

TEUTOBURG FOREST, LITTLE BIGHORN, AND MAIWAND: WHY SUPERIOR  
MILITARY FORCES SOMETIMES FAIL

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by

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## ABSTRACT

TEUTOBURG FOREST, LITTLE BIGHORN, AND MAIWAND: WHY SUPERIOR MILITARY FORCES SOMETIMES FAIL, by Major Michael T. Grissom, 147 pages.

Usually in history it seems that the technologically advanced society has a greater advantage in warfare than more primitive societies. For most battles this seems to hold true; however, there are exceptions to this rule. This document examines three different battles in history where a primitive, tribal force was able to decisively defeat a better-equipped, more advanced army. Following the introduction the second chapter focuses on the Romans versus Germanic tribes at the Battle of Teutoburg Forest; the third chapter investigates Custer and the Battle of the Little Bighorn; and the fourth chapter discusses the Battle of Maiwand in the Second Afghan War. Although each of these battles has its own unique circumstances that contributed to the victory of the primitive forces, three main themes link each of the battles. In each battle the technologically advanced army followed predictable tactics. The primitive armies employed new tactics that generally served to negate some of the technological advantages of the superior force. And finally, cultural influences played a role in strengthening the resolve to fight despite apparently poor odds. In each of the battles these factors combined with others to produce a victory over a technologically advanced foe.

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## ACRONYMS

IPB	Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield
RBL	Rifled Breech Loading
RHA	Royal Horse Artillery
RML	Rifled Muzzle Loading



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background

In the vast majority of battles between a highly advanced civilization and a primitive people, the advanced civilization wins. The strength of a professional, standing army and superior technology has proven extremely difficult to overcome. Yet a victory by the advanced society is not always the case, and the few exceptions to this trend have much to offer the student of history. This research focuses on three different battles in history from widely disparate battles that prove to have similar patterns. The battles are quite separated in time and geography, ranging from Classical times to the nineteenth century, and across three different continents.

The first battle to be discussed, the Battle of Teutoburg Forest, was fought between Roman legionary soldiers and a loose coalition of Germanic tribes in the early first century CE. Despite significant advantages over the Germanic tribes, the Romans lost the battle, and a total of three legions were destroyed. The next battle examined is the Battle of the Little Bighorn. American cavalry forces, led by General George Armstrong Custer, attacked a gathering of Indian tribes that had left their reservations. The Indians severely defeated Custer's force, and completely destroyed the battalion that Custer commanded. The final battle is the Battle of Maiwand, which occurred during the Second Afghan War in 1880. Ayub Khan, the ruler of Herat, overwhelmed a British force of several regiments near the small Afghan village of Maiwand. These three battles vary greatly in the forces that fought them, the level of technologies among the

combatants, and the tactics used. Yet all three battles are cases where the more powerful, technologically advanced side lost to a more primitive opponent.

Each of these battles took place at great distances in time and space. Yet the central question for all of them is how it happened that the non-professional, less technologically advanced societies won the battle. In each of the battles it would seem that the technologically advanced armies would have had a great advantage. Excepting these particular battles, the records for all other confrontations between the forces are almost completely in the favor of the superior military forces. So what elements of these battles help explain the drastic change in outcome?

There are three secondary questions used to focus the research on answering the primary question. The first question: what was the standard conventional doctrine for the professional armies at the time of the defeat, and did the commanders stray from this doctrine? A natural extension of this question is what the losing commanders might have done to prevent their defeat. The second question: How did the primitive armies negate the technological advantages of the opposing sides (or did they)? The third question: Were there any cultural dimensions that led to victory for the primitive forces?

### Significance

The significance of the research is that there are lessons to be learned from previous battles between a relatively primitive enemy and technologically advanced opponent that can be applied in future wars. Currently, the U.S. Army enjoys a superior technological edge over virtually all potential opponents. By understanding the lessons from battles where primitive military forces beat technologically advanced armies, the U.S. Army could hopefully avoid a similar defeat.

### Assumptions

To answer these questions the assumption is made in this research that despite the many different variables in the three different battles, there are some common threads of each battle that can be linked together. The natural corollary to this assumption is that there is potential knowledge that a military leader can use to avoid the defeat of an apparently superior military force. Another assumption is that a series of complicated and interwoven factors determined the outcome of each battle, and that there is no one proximate cause that foreordained the result. The final assumption is that faulty tactics on one side, or new tactics on the other, are not sufficient explanations for the defeat.

### Definitions

There are two primary definitions in the research that need to be clarified. The first concerns the idea of technologically primitive forces versus technologically advanced militaries. In some cases, such as Custer's cavalry forces and the Sioux warriors, the weapons of soldiers from the advanced society were technologically inferior to some weapons from the supposedly primitive force. The same can be said of the armament of individual Germanic warriors. Some were undoubtedly equipped similarly to their Roman legion counterpart. For the most part, however, the technological advantage refers to how the average soldier was equipped, and is not as concerned with outliers, unless the particular outliers offered a significant advantage. On the average, Roman legionaries were much better-equipped than Germanic tribesmen. The British regiments at Maiwand carried much superior small arms than the opposing army. What can become important is the application of so-called "niche technology." A force might be technologically inferior in almost all aspects, but can achieve parity or even

superiority in one particular aspect of technology. Clear examples of this are apparent in some of the battles, and clearly contributed to the outcome.

The second definition necessary for the research is the concept of professional armies. An exact distinction between professional and non-professional forces in these battles is sometimes difficult to make. In general the term “professional” refers to hierarchical, Western-style military organizations that have a clear chain-of-command, an established doctrine, and soldiers whose primary job is that of being a soldier. “Non-professional” forces refers to those that are more loosely organized, exist without a clear statement of doctrine, and consist of soldiers who are not primarily soldiers, but have other occupations unless there are times of conflict. This definition is somewhat problematic concerning some of the societies. There is evidence given by Tacitus of semi-organized Germanic war bands called *comitatus* that contained men whose only profession was fighting for their leader. The Afghan force under Ayub Khan consisted of both regular army components, and irregular formations of religious fanatics and ordinary tribesmen. Although not all the military forces fit neatly into these categories, it is generally understood that, for example, the professionalism of a Germanic war band was far less than that of an imperial Roman legion.

### Literature Review

There are a number of important works that form the basis for this research. Concerning the Battle of Teutoburg Forest, the ancient sources are few and generally do not provide very many details. In addition, the authors often incorporate standard rhetorical devices that appealed to audiences at the time, but do not fit the more rigorous standards of today. Of the ancient authors, Cassius Dio provides the best overview of the

battle, while Tacitus describes the strategic framework well. Velleius Paterculus has great contempt for Varus, and some of his narrative is undoubtedly an attempt to portray this viewpoint.

Concerning the modern historians who have studied the battle, Adrian Murdoch has written what many consider to be the most encompassing history with his book *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*. This book provides a complex view of the battle merging ancient texts with recently discovered archeological finds, although the analysis might be somewhat tainted due to the author's strong desire to link the battle with recent conflicts. Adrian Goldsworthy provides an excellent overview of the Roman army, and his books go into great detail on what is known of Roman doctrine and equipment. Concerning the Germanic tribes, Lotte Hedeager's *Iron-Age Societies* is an exhausting examination of pre-Christian Germanic tribes and their societal trends.

The Battle of the Little Bighorn is well-represented by historical research. John Gray and his book *Custer's Last Campaign* provides a logical and intensely detailed reconstruction of the battle, combining written narratives and archeological finds into a coherent whole. James Donovan in his books provides a clear description of the different personalities involved, and offers an objective viewpoint of the battle in a genre where subjectivity abounds. James Michno's book *Lakota Noon Indian Narratives of Custer's Defeat* researches the battle from the Indian point of view, and creates a remarkably clear narrative out of seemingly contradictory material.

Literature on the Battle of Maiwand unfortunately does not have as much depth as the Battle of Little Bighorn. Leigh Maxwell's *My God! – Maiwand* is the most detailed

book on the battle. A number of other sources mention the battle as part of the Second Afghan War or merely as a loss in one of Britain's colonial wars. Lieutenant Colonel Snook's book *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900* provides an excellent analysis of the British army of that time period, as well as a good description of the Battle of Maiwand. Material from the Afghan perspective is lacking, however, and what exists usually incorporates the Battle of Maiwand into another narrative, rather than focusing on the battle itself.

### Limitations

Some problems that were encountered in the research were the availability and reliability of sources. This problem is most pronounced in the earliest battle, that of Teutoburg Forest. Only a handful of potentially unreliable sources date from the general time period of the battle. Also, much of the history of the battle has been tainted because of its association with the National Socialists, and the fact that the party co-opted the battle of Teutoburg Forest as part of a meta-historical myth to further their own ends. Fortunately, the battlefield has recently been discovered, and archeology can help fill in the gaps of our understanding of the battle.

Concerning the Battle of the Little Big Horn and the Battle of Maiwand, the most glaring problem is the lack of perspective from the victorious side in the research. The majority of the body of knowledge about these battles comes from the viewpoint of the United States or Great Britain, and the other sides of the conflicts are under-represented. This is somewhat less true concerning the Battle of the Little Bighorn since there are several good native sources. However, the under-representation of the other sides of the battles must be kept in mind when considering the topic as a whole.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE BATTLE OF TEUTOBURG FOREST

Varus, give me back my legions!

— Augustus Caesar Wells,  
*The Battle That Stopped Rome*

In AD 9, near the near the modern-day site of Kalkriese in north-western Germany, a total of three Roman legions plus auxiliary troops were defeated in an ambush by a group of Germanic tribesman. The Roman Empire had arguably one of the best-trained and best-equipped armies in the world, holding a technological advantage over nearly all other armies that had yet existed on earth. Yet a group of relatively unsophisticated tribesman was able to decisively defeat the Roman force, and change Roman policy towards Germanic lands for the duration of the Western Roman Empire. The primary question of how this victory was accomplished will be the subject of this chapter.

