁹

Custer now faced a dilemma. Having been told that his column had been detected by three different groups of Indians he had to make a choice. If he stayed with the original plan and tried to hide the command till 26 June, the Indians having observed his column would notify their village which would disperse or escape.²⁰

of the main column to scout the left flank. At this point, Major Marcus Reno took his battalion and moved slightly to the left of the remaining five companies under Custer which were heading west. At this time, Custer and Reno were following a parallel course toward the Little Bighorn River. The pack trains followed behind Reno and Custer.²¹

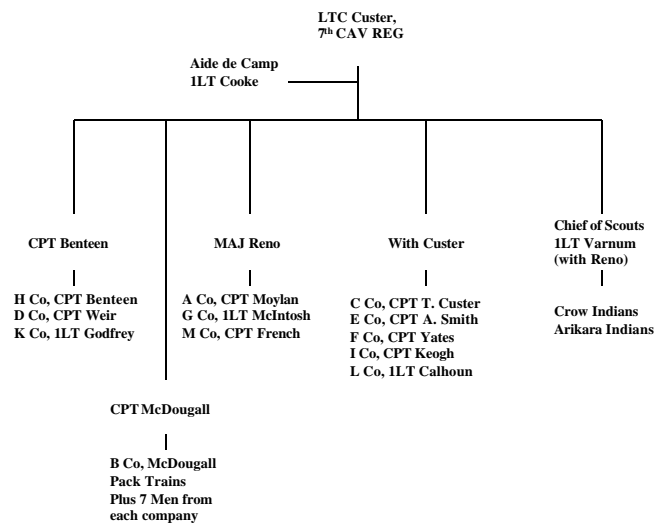


Figure 23. Custer's Final Organization

Reno's and Custer's battalions rode parallel for several miles until--they reached the forks of a creek that would later bear Reno's name about five or so miles south of the main village. At this point, several scouts reported Indians in the vicinity.²² Custer gave Reno the orders through his adjutant Lieutenant Cooke to, "take as rapid a gait as you think prudent and charge the village afterward and you will be supported by the whole outfit"²³

Moving ahead, Reno's battalion crossed the Little Bighorn and proceeded north on the west side of the river. Paralleling his course, Custer marched the other five companies on the east side of the Little Bighorn. As Reno moved north (see figure 24) he put his battalion on line and picked up the pace to a trot. As it moved down the valley, Reno's force went to a gallop. When Reno observed that the numbers of Indians in front of him was growing he decided that his battalion could not continue the charge due to the numbers of Indians. Reno had his bugler sound skirmish line. In Reno's words "their numbers had thrown me on the defensive."²⁴

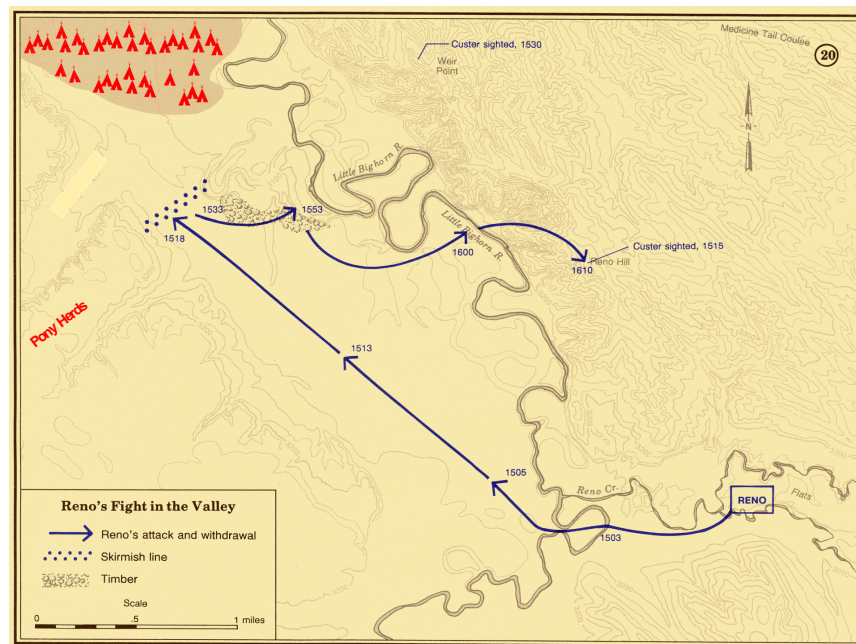


Figure 24. Reno's Attack and Rout. Source: Dr. William G. Robertson, Dr. Jerold E. Brown, Major William M. Campsey, and Major Scott R. McMeen, *Atlas of the Sioux Wars* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1995), 20.

The Sioux and Cheyenne village stretched out along the west bank of the Little Bighorn River. John Gray's detailed analysis of Sioux and Cheyenne lodges indicate that the Sioux and Cheyenne village probably consisted of between 1,000 and 1,200 lodges, divided into six major camps. These six camps spread their lodges down the river. Based on the standard Army calculation of two warriors per lodge a sound estimate is that there were about 2,000 warriors in the village.²⁵

The Sioux and Cheyenne had been surprised by Reno's column. Seeing the dust trail from Reno's column or some of Reno's scouts who were stealing a small portion of the horse herd, the warriors started to react. Several warriors gave accounts that after securing their weapons the next step was to get their horse. However, the horses for reasons of pasturage were kept some distance from the village. For example war chief Gall stated that after the alarm was sounded, "everyone rushed for their guns and horses. Some of the Hunkpapa horse herd was located down the valley. Gall headed north."²⁶ In the words of Wooden Leg, a Cheyenne warrior,

We ran to our camp and to our home lodge. . . . I got my lariat and my six shooter. I hastened on down toward where had been our horse herd. I came across three of our herder boys. . . . I told them what was going on and asked them where were the horses. They jumped on their picketed ponies and dashed for the camp, without answering me. Just then I heard Bald Eagle calling out to hurry with the horses. Two other boys were driving them toward the camp circle.²⁷

In the words of a Sioux Warrior called Hump, who grabbed the first horse he could, "I had a horse that I could not manage. He was not mine, and was not well broke; so I went to where the horses were, and the women and the old men and boys were gathering them together, and caught a horse I could manage better,"²⁸ Finally, the Sioux Warrior, Iron Thunder, in a later interview stated;

I did not know anything about Reno's attack until his men were so close that the bullets went through the camp, and everything was in confusion. The horses were so frightened we could not catch them. I was catching my horse to join the fight.²⁹

For the vast majority of warriors, their horses were in the herd being watched by a few young boys. Either the boys drove the horses to the warriors or the warriors ran to find their horses in the herd, but Reno was initially met with a small force that was mostly dismounted, because they did not have time to both arm themselves and get a horse.

Seven of Reno's scouts had moved in front of Reno's companies to attempt to capture some of the Sioux ponies. Seeing a herd of 200 horses on the east side of the river the scouts drove off the Sioux herders, and after pursuing the herd which stampeded toward the village, were able to finally turn this small herd back. However, the seven Arikara scouts had to also avoid several Sioux warriors who came out of the village to protect their horses. The scouts chased their herd up some steep bluffs on the east side of the river, but by the time the scouts reached the top of the hill they only had thirty-eight ponies remaining.³⁰

The number of warriors in front of Reno gradually grew as they reacted throughout the village by arming themselves, getting their horses, and charging to the fight. Reno's men now skirmishing in the timber were completely on the defensive. The right flank of Reno's skirmishing line was anchored by the Little Big Horn with woods and brush growing alongside the river. Reno sent his horses with their holders into the woods while the remainder of the battalion skirmished with an ever increasing number of Sioux for about fifteen or twenty minutes. Reno took Company G to the banks of the

river after being informed that Indians were moving around his right along the river.

When he reached the river, he later stated at his court of inquiry:

I had a good view of the tepees and could see many scattering ones. It was plain to me that the Indians were using the woods as much as I was, sheltering themselves and creeping up on me. I then rode out on the plain. Lt. Hodgson came to me and told me they were passing to the left and rear and I told him to bring the line in, round the horses.³¹

Reno pivoted his line parallel to the main course of the river, anchored by a bend in the river. After dismounting, Reno's command was now threatened on both flanks by Sioux warriors.

After skirmishing for a few additional minutes, Reno saw that his situation was worsening. He had no knowledge of Custer's or Benteen's location. In addition, Reno did not think he could defend the timber, because enemy forces were both flanking him and increasing in number. After a couple of men had been killed, including Bloody Knife a scout sitting on a horse next to Reno, Reno decided to retreat. Paraphrasing Reno's later report he led a charge to some bluffs on the other side of the river to his south which he thought were more defensible.³² He gave orders for his three companies to mount their horses and move to the bluffs. As the orders swept through the skirmish line the soldiers ran to their horses. George Herendeen, the civilian guide, described what occurred: "The men were passing me and all going as fast as spurs will make a horse go; . . . Men were passing me all the time and everybody running for his life."³³

Reno's retreat turned into a rout as the Sioux warriors closed in on the disorganized command. The Indians with their superior mobility cut Reno's force off from the ford he had crossed earlier and forced the fleeing soldiers to cross the river at a deep spot, with a high bank on the other side. All the time several of the warriors raced

among the soldiers shooting their rifles at a range of 50-100 yards (out of pistol range) into the fleeing column of soldiers. After crossing the river at the bottom of the bluffs the soldiers climbed to its heights. In the course of the rout Reno's force had lost twenty-nine enlisted, three officers and five civilians dead. In addition, another thirteen wounded men were able to stay mounted and make the bluffs.³⁴