#### Strategic Situation

##### The Romans

The strategic situation of the Roman Empire at the beginning of the first century AD is marked by expansion into Europe. This was true of the Roman Empire for a number of years prior to this period. Following a victory by Fabius in 121 BC, the Romans started colonies in Transalpine Gaul.<sup>1</sup> This proved to be the first Roman foothold in Gaul, and the rest of the Gallic territory would eventually fall to the Romans. By 57 BC Caesar was planning the subjugation of all the tribes within Gaul, and he embarked on a campaign against the Belgae with this end in mind.<sup>2</sup> Caesar was able to



defeat the various Gallic tribes in detail, using some of them as allies, and so accomplished his overall goal of gaining the province of Gaul for the Roman Empire. The Gauls revolted against Roman rule under a coalition led by the Gallic leader Vercingetorix. Following the Gallic failure to relieve the siege of Alesia and subsequent surrender of Vercingetorix, the Romans did not face any more serious challenges to their authority in Gaul.<sup>3</sup>

Rome's expansion was placed on hold for a while during the civil war period from 45 BC to 27 BC as the Romans were busy fighting one another. Once Octavius defeated his rivals and became the Emperor Augustus, however, he set his eyes on further expansion of the Empire. In 15 BC, Augustus' nephews Tiberius and Drusus conquered the Alpine tribes and the area between the Alps and the Danube, adding these lands to the Empire.<sup>4</sup> In 12 BC Drusus continued the Roman expansion policy. He conducted a campaign against the Germanic tribes, penetrating all the way to the Elbe River.<sup>5</sup> This campaign did not subdue the tribes, however. Roman armies were able to successfully cross hostile lands and arrive at the river, but they did not hold the territory or establish government. Actual occupation of the land would not effectively begin, as far as can be known, until Tiberius' campaigns. Drusus died in 9 BC from a fall off of his horse, and Tiberius assumed command of Rome's forces on the Rhine.<sup>6</sup> Tiberius led large campaigns against the Germanic tribes in 4-5 BC, again advancing to the Elbe.<sup>7</sup> He even wintered with his army east of the Rhine on this campaign. By the end of AD 5 Augustus believed that Tiberius had conquered the Germanic tribes, and that their lands were ready to be successfully integrated into the Roman Empire.<sup>8</sup> In order to continue the

pacification and Romanization of the newly conquered territory Augustus appointed Varus as governor for the Rhineland in AD 7.<sup>9</sup>

There is evidence that the Romans viewed Germania in much the same way that they had viewed Gaul. There are indeed similarities between the situations. Gaul was relatively quickly pacified. Caesar establish a foothold in the south, and then he rapidly conquered the rest of the territory. There was a formidable revolt in Gaul after a few years, but after this little organized resistance. Within fifty years of Caesar's invasion, there was little to distinguish Gaul from some of Rome's more ancient acquisitions. It is probable that Augustus and his commanders viewed Gaul as a model for Germania, and fashioned their campaigns accordingly. Drusus assumed command of the legions stationed on the Rhine frontier in 13 BC, and proceeded to launch campaigns against the Germanic tribes to the east.<sup>10</sup> Vechten, Xanten, and Mainz were all military camps established along the major invasion routes into Germania.<sup>11</sup> Drusus established a foothold with a semi-permanent camp near Oberaden on the River Lippe. Following the inopportune death of Drusus in 9 BC, Tiberius continued the campaign and relatively quickly owned Germanic territory all the way to the River Elbe. By AD 6 Rome considered Germany secure enough that Augustus was considering a campaign against Maroboduus, a barbarian king established in Bohemia along the Danube.<sup>12</sup>

### The Germanic Tribes

From the Germanic perspective the situation was rather complicated. Germanic society was organized into tribes. In his description of Germanic peoples, Tacitus lists a number of different tribes with varying characteristics.<sup>13</sup> These tribes were very decentralized, and alliances could shift back and forth among them. There was no

modern concept of a nation, and the tribes were not necessarily predisposed to resist outsiders. In the period leading up to the battle of Teutoburg Forest, there is substantial evidence for diplomatic relations between Rome and Germanic tribes. Roman luxury items often served as prestige goods in social relationships among the Germanic elite.<sup>14</sup> Tacitus also mentions the use of diplomatic gifts from Roman envoys to Germanic chieftains.<sup>15</sup> This in itself is evidence of the relationship that the Romans tried to foster with the Germanic tribes. It was common Roman political practice to have client kingdoms outside their borders acting within a patron / client relationship with Rome.<sup>16</sup> In this way Rome attempted to influence the areas that were not directly part of the Empire, and this pattern applied to Germania as well. During the first few campaigns into Germania prior to the battle of Teutoburg Forest, most tribes signed treaties with Rome.<sup>17</sup> Prior to the fateful battle, nearly all tribes between the Rhine and the Elbe were subdued and supposedly loyal to Rome.

Another interesting aspect from the Germanic perspective is the amount of cultural contact that existed with Rome. Rome had had boundaries with Germanic tribes since Caesar conquered Gaul in the middle of the first century BC. Even before this, and certainly after, there were trade contacts and diplomatic overtures. The amount of Roman goods that made their way into burials even in remote areas of Germanic peoples certainly attests to this fact.<sup>18</sup> Individuals from the Germanic tribes also had a great deal of contact with Rome. Segestes, Arminius' father-in-law as well as a leader within the tribe, received Roman citizenship.<sup>19</sup> Maroboduus, a Germanic king, had studied in Rome at Augustus' Palatine School, and was intimately familiar with Roman culture.<sup>20</sup> Yet perhaps the best example of the level of contact is Arminius himself. He had learned

Latin, commanded a unit of auxiliaries in the Roman army, and was a citizen of equestrian rank.<sup>21</sup> Despite his exposure to Roman culture, Arminius was deeply resentful of the Roman occupation of his homeland. It is safe to assume that this was not exactly an exceptional story, and that there were a number of other Germanic leaders, as well as ordinary tribesmen, who were familiar with Roman culture, and especially with the Roman military. It was this experience with the Roman armed forces that help to shape the battle of Teutoburg Forest. Such a body of knowledge about enemy forces enabled the Germanic leaders to plan against Roman vulnerabilities, and to safely predict Roman actions in the event of a battle.

A strong warrior culture existed among the Germanic peoples during this time. Martial ability was not merely aspired for, but was in some cases a prerequisite to hold any type of power. One of the most powerful groups in the tribal society was a free assembly of adult male warriors, with the special exception of those who had disgraced themselves in battle.<sup>22</sup> Rights and power within the clan were thus subject to performance in battle, and those who excelled were rewarded. Individual leaders were elected in time of war, and their continued hold on power was largely due to their battlefield success. Arminius and another Germanic leader, Maroboduus, both became powerful leaders not through birthright, but through their military successes.<sup>23</sup>

Using an ends, ways, and means perspective, when Varus arrived in the province the Roman ends for Germania were to establish a tax system and prepare Germania as another Roman province similar to Gaul. The way to accomplish this was to install Roman government bureaucracy within Germania, and rule the people under Roman law.

The means to accomplish this were the Roman legions stationed in and around Germania, Germanic auxiliary forces, and the Roman governor Varus.

Within the scope of ends, ways, and means, Arminius had as an end the expulsion of Roman forces from Germania. It is unclear if he desired at this time to fill the resulting political vacuum after the Romans left, but it is likely Arminius envisioned this as well. The way to accomplish this end would be the destruction of the three Roman legions assigned to Germania, as well as killing the governor Varus. The means to accomplish this were the auxiliary forces under Arminius' command, armed Germanic warriors from his tribe, and warriors from allied tribes.

### Roman Tactics

The organization of the Roman army lent itself to a certain type of warfare. The basic foundation of Roman military organization was the legion, which usually numbered approximately 5000 men.<sup>24</sup> The standard legion at the beginning of the first century AD consisted of ten cohorts, which in turn consisted of six centuries.<sup>25</sup> The cohort consisted of 480 men, except for the first cohort which consisted of double centuries. These probably comprised only five centuries in the first cohort.<sup>26</sup> Each of the standard centuries consisted of eighty men (they might at one time have been one hundred men, but by the time of Polybius the centuries contained eighty).<sup>27</sup> The centuries were commanded by centurions, which had different grades of seniority and prestige.<sup>28</sup> The centurions were seasoned veterans who had spent their adult lives in the army. Higher ranking military officers in the legion were tribunes. The majority of these were men of equestrian rank who were relatively junior in service. The senior tribune was a senate designate.<sup>29</sup> The commanding officer of the legion was called a *legatus legionis*.<sup>30</sup>

Normally appointed by the Emperor, these commanders served for three or four years as a stage in a political career.<sup>31</sup> An important characteristic of the Roman legion was that the soldiers were professionals, and soldiering was their only occupation. The fact that the Romans had a professional army meant that its forces could be used at any time of year, and were not limited by seasonal occupation demands such as farming.<sup>32</sup>

Another important part of Roman organization was the governor of the province. The governor exerted direct control over the military forces in his province. The provincial governor combined both civil and military roles, serving to execute military goals that were necessitated by politics.<sup>33</sup> The appointment of the governor itself was largely political. The Emperor obviously needed a loyal subordinate for such a powerful position as provincial governor, and in the climate of client and patron, the most loyal ties were often familial. This is not to say that governors were picked and promoted without regard to individual talent. Nearly without exception, all of the provincial governors were from the equestrian class, and were trained for these duties in the various positions of the *cursus honorum*.<sup>34</sup> The number of important provinces that had substantial military forces was relatively few, and it can be assumed that the Emperor was able to make a choice that balanced loyalty along with competence for governors of the most important provinces.