Reno's battalion of about 140 soldiers and thirty-five scouts had been mauled. With a majority of his scouts gone, thirty-seven men dead, thirteen men wounded and another seventeen men who had been abandoned back in the timber, Reno's effective strength was now around eighty soldiers and ten scouts. With no way to move the wounded, Reno was effectively immobilized and out of the fight.³⁵

Benteen's battalion having scouted the left flank returned to the main line of advance. After receiving orders from Custer (through a courier) to come up quick because of the village, Benteen quickened his pace. Arriving at a point on some bluffs where he could oversee the valley, Benteen and his men were able to observe the end of Reno's retreat up the bluffs. Benteen moved his battalion to Reno's command and arrived a few minutes after Reno and his routed force. The combat strength on the bluffs now rose from a total of about ninety men to about 220 men. Major Reno and Captain Benteen met on the hill and conferred between themselves. Several factors were weighing in the decisions they had to make. Reno had been engaged by several hundred Indians, his force had been soundly defeated and he had eleven men wounded. On the other hand, the soldiers on the hill were not being engaged by the enemy at that moment, but heavy firing could be heard downstream. In addition, Benteen had orders from Custer to come quick

and bring the packs, but Benteen chose “to disregard” Custer’s orders based on the need to support Reno’s force that was now hampered with wounded soldiers and lost mounts.³⁶

After fixing the location of the village, Custer had sent Reno down the west side of the river to attack the village. Custer stayed on the east side of the river and moved north with his five companies. Having probably observed Reno’s initial attack toward the village and the village itself, Custer sent back a message to Captain Benteen to inform him that there was a big village and to move up quick and bring the packs.³⁷

At this point accounts vary, but it is generally agreed that Custer’s intent was to either complete the encirclement of the village or support Reno’s attack by attacking into the village around Medicine-Tail Coulee. Given Michno’s data, Medicine-Tail Coulee, was about one and a half to two miles above Reno’s skirmish line, was probably also the proximate location of the northern edge of the village (see figure 25).³⁸

What is known is that Custer’s force was eventually put on the defensive as it was forced away from the village toward some ridges east of the river. During this engagement, the Sioux and Cheyenne warriors were able to annihilate Custer’s force of about 214 men.³⁹

Captain Thomas Weir company commander of D Company, in Benteen’s battalion, made a delayed attempt to support Custer’s command. Having heard the firing downstream, Weir in a blatant act of disobedience moved his company down the east side of the river without orders from Benteen or Reno. Several companies followed D Company after seeing it move out. Eventually the entire command was following Weir. However, after moving about one mile northward several hundred Indians were seen

coming to attack the cavalry. Reno then ordered the entire command back to the defensive lines set on the hill.⁴⁰

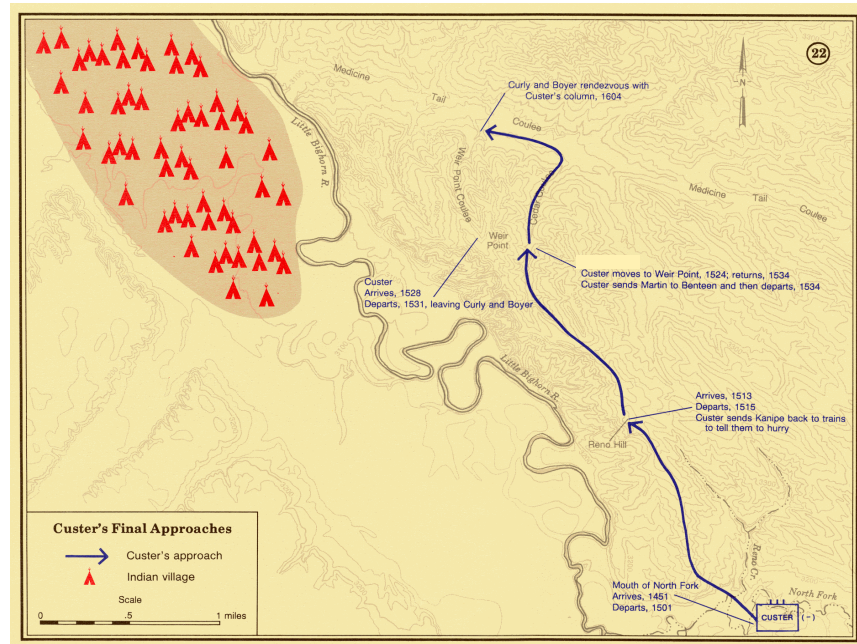


Figure 25. Custer's Final Approach . Source: Dr. William G. Robertson, Dr. Jerold E. Brown, Major William M. Campsey, and Major Scott R. McMeen. *Atlas of the Sioux Wars* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1995), 22.

Reno's command dug-in on the top of the hill and formed a circular defense. The Sioux and Cheyenne besieged the Army defenders for the rest of 25 June and all day on 26 June. The troops dug-in and with a plentiful supply of ammunition were typically able to hold off the attacking warriors for an extended period of time. Reno's casualties during the hilltop fight included sixteen dead while the total number of wounded since the valley

attack rose to fifty-three men. The troops were now surrounded, hampered by the wounded, and could not escape.⁴¹

On the afternoon of 26 June, the besieged cavalry observed the Sioux and Cheyenne village break camp and move around them up the Little Big Horn. The soldiers made contact with Gibbon's column coming up the river the next day. The Indians, having detected Gibbon's column, simply picked up their village and moved away avoiding Gibbon's command. Reno's command was now saved. When members of Gibbon's column reached Reno's position, he and his men were told the fate of Custer's men.⁴²

The Battle of the Little Big Horn demonstrates several principles of warfare against the Sioux and Cheyenne which were all created by the superior mobility of the Sioux and Cheyenne. Army commanders like Terry and Custer were aware that the Sioux were mobile. Terry showed this when he created a mobile striking column. Terry's command carried pack saddles in their wagon train for the purpose of creating a mobile column. Reinforcing this assertion is that pack trains had never before been used in the Department of the Dakota.⁴³

The planned pincer movement again indicates that Terry knew that the Indians were very evasive and might be able to outrun even Custer's mounted command. Terry divided his force so that one of the commands could attack the enemy village. Either Custer would strike the village or he would drive the village into Gibbon's less mobile column which could then attack. This further implies that Terry knew that the Indian village was able to outrun a column of infantry and wagons. Since Gibbon's command

took all of the wagons, Gatling guns, and infantry, at best his force would act as a blocking column that would attack only if the Indians were driven toward him.

Senior officers in Terry's command (like Gibbon) thought either Gibbon's command of 450 men or Custer's larger command were enough to defeat the Indians. Since Terry had the "hope" that at least one of his two columns would be able to attack the Indians, clearly the Army did not expect serious resistance from the warriors. It was not necessary for both columns to strike the village, since both were not needed to defeat the Sioux. The plan was that the two commands would attack the village only if Custer was able to time his driving of the Sioux into Gibbon's command. Due to enemy mobility this would be difficult. Therefore, Terry hoped that one command would be able to strike the village.

This reinforces the principle of surprise: when an Army command approached a village it was critical not to be detected--directly because of the mobility of that village. If the column was detected then speed was of the essence since it was a common perception, at least among Terry's command, and nearly all Indian fighters, that the Indians would flee. This explains Custer's initiative in attacking the enemy village. After believing he had been detected, Custer had to follow "Terry's primary guidance." That guidance was that at least one column would strike the village.

The cavalry could not fight the Sioux warriors mounted if they were to bring their firepower to bear. As per standard operating procedure, Reno dismounted his command. However, after the command dismounted the mobility of the Sioux warriors allowed them to mass against the soldiers. Avoiding the firepower of the Army, several of the

Sioux simply rode around Reno's left flank which forced Reno to pivot his line to protect the horses.

The retreat demonstrates three aspects of frontier warfare. First, the warriors tended to stay out of close range unless the soldiers retreated. Second, if the soldiers retreated the warriors would close the range rapidly. Third, when Reno's retreat degenerated into a rout for the bluffs the warriors with their superior mobility were able to close the gap and destroy a large portion of the command. These aspects are proved by the casualties. In thirty minutes, Reno's skirmish line had three or four casualties. In contrast, the fifteen minute retreat cost over ten times that many.

Most Indian accounts at the Battle of the Little Bighorn state that the warriors who initially fought against Reno also fought against Custer. In fact, the Indians showed their superior mobility by pursuing Reno and after being informed that another Army force was attacking the village down the river they stopped their pursuit of Reno. Reno got his respite; the Indians moved back joined by late arriving warriors to fight Custer's command.⁴⁴

The annihilation of Custer's force again shows these aspects caused by the superior mobility of the Sioux and Cheyenne warrior. Custer was not able to retreat back to Reno, because Custer's command was less mobile than the warriors. Compounding this was the fact that the cavalry could not fight effectively mounted. In addition, the warriors rode back either through the village on the west side of the river or on the bluffs on the east side after withdrawing from the pursuit of Reno's force. This movement effectively cut off Custer's less mobile forces from Reno and his men and forced Custer

to fight dismounted. Custer's command was simply overwhelmed as hundreds of more mobile warriors massed and attacked his force.