The governors passed their commands down through the legions to the legionaire, who was well-equipped to execute those commands. The standard equipment of the legionaire at the beginning of the first century AD is fairly well known. The typical member of a Roman legion functioned as a heavily-armed infantryman. Legionaires were equipped with a bronze or iron helmet. The helmet had a thick brow, cheek pieces,

and extended over the back of the neck. Body armor consisted of scale armor, chain mail, or segmented. Mail armor was flexible and offered excellent protection, but was a little heavier than segmented armor.<sup>35</sup> Segmented armor was the most advanced type of armor, relatively lightweight with good protection and comfort.<sup>36</sup> The Roman legionary soldier was also equipped with a large rectangular body shield.<sup>37</sup> In the center of the shield was an iron boss that was strong enough to deflect missiles and blows from weapons.<sup>38</sup> There was a horizontal hand grip behind the boss that enabled the soldier to strike blows with the shield as well as use it defensively.<sup>39</sup> For weapons soldiers carried javelins or throwing spears called *pilum*, short, stabbing swords called a *gladius*, and usually a dagger.<sup>40</sup> The *pilum* was rarely used in hand-to-hand combat, but was usually thrown just before engaging an enemy's line.<sup>41</sup> Its tip would bend and often render an enemy's shield useless, even if it did no other damage. The *gladius* was primarily a thrusting weapon, but was also well-balanced enough to serve as an efficient slashing weapon.<sup>42</sup> Using training that sought to use each of the strengths of their armor and weapons to the best advantage, the Roman infantrymen could completely overmatch most opponents. There were very few, if any, opponents of this period that could produce an entire army of similarly equipped soldiers.

In addition to individual weapons and equipment, the Romans also had the advantage of artillery, siege trains, and well-planned logistical support. Legions had the ability to field artillery, both during sieges and also during battle.<sup>43</sup> The artillery included torsion catapults which launch relatively small projectiles, as well as large stone-throwing pieces. The possession of artillery gave a psychological as well as tactical advantage to Roman forces as very few opponents could field or even operate such equipment. The

siege trains and ability to conduct siege warfare meant that enemy forces would not be able to hide behind defenses, but would have to seek battle with the opposing Roman force. Finally, the logistical capability of the Roman army allowed them to project power far from bases (operating mainly along water-lines), and to maintain those forces once in place.<sup>44</sup>

In general, the Roman army was a force that was designed for large-scale battles fought primarily by infantry. The formations and equipment provided an advantage to soldiers who were formed in ranks, standing in the open, and carving straight through their opponents' formation.<sup>45</sup> Although Roman armies were prepared to execute a variety of missions, for the purpose of this research the suppression of insurrection will be discussed. Typically, when Roman governors faced an insurrection in their territory, they would commit military forces as quickly as they could in an offensive manner. While reacting to the rebellion in Gaul in 52 BC Caesar quickly led a small force against the Arveni, and then again in support of the Boii.<sup>46</sup> Both attacks were gambles but ended up as successes. Varus, while governor in Judaea in 4 BC attacked immediately at the first sign of rebellion.<sup>47</sup> The same pattern can be seen in Britain in 48 AD during the revolt of the Iceni.<sup>48</sup> The typical Roman reaction to an insurrection was to attack immediately with whatever troops were available and to maintain the offensive.

While moving towards contact with the enemy Roman armies used certain formations and tactics. As with modern armies, formations would vary according to the enemy and the terrain. According to Caesar, his legions normally marched one behind the other, and each legion had its own baggage trailing.<sup>49</sup> In the event that enemy contact was likely, the baggage would be centralized and guarded, and unencumbered legions



would lead the formation. In Germany, where wooded terrain and broken ground facilitated attacks from all sides, Roman forces usually took a different approach. The auxilia and cavalry would march in the lead, while the legions were formed in a hollow formation protecting the baggage. More cavalry and auxilia would form the rear of this formation.<sup>50</sup> In any event, a Roman army would have been unlikely to string out all their forces in a long column unless the terrain would not allow another formation.<sup>51</sup> The baggage train was the true limiting factor on movement, as the carts would need roads or trails on which to move, and bridges to cross streams, and the draft animals would not be able to pull loads without appropriate rest and fodder.

In order to have adequate protection on the march, a Roman army in the Imperial era nearly always built a fort at the end of every day's march. The camps probably took several hours to construct, and had base defenses of a perimeter ditch, a rampart, and a palisade.<sup>52</sup> The defences were not intended to be formidable, but they served well the purpose of an early warning of enemy attack and providing a secure area for billeting. There are a number of accounts of camps being attacked, but relatively few where that attack was successful if there had not been a previous defeat on an open field of battle.<sup>53</sup> Goldsworthy also makes an argument for the psychological impact on the enemy when a marching army creates a fortified camp at every stop.<sup>54</sup> The fort would emphasize the unstoppable nature of the Roman movement, and would serve to intimidate an army that was not as well-organized or advanced.

### Tactics of the Germanic Tribes

The Germanic tribes, by contrast with the Roman legions, were not an orderly fighting force. Compounding the matter, the information that we have on how these

tribes conducted warfare is scant and mostly relies on accounts from the Roman side.

Some of the gaps can be filled in by archeology, but little is known for sure of the exact composition and organization of the Germanic forces. Since the society was tribal, most of the armies would probably be structured in this way as well. This means that warriors would fight in groups of kin, and would be fighting for their specific chieftain.

Generally, the tribes were divided into several clans, which were led by a combination of a monarch, aristocrats, and an assembly of all free adult males.<sup>55</sup> In most of the tribes of this time period, the assembly would have had the greatest influence of the three.

Although the tribes did not have anything resembling the modern idea of a nation-state, tribes would ally with each other against a common enemy. Their armies, composed of free adult males of warrior age, would fight together for a common goal. At the beginning of the uprising against the Romans, the historical record is only clear on three tribes that were allied; the Cherusicans, the Bructeri, and the Marsi.<sup>56</sup> By the end of the revolt, nearly all of the Germanic tribes were united against the Romans.

Despite the tribal structure, however, there are signs that the nobles were consolidating their power and a new social structure was being created, possibly in reaction to increasing Roman influence. Tacitus describes groups of warriors, known as a *comitatus*, who fought for fame and treasure under a single leader.<sup>57</sup> This group, however, was not necessarily tied by bonds of kinship. They competed with each other for rank, and survived on the generosity of the leader and the spoils of battle. Such a system tended to always require new battles; the only way that a chieftain could attract and maintain quality retainers was to reward them well, and the chieftain could only do this by conducting raids or battle.<sup>58</sup> Armed groups that are loyal to leaders based upon

benefits and intricate gift-giving systems can be seen as starting to tear apart the fabric of a society that was based on tribal relationships and loyalties. The conflict with the Romans occurred at the time that power was starting to be realigned on a basis other than kin, and it is possible that Roman pressure was a main cause of this change. Regardless of the cause, two apparently incongruous systems were operating at the same time among the Germanic peoples, and it is difficult to know exactly the extent of the societal change at the time of the Teutoburg Forest battle. The *comitatus* blurred the distinction between a professional force versus a tribal militia. It is clear, however, that there was no standing professional force among the Germanic peoples that could in any way compare to the system established by Rome.

The equipment that Germanic warriors used differed greatly from the equipment that the legionaries wielded. One of the main differences was in the quality of the weaponry and armor that the average soldier carried. Legionaries were equipped to common standards, with weapons provided by the state (subtracted from the soldier's pay of course). The Germanic tribes on the contrary did not have the advantage of a large state-run organization. Although the chieftain might have provided some weapons to his *comitatus*, it seems that most arms were procured by individual warriors. This was a significant disadvantage especially concerning armor. In Germanic graves and offerings of this time period, there are not very high numbers of chain mail armor.<sup>59</sup> The reason for this is probably that it was too expensive for the ordinary tribal warrior to procure, and was used mainly by high-ranking members of the aristocracy. The main object of defense for Germanic warriors appears to have been the shield.<sup>60</sup> Tacitus describes the military equipment of the Germanic tribes in a way that is well-supported by archeology.

He states that very few of them were equipped with breast-plates or other types of armor, including helmets, but relied mainly on their shields for defense.<sup>61</sup>

Tacitus also stated that the most common weapons of the Germanic tribes were spears called *frameae*.<sup>62</sup> This was a short stabbing spear that could be thrown but was primarily meant as a hand-to-hand weapon. Javelins were also used, as well as arrows for long-range weapons. According to Tacitus, only a few warriors carried swords or long lances. Germanicus supposedly said in a speech that tribesman in the rear ranks were sometimes armed only with clubs.<sup>63</sup> Based upon the archeological record, one scholar estimates that only one in ten Germanic warriors might have carried a sword as a main armament.<sup>64</sup> Thus the primary offensive weapon for the Germanic warrior appears to have been the spear. A comparison might be made between the weapon Germanic armies carried and the stabbing spears favored by African tribes such as the Zulus. The spear, although technologically inferior to the sword, could still prove deadly. Of the swords that the Germanic tribes did possess, a number appear to be of the long-bladed La Tene type.<sup>65</sup> These were primarily used for slashing attacks, not for the short underhand stabs favored by the Roman legions. Germanic tribes also possessed a few Roman swords, or copies of them, and an indigenous single-edged long knife.<sup>66</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that Germanic armies carried any type of artillery or weapons other than those carried by individuals.

The lack of heavy armor shaped the tactics for the Germanic armies significantly, as compared to the Roman legions. The Germanic warriors would be much more exposed due to the lack of protection, but would have the advantage of mobility and speed. This advantage would come into play to the greatest extent in an environment of

restricted terrain. Wells makes the argument that this method of warfare was more suited to the swamps and bogs of Northern Europe, instead of the pitched battles fought on the open battlefields of Italy or Greece.<sup>67</sup> A Germanic force would not be able to face head-to-head an equal number of Roman legionaries for very long. The advantage given by armor and superior drilling in tactics would enable the Roman force to invariably win, all other factors being equal. The Germanic forces used other tactics to enable them to overcome these inherent Roman advantages. One tactic described by Tacitus is a wedge-shaped formation, utilizing a fast charge with a dense formation of soldiers.<sup>68</sup> This was a clear attempt at a penetration of the Roman ranks. If the ranks could be broken, individual soldiers in the formation would be denied the protection of their comrades, and would be effectively flanked. A ruptured Roman line gave a much greater chance of victory to the Germanic tribes than one with an intact front.