Therefore, the Battle of the Little Bighorn demonstrates the real strength of the Sioux and Cheyenne warrior, the horse. The buffalo was abundant enough for the Sioux and Cheyenne to mass in one large village for a short period of time and evidence of a large buffalo kill was seen by Varnum. The warriors dictated every phase of the battle by being able to mass on the cavalry forces as they dismounted. After being able to defeat Reno, the same warriors fought Custer. In comparison, Reno and Benteen could not effectively move to Custer's aid even though Benteen arrived ten to fifteen minutes after Reno retreated to the hill. In summary, this battle demonstrates again the Sioux center of gravity--the horse.

¹Utley, 252-253.

²Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 75.

³*Ibid.*, 76.

⁴*Ibid.*, 102-109, interpreted from map, 307, 377.

⁵Utley, 252-253.

⁶Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 104-105, 107-109.

⁷*Ibid.*, 257.

⁸John S. Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign: Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 199-200.

⁹Nevin, 204; Utley, 257-258.

¹⁰Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign*, 200.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 203.

¹²Charles A. Varnum, *Custer's Chief of Scouts*, ed. John M. Carroll (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 60; W. A. Grahm, *The Custer Myth: A Source Book of Custeriana* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1995), 257; Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign*, 209.

¹³Varnum, 85.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 85; Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 161.

¹⁵W. A. Grahm, *The Reno Court of Inquiry: Abstract of the Official Record of Proceedings* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1995), 68.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁷Varnum, 87.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 88; Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign*, 234-235.

¹⁹Jerold E. Brown, "Custer's Vision", *Studies in Battle Command* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College), 76.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 76.

²¹Grahm, *Reno Court of Inquiry*, 68-69.

²²Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 173-174.

²³Grahm, *Reno Court of Inquiry*, 212.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 212-213, 215.

²⁵Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 314, 352, 357.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 38.

²⁷Wooden Leg, 217-218.

²⁸Grahm, *The Custer Myth*, 78.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 79.

³⁰Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign*, 297-298.

³¹Grahm, *Reno Court of Inquiry*, 47, 214.

³²Grahm, *Reno Court of Inquiry*, 213-214.

³³*Ibid.*, 83.

³⁴Varnum, 90, 91; Grahm, *Reno Court of Inquiry*, 66-67, 90-91; Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 295; Donald D. Scott, P. Willey and Melissa A. Connor, *They Died with Custer: Soldiers' Bones from the Battle of the Little Bighorn* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 110-111.

³⁵Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 295. Scott, Willey and Connor, 110-111.

³⁶Grahm, *The Reno Court of Inquiry*, 62-63, 147-150, 171-173, 216-217; Gray, *Centennial Campaign*, 295-297.

³⁷Douglass D. Scott and Richard A. Fox, Jr., *Archaeological Insights into the Custer Battle*. (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 12-13.

³⁸Scott and Fox., 13; Michno, 19.

³⁹Scott and Fox, 13-14.

⁴⁰Grahm, *Reno Court of Inquiry*, 160-163, 217, 224.

⁴¹Utley, 260-261; Scott, Willey and Connor, 112.

⁴²Utley, 260-261; Varnum, 74.

⁴³Utley, 252-253.

⁴⁴Michno, 79-85, 173-185.

CHAPTER 6

THE HORSE AS THE CENTER OF GRAVITY OF THE SIOUX

The center of gravity (COG) of the Sioux in 1876 was the horse. The first three Army expeditions directed against the Sioux in 1876 repeatedly demonstrate this fact. What gave the Sioux and Cheyenne warriors their power was their ability to mass due to their excellent mobility. The mobility of the Sioux villages frustrated Army attempts at bringing their forces to bear on the Sioux. Repeatedly Army commanders divided their forces to increase their chances of being able to strike a village.

Army commanders commented on Sioux horsemanship at the Rosebud and Little Bighorn as they witnessed Sioux and Cheyenne warriors massing on soldiers in exposed locations. The Battle of Powder River demonstrates that when these same warriors were prevented from getting to their horses they could inflict little damage on the exposed soldiers in the low open ground in front of them. The Indians were slightly outnumbered at the Powder River, but they had even numbers at the Rosebud, where they were effective because they were mounted. The Cheyenne at the Powder River watched their village burn to the ground, because dismounted they were no match for Army forces.

Combined these three battles demonstrate that the warriors were not the center of gravity of the Sioux or Cheyenne. The warriors did have inferior firepower, their power directly derived from the horse and their horsemanship which gave them an ability to mass overwhelming numbers against exposed Army forces. After massing on the enemy the warriors were able to inflict casualties on the soldiers only after flanking their skirmish lines and forcing the greatly outnumbered Army units to withdraw. As soldiers

withdrew, their advantage of superior firepower was disrupted and allowed the Sioux and Cheyenne to get within close range of the soldiers where their weapons were more effective.