Ancient sources also often cite the large size and intimidating appearance of the Germanic warrior, as compared to his Mediterranean counterpart.<sup>69</sup> The Germanic warriors tried to add to their psychological edge by a war cry known as the *baritus*. Tacitus describes the use of this tactic by Germanic armies as a means of intimidating their enemies, and could even prophesy the outcome of a battle depending upon the tone of their war cry.<sup>70</sup> Using types of psychological warfare served to supplement the battle tactics of the Germanic tribes. Using their mobility on the battlefield, the warriors could strike quickly and ferociously, overcoming resistance before the enemy can adapt to the onslaught. This method of warfare is also well-suited for a raid, which was probably the primary maneuver used in tribal warfare. The organization of Germanic society at the time also lent itself to a raid, considering the fact that a warlord had to gain both

economic and cultural capital in which to reward (and retain) his followers. A raid, striking quickly at an enemy who was unaware, was a familiar mode of warfare to the Germanic tribes.

The tactics that the Germanic tribes practiced against the Romans did not change greatly before the Battle of Teutoburg Forest. When Caesar first crossed the Rhine during his Gallic campaigns, the Germanic tribes whose land he invaded did not march out to meet his army.<sup>71</sup> This may have been due to the overwhelming force projected by the Romans, but it was more likely due to the fact that Roman forces remained across the Rhine for only 18 days.<sup>72</sup> In order to gather in sufficient strength for a pitched battle, Germanic tribes needed a longer period of time to mobilize. There was no large standing army that was immediately ready to repel invaders. Instead local leaders had to gather their warriors together and then concentrate at a centralized location. Against other tribes this method of warfare was more ritualized, but against Roman legions Germanic forces were often unable to meet the initial advance, and were only able to close with Roman forces when these forces were leaving or passing back through their territory.<sup>73</sup> In the campaigns against Drusus, Germanic forces engaged Roman forces in strength most often as the Romans marched back from a campaign.<sup>74</sup> Thus a strategic problem posed to the Germanic forces was how to mobilize their army prior to the Roman arrival.

### The Leaders

The principal leader for the Romans at the time of the Battle of Teutoburg Forest was Publius Quinctilius Varus.<sup>75</sup> There are a variety of opinions among historians concerning Varus. Some historians viewed him as a lethal mix of stupidity, incompetence, and arrogance. Certainly the legacy of having lost such a great battle does

not help build a solid reputation. It is likely, though, that the character of Varus was much maligned in hindsight. Varus had quite a distinguished career prior to the battle, and the governorship of Germania was not his first command Varus had ever held. In the context of his career, Varus had been exceptionally successful prior to his experience in Germania. The position of military governor of Germania came with great risks, and it is doubtful that Augustus would have sent someone to fill this position whose judgment he did not trust. Prior to Germania, Varus had served with distinction, and in the context of the times he was an excellent choice as governor of a newly conquered territory.

The first firm information that has come down to modern times about Varus' career is that he served as a quaestor under the Emperor Augustus, and accompanied him on a tour of the East.<sup>76</sup> Augustus personally chose him for this position, an obvious sign of his favor. Later Varus was a consul in 13 BC with the future emperor Tiberius.<sup>77</sup> In a considerable promotion, a later assignment was the governorship of Africa. This was a particularly difficult assignment because of the strategic value that Africa had for the Roman Empire. Africa was one of the principal grain producers for the Empire, and so had significant economic clout.<sup>78</sup> In addition, there was a complicated structure to the governorship. The Emperor appointed governors, and they normally answered only to him, but in this case Africa was a public province and was technically run by the Senate.<sup>79</sup> Thus Varus had to balance the desires of both the Emperor and the Senate, and by all accounts seems to have done this well. The governor of Africa was also in command of a legion, and faced guerilla warfare occasionally from the Berbers.<sup>80</sup> Varus seems to have done very well as governor, and was next given another difficult assignment as governor of Syria.

In Syria Varus had to oversee several client kingdoms, large cities within the province, and a contested border with the Parthian Empire.<sup>81</sup> This particular assignment also demonstrated great faith on the part of the Emperor in the governor's ability to act independently. Messages back to Rome could sometimes take months depending on the time of the year, and in such a position Varus had to be expected to act decisively without first consulting with the Emperor.<sup>82</sup> Here Varus was in charge of four legions, and had to use them in military campaigns.<sup>83</sup> During his time as governor King Herod died and the province of Judea revolted. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, Varus handled the uprising very skillfully.<sup>84</sup> Varus deftly maneuvered his legions and ended the variously uprisings using a well-balanced mix of military force and threat. Coming to the aid of the besieged Roman garrison in Jerusalem, Varus pursued a policy of punishing the rebels and rewarding those who stayed out of the fight.<sup>85</sup> Securing his lines of communication, he moved quickly and decisively to Jerusalem, where his arrival prompted the rebel army to disintegrate. After rounding up the ringleaders, Varus quelled what could have become a full-blown disaster for the Romans.

Following his time in Syria, history loses Varus until his next major appointment in AD 7.<sup>86</sup> Augustus appointed Varus as military governor of Germania, following the successful military campaigns of Drusus and Tiberius. The assumption from the Emperor's perspective seems to have been that the province was pacified, and that economic and infrastructure development was the next logical step. Of course, there was always a significant chance of rebellion after military subjugation of a territory, and so the new governor had to have experience in handling legions during a rebellion. The choice of Varus seemed to fit neatly both of these concerns. He had handled significant



economic matters in both of his previous postings. Varus had also displayed exceptional ability during his suppression of the rebellion in Judea. Given the context of the times, the choice of Varus as governor of Germania makes perfect sense. He was not a brilliantly successful military commander, but then the main military operations in Germania had already taken place. Or so the Emperor believed.

Arminius' history is more difficult to determine than that of Varus. Nearly all of the accounts of Arminius that have survived are Roman in origin, so the accounts are certain to be biased. What is known is that he was born in the Cherusci tribe sometime around 18 BC, and his family was one of the more distinguished families among the tribe.<sup>87</sup> Leadership in the tribe, as in a number of Germanic tribes, was not by kinship but by an aristocratic oligarchy.<sup>88</sup> It is clear that Arminius did not come to consolidate power in the tribe without a struggle. Within the leadership of the tribe there were those who chose to revolt against Rome, but there were also elders who desired to remain firmly allied to Rome. Arminius' uncle, Inguiomerus, was initially against a revolt, then joined in the movement after Arminius' success, yet ultimately deserted Arminius.<sup>89</sup> Arminius' father-in-law, Segestes, remained a constant friend of Rome. Even Arminius' brother, Flavus, was a loyal servant in the Roman army and eventually retired in Rome.<sup>90</sup> In order to retain power within his tribe, Arminius had to show that his position was strongest. The ultimate path to retain leadership for him, as it was throughout much of Germanic society, was through military might and success in battle.<sup>91</sup>

That Arminius was an experienced warrior and military leader is beyond doubt. Much of the early part of his military career was actually spent in the service of Rome. Arminius served as the head of a contingent of his native troops, an auxiliary corps.<sup>92</sup> In

addition to this high rank, his performance was such that Arminius not only received Roman citizenship, but was accorded equestrian status.<sup>93</sup> During his service Arminius also learned Latin, and undoubtedly a great deal about Rome's culture and military system.<sup>94</sup> These experiences would prove invaluable to Arminius once he began plotting how to defeat the Roman forces who occupied his homeland. Indeed, he played a very important role as the auxiliary commander in Varus' force. Although it is not known precisely which campaigns that Arminius participated in, historians suspect that he was present during the Pannonian revolt in AD 6.<sup>95</sup> Here Arminius would have had the opportunity to observe the reaction of a Roman army to a developing insurrection, and, perhaps more importantly, learn how the legions might be beaten. Regardless of whether Arminius was in Pannonia, through his service as a Roman officer Arminius was in a position to learn a great deal about how the Roman army functioned. Such detailed knowledge would be extremely beneficial as Arminius made his plans to topple the Roman government in his homeland.

### Battle Narrative

The Battle of Teutoburg Forest was set in motion when Varus received word of a small revolt in a far corner of Germania. As the governor of the new province, Varus commanded three entire Roman legions. To deal with the insurrection Varus took with him the greatest part of the troops that he could, likely numbering around 14,000 fighting men<sup>96</sup>. Also accompanying the legions were Germanic auxiliary troops, commanded by Arminius himself. At this point Varus had no idea of Arminius' treachery, and sources reveal that Varus gave command of the vanguard to Arminius. Arminius took this force and raced ahead, presumably to make sure the path was clear, but in reality he meant to

ensure the trap was set.<sup>97</sup> The rest of the Roman forces followed behind as quick as they could, since Varus was adhering to the known Roman tactic of responding immediately with available forces to the insurrection. Varus moved on a direct route, following a road that at one point passes between the Kalkriese Hill on the south and the Great Bog on the north.<sup>98</sup> The army marched along a path that is still called the Old Army Road on some modern maps.<sup>99</sup> Varus was pressing his forces toward what he believed to be a small revolt, but in actuality he was leading the Roman soldiers into a trap. He sent his Germanic vanguard forward to coordinate with the tribes whose land the Romans would be passing through and to ensure that the way was clear. All of the Roman reconnaissance was in Arminius' hands, however, and his betrayal blinded and made vulnerable the Roman army.



Figure 1. Germania

Source: Lendering, Jona and Prins, Marcus, *Map of the Roman Wars in Germania*  
<http://www.livius.org/te-tg/teutoburg/teutoburg01.htm> (accessed May 15, 2009).

Knowing that the Romans would come hurrying towards the report of a revolt, Arminius manufactured one.<sup>100</sup> The revolt toward which Varus marched was actually a ruse. Arminius' plan was to draw out then Roman forces, and then ambush them enroute. Given this plan, Arminius chose his ground well. The site around the battlefield at Kalkriese was heavily forested, and did not allow the large Roman formations much room to maneuver.<sup>101</sup> In addition, the lack of good roads canalized the formation, especially the wagon train and artillery, and spread out the Roman forces. It is likely that

the Roman formation stretched for approximately eight to ten kilometers, and in such a condition it would be nearly impossible for each of the legions to reinforce each other.<sup>102</sup> Given the terrain the baggage would probably have been located in the middle of the formation, further dividing the actual combat units.<sup>103</sup> With the column strung out in rough terrain the Romans would be vulnerable, and this made an ideal time for the Germanic tribes to strike.

The exact details of the battle are unclear, and much of the understanding of the battle relies upon interpretation of the evidence and sifting through ancient sources.<sup>104</sup> With the information at hand, and an analysis of the tactics of both sides, a reasonable conclusion of the events can be drawn. An initial ambush by Germanic warriors struck the rear of the marching Roman column. With the legionaires on the march, the Germanic forces would have had a tremendous advantage initially since the Roman soldiers would not have the benefit of their disciplined formation. Striking at the rear of the column would serve to separate the Roman forces, at least at first, since it would take time for the information to move up to the head of the column so that the Romans would halt. Once the Romans managed to react and form ranks, they were able to beat off their attackers. However, graver damage was done and now at least one of the Roman formations was seriously mauled, and the Germanic warriors managed to escape back into the forest with relatively light casualties.

After the resulting confusion from the first fight, the Romans followed standard procedure and made camp for the evening.<sup>105</sup> A heavy rain and the requirement to have at least half of the force on guard due to incessant attacks prevented the Romans from having much rest. The next day continued with more of the same, as Varus continued in

vain to contact his scouts, not realizing that his reconnaissance forces under Arminius were the ones who set the trap. Throughout the day the Romans are forced to stop and fight off point ambushes as the Germanic tribes seek gaps between the formations and strike vulnerabilities, only to slip away quickly into the forest when threatened by formed legionary ranks. In such attacks the heavy armor and equipment carried by the Roman soldiers proved to be more of a detriment than an advantage. After a full day of marching, Varus realizes the true precariousness of his situation. His column is blinded, operating in difficult terrain that strips them of most of their advantages, and miles away from relief. The sources record that at one point Varus ordered all unnecessary baggage to be collected and burned, showing the extremity to which the Romans were reduced.<sup>106</sup>

After several days of moving through the forest, and spending the nights in hastily built (and ever smaller) camps, the Romans were near desperation. Varus chose to abandon his original intention of putting down a revolt, and instead make for the nearest Roman camp at Haltern. The only route available to him led between the Kalkriese mountain and the Great Bog. This trail moved from east to west, and the terrain was such that a large bog hemmed the path in from the north, while the high ground of the mountain was to the south.<sup>107</sup> At this point Arminius sprung his most careful trap. Along the Kalkriese Pass, where the trail narrowed between the mountain and a large bog, a series of earthen walls mirrored the trail for a distance of approximately one mile.<sup>108</sup> These walls were dug out of sod, and a great deal of effort and preparation went into their emplacement prior to the battle. The walls were also camouflaged to appear as part of the forest, so that the Romans could only understand that the walls were obstacles when it was too late to do anything in response.<sup>109</sup> A

Roman army pinned in this way with impassable terrain on their flanks and being struck on the move recalls the image of an earlier defeat at Lake Trasimene at the hands of Hannibal, and the result was much the same.

The earthen walls previously prepared helped to canalize Roman movement in the narrow pass, and the Germanic warriors sallied out from deliberate gaps to attack the contracted columns.<sup>110</sup> It is doubtful that in such a predicament the Roman forces could mount a successful defense, and enjoy the advantages of their superior arms and equipment. Rather, in this situation, the heavy armor and large shields worked against them, and the clumsy legionaries were forced to fight in *ad hoc* groups against a ghost-like enemy that could retreat into the forest and then attack a vulnerable Roman formation at will. Pressed into this final ambush location, the Roman army disintegrated. The Roman cavalry under Varus' subordinate Vala tried to break out on their own, away from the infantry forces, but were eventually cut down.<sup>111</sup> Pockets of Romans surrendered, but an ill fate awaited centurions and high-ranking officers. These groups were sacrificed by the victorious Germanic tribes, and Roman blood flowed freely over makeshift altars in the forest as offerings to Germanic gods.<sup>112</sup> Lower-ranking Romans were held captive, in some cases for years, and a very few number of survivors managed to trickle back to frontier outposts to report on the carnage. This report caused quite a stir, and Roman forts all along the Rhine were on alert for an anticipated invasion.<sup>113</sup>

It is unclear at what point in the battle Varus realized that his faith in Arminius had been greatly misplaced, but it was clearly not a well-received revelation. Ancient writers state that Varus, having been previously wounded, at some point committed suicide.<sup>114</sup> His attendants did their best to burn his body and partially bury it, but Varus'

remains were discovered, and Arminius sent Varus' head to Maroboduus in an ill-fated attempt to cement an alliance.<sup>115</sup> The remains were eventually delivered to Rome.

The magnitude of the loss of this battle was to shape Roman foreign policy for centuries. There would be a Roman expedition led by Germanicus several years later as a punitive effort, and he even visited the battlefield where he was guided to various sites by some of the survivors of the battle. Germanicus ordered the Roman remains to be collected and buried, for the Germanic tribes had left their bones scattered and a number of Roman skulls were still nailed into trees.<sup>116</sup> After Germanicus' triumph in Rome, there were no further attempts by the Romans to occupy the lands east of the Rhine.

### Analysis

Understanding and interpreting the Battle of Teutoburg Forest is necessarily made more difficult by the fact that it is far from certain exactly what transpired at the battle. However, there is enough knowledge from ancient writers and modern archeology that some general conclusions can be drawn from the experience. When examining the campaign, it becomes apparent that Varus' fundamental flaw was not necessarily in the way that he executed the operation. Varus' critical mistake was the assumption that Arminius was on the Roman side. This assumption proved to be Varus' undoing, and much has been made by historians regarding the nature of this mistake. Whatever Varus' intentions might have been about the province of Germania, it is clear that he did not anticipate Arminius to turn against Rome, and the level of trust that Arminius enjoyed enabled him to accomplish such a complete victory.

Perhaps one of the most obvious lessons in this situation is Roman arrogance or *hubris*. It is clear that Rome fielded the most powerful and technologically advanced



army of the time period, and three entire legions represented an overwhelming force in that part of the world. Yet the Germanic tribes were able to destroy them utterly, and did so with warriors who, for the most part, were not professionally trained and were much less well-equipped than their Roman counterparts. This happened in part because the Roman force became focused on Germanic intentions, instead of their capabilities.

Certainly the Romans had a healthy respect for Germanic military prowess. A large number of Germanic warriors served as auxiliaries in the Roman army, and even the Emperor's guards were Germanic tribesmen.<sup>117</sup> Also the victories that Drusus and Tiberius gained were not bloodless, and those setbacks would still be in living memory of some of the Roman legionaries.<sup>118</sup> Despite this respect for their military exploits, Varus as governor became fixated on what he perceived as the intentions of the Germanic tribes, and not their military capabilities. This fact was personified in Arminius, in whom Varus placed the trust of the reconnaissance of his army. In retrospect this was certainly an inopportune choice, to say the least, but acting under the assumptions that he did this was a perfectly reasonable action. The fact that Arminius was capable of that level of treachery completely escaped Varus, even though he had been warned against this eventuality by Arminius' future father-in-law Segestes.<sup>119</sup> By becoming fixated on the perceived intentions of his enemy, and not on Germanic capabilities, Varus doomed his army.

Another aspect that proved fatal for the Romans was their predictability. Having conducted a number of campaigns in Germania, the majority of which were successful, the Romans saw little need to change their *modus operandi*. Roman doctrine against an insurrection remained the same, not only in Germania, but throughout the Empire, and

doctrine called for a swift and immediate response from all available forces. Perhaps as a result of seeing this first-hand in Pannonia, and almost certainly as a result of his experience with the Roman army, Arminius seized upon this as an opportunity. He knew that he could draw Roman forces along a path of his choosing, at his timing, and could strike them when they were least prepared. Arminius could be certain of this knowledge because of Roman predictability. Thus one of the Romans' greatest strengths, their consistency, became a vulnerability under Arminius' plan. The Roman army was very accomplished at fighting and winning a set-piece battle in favorable terrain, so that is exactly what Arminius sought to deny them. Having become predictable in their movements, the Romans fell victim to Arminius' plan.

In order to overcome the significant advantages of the Roman forces, Arminius devised a plan that negated the advantages enjoyed by the Roman army. He invented new tactics for the Germanic forces, and solved several tactical problems along the way. In previous campaigns Germanic forces had sometimes had difficulty massing in time to face off against a Roman force. Some battles had come only as the Romans were leaving an area, as a result of the problem the Germanic tribes had with mobilizing. Arminius solved this problem by planning an ambush. By using the report of a revolt to draw out the Roman army, Arminius could engage the Romans when his own forces were fully prepared.