Combat was almost always at long range. This is proved by the fact that there is not one recorded arrow wound in any of the Army wounded in these three expeditions. Simply put even though roughly 50 percent of the warriors were armed with only bows and arrows and not rifles; all eighty of the combined wounded Army soldiers who survived these three battles all had gunshot wounds.¹ Not one Army soldier was listed with an arrow wound because the Sioux rarely got within the short range of their bows.

The alliance of the Sioux and Cheyenne was a source of power, but over 60 percent of the Sioux and Cheyenne sat out the war on reservations. Following the Battle of the Little Bighorn, the Sioux and Cheyenne villages split up and went in different directions. Although the tribes split up and continued to resist independently for another year, the alliance simply did not mass again. With Sitting Bull's band escaping to Canada and other bands continuing to roam in the "unceded lands," the Sioux and Cheyenne simply lacked the centralized leadership and ability to hunt enough game to keep the alliance together for an extended period of time. Therefore, the alliance was not the center of gravity of the Sioux.

The ability to live off the land was also a source of power for the Sioux. The Sioux could live off the land and completely rebuild a village by hunting. Unlike the soldiers with unwieldy and slow logistics columns, the Sioux could move rapidly cross country. The Sioux dependence on the buffalo was not a center of gravity, but a weakness. Later, disappearance of the buffalo on the northern plains severely impacted

the ability of the Sioux to live off the land, and along with continual Army pressure, forced the Sioux onto the reservations for reasons of survival. The ability to live off the land was not the hub of all power for the Sioux, because it did not significantly add to their combat power.

Sioux trade was significant but was also unreliable. The logistical resources that the Sioux and Cheyenne had in relation to the U.S. Army were insignificant. The Army had a tremendous base of supply to draw upon and could, to some extent, interrupt trade to the Sioux. The railroad and steamboats added to the Army's advantage in logistics. Even though the Sioux and Cheyenne were able to adequately arm themselves with a multitude of modern weapons, they never matched the Army soldiers in terms of firepower. In all three battles, there are no examples of soldiers being forced to retreat when the numbers of the combatants were within reasonable odds. It was overwhelming numbers of Indians that forced soldiers to retreat not rifles and ammunition gained through trade. Therefore, trade was not the center of gravity of the Sioux or Cheyenne.

The village was a source of power for the Sioux and its mobility made it difficult to find. Unlike the eastern tribes with semipermanent villages, more reliant on farming, the Sioux and Cheyenne had villages that moved and were replaceable by hunting. Destroying a village without capturing the horse herd at the Powder River actually solidified the Cheyenne alliance with the Sioux as warriors from the village of the Powder River fought at both the Rosebud and the Little Bighorn. Therefore destroying villages did not necessarily destroy the will to fight--it actually increased it.

All of these possible COG(s) require the horse to be effective. The mobility of the village and the gathering of the tribes required an average of three horses to move each

lodge. In addition, the village was dependent on horses to allow hunters to provide enough food and hides for its people to live off the land. The ability to trade was raised tenfold by the introduction of the horse as the mounted Sioux could travel vast distances to trade. All three 1876 battles show that the mobility of the Sioux allowed them to mass on exposed Army elements was their strength and not their firepower. The hub of all power that all of the other possible COG(s) depend upon is the horse. The COG of the Sioux was the horse, but did the Army adapt its strategy, operational maneuver, and tactics to this fact?

The first three major engagements of the Sioux War of 1876 demonstrate that Army commanders considered the village as the main objective of each expedition. However, Army commanders at the strategic and operational level were planning their campaigns and expeditions based upon their understanding of the mobility of the Sioux village.

General Sheridan's multiple columns plan was the same strategy he had used with success against the Southern Plains Indian tribes in the Red River War of 1874.² The three columns were to approach from multiple angles to prevent the mobile Sioux villages from being able to outrun all three columns. Sheridan allowed Terry and Crook to operate independently of each other because he understood the mobility of the enemy. By allowing this independence of action, Sheridan violated two of the most important tenets of warfare: unity of command and mass. Sheridan also violated the principle of economy of force by supporting three major columns simultaneously. However, Sheridan violated these principles because he understood that the hostile villages were mobile and that they could outrun or disperse before being ran down by a column.

Operational maneuver was also conducted to counter enemy mobility. Crook demonstrated in both of his expeditions that he understood the mobility of his enemy. During the Powder River expedition, Crook first set his infantry in a base camp with the expedition's wagons to increase the mobility of his column. Later, Reynolds attacked the village at Powder River with only six of ten available cavalry companies. Crook thought it was more important to use four companies to escort the pack trains and thus prevent the pack trains from slowing down Reynolds column than to mass all ten companies on the enemy village--as it turned out he was right. In the Rosebud expedition, Crook parked his wagons at a base camp then mounted his infantry on mules and reduced the baggage and rations in his command to create a column that was completely mounted. Crook chose these measures to increase the mobility of his command.