Another problem faced by Germanic armies in combating the Romans was Roman military technology and firepower. Lightly armed Germanic warriors were unable to directly confront the legions in a head-to-head battle. Instead, Arminius was determined to attack the Roman formations on the move, when they were the most

vulnerable. In restrictive terrain, the superior Roman armor actually worked against the legionaries, leaving them vulnerable to the more mobile and lightly armed Germanic warriors. These tactics completely negated Roman firepower as well, since the artillery was very difficult to bring to bear in forested and uneven terrain.<sup>120</sup> Arminius even shaped the terrain to his own advantage, building walls that served to canalize the Romans at the final ambush location. The end result of these new tactics was the decisive defeat of a well-equipped, professional force by relatively primitive tribesmen.

Another factor that could have aided in the Germanic victory is the fact that the Germanic auxiliaries were equipped with Roman arms. Although the auxiliary soldiers did not enjoy the same level of armor protection and weapons as the Roman legionaries, their equipment was better than ordinary tribesman. The auxiliary force in this battle was rather large, and by using them as shock troops Arminius could have complemented his use of the lighter and less protected Germanic tribesman. Although there is no historical or archeological evidence for this, it seems logical that Arminius might have kept the auxiliaries from the battle until the final ambush. The Romans would not know the fate of their scouts until the battle was nearly over. The guerilla style attacks wore down the Roman army, and then Arminius used the better-equipped auxiliaries to launch his final, overwhelming attack in Kalkriese Pass. If this occurred Arminius applied technology in a limited and constrained sense that allowed his forces to better match the technological advantage enjoyed by the Romans.

The final piece of the victory for the Germanic forces was the societal structure of the tribes themselves. The cultural value system of the Germanic tribes placed a heavy emphasis on warfighting ability. On an individual level, from the highest rank to

common tribal members, power was achieved by prowess in battle. Kings were not usually hereditary, but rather chosen from an aristocratic group by virtue of their success in war. Leaders achieved political and cultural power by attracting warriors to their *comitati*, and maintained this following only by success in battle. An ordinary member of a tribe received the full rights of an adult male by properly performing his duties in battle, and lost these rights by cowardice in battle. Into this societal structure the Romans sought to suddenly impose a governing system that left the Romans the only ones who could legitimately exercise the use of force. The futility of this exercise becomes clear in hindsight, and it is almost a foregone conclusion that depriving armed warriors of their only means of livelihood and social advancement would result in a violent and bloody end.

More importantly for the battle itself, the individual Germanic warriors were motivated to perform well. They would not only be rewarded for their successful efforts at all levels, but faced the most horrible punishment by the Romans if they failed. The rewards that the warriors reaped were huge. The pillage from three Roman legions would have made many warriors instantly wealthy, not to mention the treasury that was also captured. According to legend Arminius captured the eagles (military standards) of two Roman legions, a momentous feat that few of Rome's enemies could claim. He in turn gave the Roman eagles to other tribes that supported him in the rebellion, bringing great honor to them (not to mention Roman attention in the future).<sup>121</sup> The failure to understand the ramifications of the societal structure of the Germanic tribes, and the attendant cultural values attached to it, might well have been one of the greatest mistakes the Romans made.

The evidence is unclear for the role that religion itself may have played in the motivation for the battle. Clearly religion was a part of warfare for the Germanic tribes, and certainly religion influenced the battle in some way. The shrines that the Germanic warriors established in the forest, and the ritualized sacrifice of some of the captured Romans attests to the importance of religion. The ancient sources do not state whether Arminius tapped into religious fervor and rejection of Roman gods in order to gain support for the uprising, and with the evidence at hand it is impossible to determine whether this occurred. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that religion did influence, in some way, the desire on the part of the Germanic tribes to free themselves from Roman rule.

This chapter discussed the Battle of Teutoburg Forest, and the Roman and Germanic forces that fought in the battle. A general overview of the strategic situation is given, from both the perspective of the Romans and the Germanic tribes. The tactics of the two armies are considered, as well as a biography of the main leaders. The chapter provides a narrative of the battle, linking ancient sources with recently retrieved archeological evidence from the battlefield and attempts to reconstruct the action that took place. Finally, an analysis of the battle is given. The fatal flaw for Varus' forces was his assumption that Arminius was loyal to the Roman cause. Roman arrogance resulted in predictable Roman tactics. This in turn enabled the Germanic tribes to change their strategy and take advantage of Roman weaknesses. Finally, this chapter discussed the cultural influences that were at work among the Germanic tribes. A warrior society faced with the extinction of their existing social order reacted violently against Roman intrusion. The role of religion remains ill-defined, but is undoubtedly present based upon

the evidence from ancient writers and the battlefield itself. By not understanding the cultural implications of their occupation of Germania, the Romans drew upon themselves a vengeance that altered the future of Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Gilliver, Adrian Goldsworthy, and Michael Whitby, *Rome at War; Caesar and his Legacy* (New York: Osprey Publishing Limited, 23).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>4</sup> Peter S. Wells, *The Battle that Stopped Rome* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co. Ltd., 2003), 78.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Adrian Murdoch, *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*. Sparkford: J.H. Haynes and Co. Ltd., 2006), 31.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>13</sup> Tacitus, *The Agricola and the Germania* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 102.

<sup>14</sup> Lotte Hedeager, *Iron-Age Societies; From Tribe to State in Northern Europe, 500 BC to AD 700* (Cornwall: TJ Press (Padstow), Ltd., 1992), 156.

<sup>15</sup> Tacitus, *The Agricola and the Germania*, 105.

<sup>16</sup> T.Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians, 100 B.C. - A.D. 400* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 141.

<sup>17</sup> Murdoch, *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*, 40.

<sup>18</sup> Hedeager, *Iron-Age Societies; From Tribe to State in Northern Europe, 500 BC to AD 700*, 157.

- <sup>19</sup> Murdoch, *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*, 84.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 85.
- <sup>21</sup> Wells, *The Battle that Stopped Rome*, 108.
- <sup>22</sup> Adrian Goldsworthy, *The Roman Army at War 100 BC - AD 200* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1996), 41.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., 43.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., 35.
- <sup>25</sup> Graham Webster, *The Roman Imperial Army* (London: A. & C. Black Publishers Limited, 1969), 114.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., 118.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., 117.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., 116.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Goldsworthy *The Roman Army at War 100 BC - AD 200*, 37.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., 110.
- <sup>34</sup> Wells, *The Battle that Stopped Rome*, 58.
- <sup>35</sup> Goldsworthy, *The Roman Army at War 100 BC - AD 200*, 216.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 17.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., 209.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., 218.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 17.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>56</sup> Murdoch, *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*, 106.

<sup>57</sup> Tacitus, *The Agricola and the Germania*, 112.

<sup>58</sup> Lotte Hedeager theorized in her book that this changing social dynamic is demonstrated by the change in grave goods evident in Germanic tribes during this time period. Hedeager, *Iron-Age Societies; From Tribe to State in Northern Europe, 500 BC to AD 700*, 81.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>60</sup> Goldsworthy, *The Roman Army at War 100 BC - AD 200*, 49.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Goldsworthy, *The Roman Army at War 100 BC - AD 200*, 48.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.



- <sup>65</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>67</sup> Wells, 145.
- <sup>68</sup> Goldsworthy, *The Roman Army at War 100 BC - AD 200*, 50.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid., 48.
- <sup>70</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>71</sup> Gilliver Rome at War, 58.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>73</sup> Goldsworthy, *The Roman Army at War 100 BC - AD 200*, 53.
- <sup>74</sup> Murdoch, *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*, 34.
- <sup>75</sup> Wells, *The Battle that Stopped Rome*, 80.
- <sup>76</sup> Murdoch, *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*, 53.
- <sup>77</sup> Wells, *The Battle that Stopped Rome*, 81.
- <sup>78</sup> Murdoch, *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*, 57.
- <sup>79</sup> Ibid., 56.
- <sup>80</sup> Ibid., 57.
- <sup>81</sup> Wells, *The Battle that Stopped Rome*, 82.
- <sup>82</sup> Murdoch, *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*, 58.
- <sup>83</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>84</sup> Wells, *The Battle that Stopped Rome*, 82.
- <sup>85</sup> Murdoch, *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*, 64.
- <sup>86</sup> Wells, *The Battle that Stopped Rome*, 83.
- <sup>87</sup> Ibid., 107.
- <sup>88</sup> Murdoch, *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*, 84.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Wells, *The Battle that Stopped Rome*, 108.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>96</sup> Murdoch, *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*, 105.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Wells, *The Battle that Stopped Rome*, 47.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 49

<sup>100</sup> Murdoch, *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*, 101.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>104</sup> One modern historian, Wells, was convinced that the entire battle took place at modern-day Kalkriese, where a well-planned ambush by the Germanic forces wiped out the Roman legions in less than an hour. Most historians do not agree with this concept, however, and it is unlikely that this was the scenario given the extreme difficulty of hiding that number of warriors along one long route and then striking with them simultaneously. A far more likely scenario is a running battle of two or three days after the initial contact. Wells, *The Battle that Stopped Rome*, 176.

<sup>105</sup> Murdoch, *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*, 109.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>107</sup> Wells, *The Battle that Stopped Rome*, 161.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>110</sup> Murdoch, *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*, 112.
- <sup>111</sup> Ibid., 115.
- <sup>112</sup> Ibid., 119.
- <sup>113</sup> Wells, *The Battle that Stopped Rome*, 200.
- <sup>114</sup> Murdoch, *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*, 116.
- <sup>115</sup> Ibid., 117.
- <sup>116</sup> Wells, *The Battle that Stopped Rome*, 43.
- <sup>117</sup> Murdoch, *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*, 102.
- <sup>118</sup> Wells, *The Battle that Stopped Rome*, 125.
- <sup>119</sup> Murdoch, *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*, 100.
- <sup>120</sup> Wells, *The Battle that Stopped Rome*, 135.
- <sup>121</sup> Murdoch, *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*, 117.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE BATTLE OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN

It is a good day to die! – Lakota battle cry

Robinson, *A Good Year to Die*

Much as Rome spread across Europe centuries earlier, in the nineteenth century the United States was spreading across North America. Manifest Destiny was the predominant idea, and fighting battles became necessary as some of the people already on those lands sought to resist. One of those battles was the Battle of the Little Bighorn, arguably one of the most analyzed battles in American history. The battle is also a tantalizing riddle, since some of the most important elements, such as Custer's last stand, were not witnessed by any living white men, and the Sioux narratives are difficult to fully interpret. Nevertheless, the facts of the battle are plain enough; tribal warriors from a primitive society defeated a professional army from a technologically advanced society who were armed with superior weaponry. The intent of this chapter is to unravel how this may have transpired, and to later establish the relationship between this battle and others of its kind.