Terry also demonstrated that he understood the mobility of the Sioux. By bringing pack saddles in his wagons, Terry planned before the expedition started to create a mobile column. The result was a two-column envelopment plan devised with a more mobile mounted column. Gibbon's command which included the wagons, infantry, and Gatling guns was the slower or blocking column while Custer's command and logistics support was completely mounted and thus the mobile striking force. Terry's hope that one column would be able to strike the Sioux was based on his hope that if the Sioux outran Custer's more mobile column they would run into Gibbon further down the Little Bighorn River. The plan was not devised to allow Gibbon to run down the enemy, because his force was not mobile enough. Terry, like Crook and Sheridan, sacrificed massing their forces against the enemy in order to be able to create a more mobile force that had a better chance to attack or capture an enemy village.

All three expeditions show Army strategy centered on attacking Sioux and Cheyenne villages to force them back onto their reservations. Since it was infeasible to run down and force various groups of warriors on the plains into a firefight where Army firepower would prevail, the only way to force the Sioux or Cheyenne to fight was to attack or threaten their village. Therefore, operational maneuver was centered on finding and attacking enemy villages. Since the enemy village was extremely mobile and would have hunting parties ranging in all directions around it, Army commanders used all available means to speed up their commands when they thought an enemy village was within range. This was demonstrated in all three expeditions. In the Powder River Expedition, Reynolds's command was stripped of pack trains, reduced to six companies, marched through the night with no rest, marched over rough terrain in sub-zero temperatures all in order to surprise an enemy village before it was alerted. In the Rosebud Expedition, Crook parked his wagons, mounted his infantry, reduced his rations to four days and eliminated all excess baggage, because he thought he was within two days striking distance of the enemy and wanted to speed up his command. Custer although giving his men six hours of rest the morning of 25 June, also sped his column up after he determined where the enemy village was and that he might have been detected. It seems obvious that the primary concern of Army commanders was that the enemy village might escape their command.

At the tactical level, the perceived mobility of the Sioux village and its people seemed to force Army commanders to choose between splitting their forces over keeping them in mass. Reynolds's plan at the Powder River was for Egan's company to drive the Indians into Moore's battalion which had been ordered to set up on the opposite of the

village from Egan's charge. Reynolds plan was based upon preventing the enemy from fleeing. Crook at the Rosebud, even after being engaged by about 7, 500 to 1,500 Sioux and Cheyenne warriors, decided to send eight of his twenty companies to attack the enemy's village, because he did not want it to get away. Crook was willing to sacrifice mass in order to prevent the enemy from escaping. Terry chose to split his columns to attempt a pincer movement.

At the Little Bighorn, Custer split his command multiple times based on enemy mobility. After assigning one company with additional men to guard the packs, Benteen's battalion was sent on a flanking mission to prevent the enemy from escaping in his direction. Reno was ordered to attack with three companies, while Custer with the remaining five companies went further down stream on the opposite bank to prevent the enemy from escaping.

Army commanders showed little respect for the Sioux warrior. At the Battle of Powder River, Reynolds thought that Egan with forty-seven men could drive the enemy from their village--which they did. Even though Reynolds had roughly 300 men his plan involved only 200 men in attacking the village. This was after Crook's decision to keep 200 men with him to escort the pack trains. Therefore, only 200 of 500 cavalry soldiers were used in the initial attack on the village at Powder River. At the Rosebud Crook split his forces, even after witnessing an unprecedented mass attack by the Sioux on an Army column with over 1,000 men. Terry split his command into two elements at his conference on 21 June, because he felt either force could handle the enemy. The split actually gave Custer the larger force. Terry's hope that one column would strike the Sioux shows that he thought Gibbon's smaller command could defeat the enemy. In

addition, Custer split his regiment before engaging the enemy and his initial plan of attack involved only eight of twelve companies which were separated by a river and bluffs. Gibbon's letter, sent from Fort Pease, along with the decisions of Reynolds, Crook, Terry, and Custer proves that the five senior commanders in these expeditions believed that Army forces of even a few companies would be able to defeat any force of Sioux or Cheyenne they might engage.

Therefore, the Army's strategy and operational maneuver had evolved to counteract the Sioux center of gravity, but its tactics did not. The Army focused on the village when it should have focused on the enemy horse herd. By focusing their attacks on the village, Army commanders allowed the enemy to use their center of gravity. At the Powder River, when Reynolds successfully captured the horse herd he immobilized the Cheyenne warriors and this allowed him to destroy their village. Reynolds failure to secure the horse herd and prevent the Cheyenne from recapturing them shows at least one Army commander did not prioritize capturing and destroying the horse herd over destroying the village.