#### Strategic Situation

##### The U.S. Army

During the latter half of the nineteenth century the United State was advancing westward across the continent at a rapid, if uneven pace. Naturally, this meant the dispossession of the Indian tribes who were already occupying those lands. Although the United States policy varied somewhat throughout this time period, the political resolution was that Indians were steadily pushed westward onto reservations set aside for them. The

reality of this situation, however, was that the federal government did not have the means, military or political, to prevent white settlement of even these areas.<sup>1</sup> White settlers sometimes occupied these reservations, or portions of the reservations, especially if there were resources such as gold on them. A notable example of this occurred in 1874 when Custer led an Army expedition to scout for gold in the Black Hills.<sup>2</sup> The United States had previously ceded this territory to the Sioux Indians in the Fort Laramie Treaty signed by the chief Red Cloud.<sup>3</sup> Under President Ulysses Grant, the United States ceased enforcement of this treaty, and no longer attempted to prevent white incursions in the Black Hills, which was considered sacred hunting ground by the Sioux.<sup>4</sup> These actions inevitably led to war between the United States and the various Sioux tribes.

A key element of the U.S. policy towards the Indians was to settle Indian tribes on reservation and attempt to “civilize them,” turning them into farmers and Christianizing them.<sup>5</sup> This approach, obviously, did not take into account the dramatic, if not cataclysmic, shift necessary to Indian culture. Also complicating matters were the various treaties signed and ratified by both sides. Indians who did not directly sign treaties did not feel bound by them, arousing cries of duplicity from the U.S. government when certain tribes or parts of tribes did not follow the terms of the treaty. The Indians also did not respect the land boundaries that the treaties imposed on them.<sup>6</sup> On the other side the U.S. government repeatedly violated terms under the treaties, or Congress ratified changes to the treaties after the Indians had already signed. Chief among the violations was the seizure of Indian lands, and the failure to provide rations and other supplies guaranteed under the treaties. The lack of rations or their poor quality was often

due to the near universal corruption of the Indian agents, who profited at the expense of the reservation tribes.<sup>7</sup>

The end result of this situation was that by 1875 a number of Sioux Indians and other tribes refused to settle on reservations, and maintained their traditional lifestyle upon the open plains. On December 6 the commissioner of Indian Affairs, Edward Smith, sent out a directive that all Indians needed to report to the reservations before January 31, 1876, even though tribes were only able to conduct limited movement due to the winter weather.<sup>8</sup> This impractical demand precipitated the Great Sioux War. Under General Philip Sherman's guidance, the commander of the Department of the Missouri, the military now considered all of the non-reservation Indians hostile. On February 1, all non-reservation Sioux became the army's responsibility.<sup>9</sup>

### The Plains Indians

The plains Indians were a tribal society, with kinship ties predominating in the political system. The tribes did not fight only white men; many of the traditional enemies of the Sioux tribes were other Indian tribes. There were also tribes that were traditional allies, or at least tribes considered friendly. Indian society at this time, however, was in a state of flux. Many tribes, the Lakota included, had migrated from the land they had occupied before the whites arrived, and moved on to areas that were not as pressured by white settlers. By the mid to late nineteenth century such land was hard, if not impossible, to find. Under relentless pressure from white expansion, some of the tribes moved to the reservations set aside for them and adopted a lifestyle that was non-traditional for them. Others, however, rejected this. A conglomeration of various tribes,

including the Lakotas and Cheyenne, began to unite in 1875 and refuse life on the reservation.

By the 1870s there was essentially a split in plains Indian society between those who lived on reservations and those who still followed the traditional nomadic lifestyle. This delineation was not necessarily clear-cut, however. The most extreme of the tribes that kept to the traditional hunting grounds lived on their own, but a fairly substantial portion of the Indian population on the reservations would seasonally migrate to live with the off-reservation tribes. This exodus became more widespread when there were difficulties with the rations and supplies that were set aside for the Indians on the reservations. The situation came to a head in the spring of 1876 when large numbers of young men left the reservations and joined up with the most famous of the Lakota's leaders, Sitting Bull, and his free-roaming tribe.<sup>10</sup>

Viewed in the framework of ends, ways, and means, the United States' strategic objective or end was to have all of the plains Indians living within the boundaries of their reservations. The way to accomplish this was by attacking those tribes who lived off of the reservation and using force to compel them to move to the reservation. The means to accomplish this was the use of military forces then in the vicinity of the frontier. For the Great Sioux War these consisted of an infantry and cavalry force under Colonel Gibbon located in current-day Montana, a large detachment of cavalry and infantry under General Crook, and another large force commanded by General Terry. At General Terry's insistence General Custer was restored to his command of the Seventh Cavalry, which would form the main strike force under General Terry. The campaign was begun in May of 1876.

Under the framework of ends, ways, and means, the Indian end appears to have been to maintain a *status quo* lifestyle, enjoying the use of their traditional hunting grounds and keeping their lands free from white settlers. The way was to ignore American government demands to return to the reservations set aside for the Indians (inadequate as they were). If it came to military action then the Indians would defend themselves and their land from American encroachment; this course of action was strengthened by the unification of the various tribes. The means used to accomplish the Indians' end was the military force provided by the conglomeration of tribes. The strategy in essence was passive, since if the U.S. government took no action the Indians would achieve what they desired. The government, however, was not inactive.

#### U.S. Army Tactics

The United States military was not at a high point in the summer of 1876. The post-Civil War army had largely been gutted, and the cavalry garrisoned along the frontier was more along the lines of a police force. The average soldier was not of very high quality either. The soldiers tended to be among the dregs of society, either those who could find no other job or criminals hoping to escape their past (it was estimated that over ten percent of the force enlisted under a false name.)<sup>11</sup> A large number of the soldiers were also immigrants, and not always fluent in English. Many of the soldiers were men from the industrial cities, former laborers who had no experience with horses or farm animals.<sup>12</sup> The need to teach soldiers how to be horsemen and take care of their mounts added to the training challenge to teach a new recruit tactics and weapon skills. Despite these weaknesses, however, the army also had some strengths.



A large number of the officer corps, especially more senior officers, were Civil War veterans and had seen much action. Custer himself was a very famous Civil War general, and all of his superiors were as well. Custer's two subordinates, Reno and Benteen, were successful leaders in their own right during the Civil War. Many non-commissioned officers were also veterans of the Civil War.<sup>13</sup> Even some of the immigrant soldiers had served in conflicts in Europe before moving to the United States and joining the cavalry. The officer leadership within the Army, for the most part, was experienced and proficient.

The cavalry was organized into small garrison posts along the frontier. Generally it was rare for the various troops to come together and operate as a single unit. Many of the outposts suffered from high desertion rates and discipline problems related to the consumption of alcohol.<sup>14</sup> There had been a few major actions against the plains Indians, but most combat consisted of light skirmishing. When Custer's Seventh Cavalry was consolidated prior to the campaign in 1876, it was with a cadre of combat veterans, a smaller number who had actually battled Indians, and a large number of rather green recruits.

The primary weapon for the U.S. cavalryman was the Springfield .45 carbine. This weapon had been selected after extensive testing, and although a single-shot rifle a trained trooper could fire approximately seventeen rounds a minute out to a maximum range of 1,000 yards with accuracy to 250 yards.<sup>15</sup> There was however a nasty tendency for the soft copper cartridges to jam after repeated use, causing the operator to have to pry the shells out with a knife.<sup>16</sup> Each cavalryman also carried a revolver, usually a Colt .45 Model 1873. Senior non-commissioned officers and officers were known to carry

their own personal, more expensive weapons.<sup>17</sup> Although artillery was available to the cavalry, it was not used very often against the Indians due to the difficulty of transport and supply. Gatling guns were fielded, however, and could mount an impressive rate of fire. There were similar difficulties maneuvering these weapons since they were mounted on carriages like traditional artillery.

The strategy that the U.S. Army used against the Indians sought to take advantage of the cavalry's strengths and strike the Indians' weaknesses. Indian warriors were notoriously difficult to bring to battle if they did not desire battle, and many cavalry expeditions returned with little results after weeks of campaigning. The tactics that eventually evolved were for the army to attack the Indian camps, where the warriors would be forced to defend their women, children, and possessions. Even if the battle was only partially successful, as long as the army was able to destroy the Indians' shelter and food supplies, the Indians were often forced to surrender later due to starvation. The battle at Powder River in 1876 is a quintessential example of this strategy, where the soldiers clearly targeted the Indians' shelter and supplies.<sup>18</sup> It is perhaps no accident that General Sherman adopted this variant of the scorched earth policy, having gained fame for his destructive march across Georgia during the American Civil War (perhaps learned by Civil War generals previously in the Seminole Wars). Custer's most successful attack against an Indian tribe followed the same strategy. In 1870 Custer launched a raid against an Indian village along the Washita River. During this battle he surprised an Indian village at dawn, attacking from multiple directions.<sup>19</sup> Custer was in turn surprised, however, by warriors from outlying villages who quickly closed on his men. One of Custer's detachments (sixteen men, including one officer) was cut off and killed to a

man, but the rest of the unit was able to make good their escape. Though his superiors highly praised Custer for the attack, he did face criticism over essentially abandoning the detachment. Benteen was especially sharp in his criticism.<sup>20</sup>

### Indian Tactics

The plains Indians just prior to the Great Sioux War, as previously discussed, were divided into camps of reservation and non-reservation dwellers. In early 1876 the non-reservation Indians of the northern plains coalesced under the leadership of Sitting Bull, when in an unprecedented move the Lakota nation recognized him as the supreme leader.<sup>21</sup> The tribes that were banded together in the group that Custer eventually attacked included a number of Sioux subtribes, such as the Lakota, Oglalas, Hunkpapas (all subtribes under the Teton Sioux), and separate tribes such as the Cheyenne.<sup>22</sup> For these various groups to gather together in this way was very uncommon, and one of the scouts that Custer used commented that he had never seen or heard of such a large gathering of plains Indians.<sup>23</sup> Faced with the government's ultimatum, and hoping to maintain their traditional way of life, the Indian tribes came together for their own protection, and stood ready to defend their hunting grounds.