If attacking the horse herd was the correct tactic, what could commanders like Crook do at the Rosebud when forced into a meeting engagement? The answer is that Crook's only proper option at the Rosebud was to keep his forces concentrated together and maneuver them into favorable covered terrain until the Sioux or Cheyenne withdrew. If an Army force failed to surprise the Sioux or Cheyenne at their village the soldiers did not have the mobility to take the battle to the enemy. At the Rosebud any time Crook's forces charged the Sioux and Cheyenne simply rode out of the way.

Custer could have been at fault for not pushing his men hard enough. By allowing them to rest for several hours on the morning of 25 June, Custer failed to hit the village in the early morning hours. Crook had sent Reynolds's command on an all night march in terrible conditions to surprise the enemy village, but Custer let his men rest. If Custer had approached and attacked the village in the dark, Custer would have gained the surprise necessary to attack and capture the Sioux and Cheyenne horse herds. This capture would have deprived the vast majority of the warriors any ability to retaliate or attack the soldiers. Without horses to move the village, the great majority of the Indians would have lost their wealth, ability to fight, ability to live off the land, and their possessions in one blow. Custer's combined command would not have had much difficulty driving off dismounted warriors, because the Sioux couldn't mass or get within range of the soldiers as they rode off the horse herd. If the warriors and their village dispersed the loss of the horse herd would have catastrophically affected the Sioux and Cheyenne will to fight and their ability to evade the soldiers.

Custer could have won the Battle of the Little Bighorn by striking earlier and striking at the horse herds with a consolidated force. However, Custer like all other Army commanders in accordance with Army strategy was focused on attacking and destroying or capturing the enemy village. Custer after realizing that his command had been compromised attacked during the middle of the day to prevent the worst-case scenario-- that the village with its mobility would get away or disperse.

The Battle of Powder River shows it was feasible for a horse herd to be captured. In addition, Reno's scouts were also able to drive off several horses in the middle of the day at the Little Bighorn. However was this strategy of attacking horse herds both

acceptable and suitable? The approach of attacking horse herds and not the Indians themselves would have been more acceptable to most citizens living in the eastern part of the United States. There would have been no mention in the eastern press of women and children killed in their villages. Instead the papers would have described soldiers driving off horses and avoiding the slaying of innocents. It would also have become acceptable to the citizens of the west as the Sioux were deprived of their capability to conduct raids. The Army itself would have found it more agreeable to defeat an enemy with minimal casualties instead of suffering several dead and wounded in a drawn out and expensive war. Attacking the horse herd was an acceptable strategy.

Attacking the horse herd is also a suitable strategy. By focusing on the enemy horse herd the Army could have shortened the war and reduced its casualties. Reynolds's battle at the Powder River would have been more effective if he had captured the horse herd and either destroyed it or used it to provide mounts for the Army. A side benefit of capturing Indian ponies was ponies could live off the land, unlike the Army horses. Ponies could have greatly reduced the logistical requirements of cavalry columns by using them for mounts. Attacking the horse herd was more suitable for Custer's command and probably the only viable tactic capable of allowing his command to defeat the large village at the Little Bighorn. For Custer to retain the initiative, he had to be more mobile than his enemy. The only way for Custer to be more mobile was to take the horse herd.

The Army's strategy and operational maneuver was correct. However, the correct tactics were not applied because the correct COG was misidentified. Attacking the horse herd does pass the feasibility, acceptability, and suitability test and concentrates on the

enemy's COG. Army commanders failed to recognize the correct link, but they were close. General Sheridan writing about the remaining hostile Sioux and Cheyenne bands in his 1876 Annual Report might have recognized the answer: "when these are killed, captured, or surrendered, the Sioux war will be at an end, and I think all future trouble with them, as it is intended to put most of them on foot, and a Sioux on foot is a Sioux warrior no longer."³

No Army field commander in the Sioux Wars ever questioned whether the focus of an Army attack should not be the village. The COG of the Sioux was the horse, but developing a strategy to attack horse herds would have required a commander willing to challenge this old assumption. This challenge never happened, and the Army fought a drawn out and expensive war against the Sioux using a strategy of exhaustion, aimed at attacking villages to wear out the enemy's will to fight. Even after Army commanders had evolved their strategy and operational maneuver in reaction to the enemy's mobility, the Army never changed its focus to attack the enemy's COG--the horse.

¹Crook, Return of Killed, Wounded, and Missing of the Troops serving under command of Brig. General Crook with hostile Sioux on Rosebud, 1; and Scott, Fox, Connor, and Harmon, 119

²Utley, 50-51.

³U.S. Congress, House, *Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1876* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1876), 446-447.

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