The Indians typically fought under their own tribal chieftains. The tribes did sometimes camp together, but that does not mean that the tribes were necessarily organized or even well-coordinated in their actions. Indians had a very individualistic approach to warfare, and coordinated efforts among large groups of warriors was practically non-existent.<sup>24</sup> The primary loyalty of each warrior was to his next higher chieftain. Those who were famous warriors, such as Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, could certainly inspire and influence others, but there was little overall direction beyond a few

general decisions. Sitting Bull did not take part in actual combat at the Battle of the Little Big Horn, and Crazy Horse led only his personal group of warriors.<sup>25</sup>

Sioux society reflected a very strong warrior culture. Many of the ways for social advancement for males involved personal bravery in warfare. War was a way of life, and children were trained for it from a very early age.<sup>26</sup> The practice of “counting coup” was an important way of gaining prestige for a warrior.<sup>27</sup> This involved getting close enough to a live or dead enemy to touch him with a stick, bow, or even a hand. Young men received their adult names after performing deeds in combat. Sitting Bull received his name at age fourteen after performing bravely in a battle (he was previously known as Slow).<sup>28</sup> Warriors often took trophies of their enemies, especially scalps, which the female relatives of the warrior then paraded around the village.<sup>29</sup> There were also warrior societies that existed within the tribes. After performing bravely on the battlefield, a warrior would be able to join one of these societies. Within the camp these societies functioned as guards or police, and they would fight together in battle.<sup>30</sup>

The weapons that the Indians carried were varied, and depended upon their availability. There was no central organizing authority that ensured each warrior was armed in a certain way, it was the individual responsibility of the warrior. Many of the warriors went to war armed with the traditional tools of their ancestors, including bows, war clubs made of stone, and tomahawks, most with iron blades. Indians had also been intent on obtaining the white man’s weapons. Traders for years had provided the Indians with weapons, and many warriors were proficient with these weapons. In preparation for the expected struggle in 1876, warriors had also begun acquiring arms and stockpiling ammunition.<sup>31</sup> The most common rifles for the Indians were very modern and effective

repeating rifles, such as the Winchester or Henry rifle. Although these weapons did not have the range of the Springfield carried by the cavalry soldiers, they were often more reliable and easier to operate. One historian estimated that up to thirty percent of the warriors facing Custer could have been armed with such rifles.<sup>32</sup> In addition to these, Indians also carried older muzzleloaders and various other types of firearms, including revolvers, with half of the Indians fielding some sort of firearm.<sup>33</sup>

The tactics that plains Indians used in warfare were comparable to the skills they displayed in hunting the buffalo. Raids and ambushes were the primary methods that Indians used while conducting war.<sup>34</sup> When faced with a larger enemy force, the Indians avoided battle. The Indians knew their own terrain intimately, and warriors could typically evade most cavalry forces sent to find them. Plains Indians rarely stayed to fight if outnumbered or placed at a disadvantage of some kind. This type of guerilla warfare proved very frustrating to the American army forces deployed against them.

### The Leaders

George Armstrong Custer was born in a small town in Illinois, the son of a blacksmith of German descent.<sup>35</sup> He obtained an appointment to West Point and graduated from there in 1861 as the lowest ranked student in the class. His low rank was mainly due to discipline problems, although Custer was not an academic standout either.<sup>36</sup> He took naturally to warfare, and vaulted to early fame during the Civil War, at one time becoming the youngest general in the Union Army.

Custer also garnered a reputation for extraordinary luck, referred to by him and others as “Custer’s luck.”<sup>37</sup> Despite having a number of horses shot out from under him as a cavalry commander, Custer was never seriously wounded. He led a number of

famous charges, including a clash with Confederate General J. E. B. Stewart's cavalry during the Gettysburg campaign, where Custer fought the previously undefeated Confederate cavalry to a standstill. Following the Civil War, Custer continued to earn glory and headlines as an Indian fighter. His experience on the frontier was not quite as extensive as his time on Civil War battlefields, however. Custer's main action fighting Indians was at the Washita River engagement.<sup>38</sup> Other than that battle most of the conflicts that Custer participated in were skirmishes. He enjoyed a great deal of respect from his superiors, notably General Philip Sheridan, who had been his commander in the Civil War. Custer was also greatly admired by a number of his soldiers. Just prior to the outbreak of hostilities in the Great Sioux War, Custer was reinstated to his regiment to lead their campaign against the Sioux Indians.<sup>39</sup> Due to a political quarrel President Ulysses Grant had removed Custer from command, but General Terry, Custer's superior, successfully lobbied to get Custer reinstated.

Custer's immediate subordinates in the Battle of the Little Bighorn were Major Marcus Reno and Captain Frederick Benteen. Both men disliked Custer, nor did they care much for each other. Major Reno had participated in the Civil War, but had not achieved notable success. He was known as a man who had a difficult personality, and he was not generally well-liked in the regiment.<sup>40</sup> Reno was also a heavy drinker, even among the alcohol-disposed frontier crowd. He had expected to command the expedition against the Sioux, but was thwarted at the last minute by Custer's reinstatement. During the campaign and prior to the defeat at the Little Bighorn River, General Terry (the overall commander) had given Reno a reconnaissance mission. Reno had performed poorly on this mission, disobeying the commands of his superior officer,

not accomplishing the goals of his mission, and failing to follow a fresh Indian trail that he had discovered.<sup>41</sup> Knowledge of this trail proved decisive, however, and Custer followed this trail to discover the Indian camp. Reno's later conduct during the battle was deplorable according to a number of participants in the battle, and although cleared in a court of inquiry there were few who supported him in later years.<sup>42</sup>

Benteen was a Virginian who had also served in the Civil War in the Union Army. He had a successful career during the war, but one that was never as successful as Custer's.<sup>43</sup> This was undoubtedly a factor in his poor attitude towards Custer. The main cause, however, seems to have stemmed from an early incident. Benteen had served under Custer for a number of years, and was present at the Battle of Washita where Custer charged the Indian village. One of Benteen's close friends, Major Joel Elliot, had been detached from the main body and had not returned when Custer decided to withdraw. Soldiers later discovered that Major Ellis and his eighteen man detachment had all been massacred. Benteen was so incensed that he authored a letter blaming Custer for abandoning his wounded men on the field.<sup>44</sup> When Custer angrily demanded who had written the letter after its appearance in a newspaper, Benteen boldly confronted him.<sup>45</sup> Custer abruptly left, but the ill feelings continued. While on the trail of the Sioux in 1876 Custer spoke to his officers, at one point emphasizing the importance of obeying his orders, since some had criticized him in the past. Benteen immediately demanded to know if the comments were directed at him, and Custer responded that they were not.<sup>46</sup> However, this incident shows the state of relations between the two. Despite his problems with Custer, Benteen was an excellent soldier and leader. By all accounts

Benteen behaved admirably as a leader in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, helping to hold the beleaguered cavalry together while under siege by the Sioux.<sup>47</sup>

The Sioux were led at this battle by Sitting Bull, who served as the focal point for those Indians seeking to carry on their traditional life on the plains. He showed great potential as a leader from an early age. At twenty five years of age Sitting Bull became a leader of one of his tribe's elite military societies.<sup>48</sup> By his late twenties his tribe elected him as a war chief.<sup>49</sup> Yet his men recognized in him other qualities in addition to his skill in warfare. Sitting Bull was considered not only a wise leader, but a spiritual leader as well. Prior to the Great Sioux War, Sitting Bull had a vision concerning a future battle with the cavalymen.<sup>50</sup> In his vision, the soldiers fell into the camp on their heads. His followers interpreted the vision as a great victory to come for the Sioux. Under Sitting Bull's guidance the Sioux tribes prepared for war, and united in one great camp with other allied tribes such as the Cheyenne. Sitting Bull was greatly admired by not only his native tribe, the Lakotas, but by many others as well, and he had immense power to influence them.<sup>51</sup> Faced with the threat of invasion, the tribes met and in an unprecedented move named Sitting Bull the supreme war leader of all of the Sioux.<sup>52</sup> During the Battle of the Little Big Horn Sitting Bull was considered too old for active combat (he was approximately forty five years old), but he did inspire the warriors and directed their general actions. He was also present on parts of the battlefield, viewing some of Reno's slain troopers before returning to the village.<sup>53</sup>

The other leader of note among the Indian tribes was Crazy Horse. Crazy Horse was a great war leader among his tribe, the Oglalas, and was one of the most resistant to the ways of the white man.<sup>54</sup> He had campaigned for years against the encroachment of



white settlers, and had taken an active part in previous battles with the cavalry. In 1866 he was part of a group of Sioux that attacked and massacred a detachment of cavalry under Captain Fetterman.<sup>55</sup> Although a very famous warrior, Crazy Horse was still a fairly young man at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. He led a detachment of Oglala warriors that assaulted Reno and then joined in the fatal assault on Custer's command.<sup>56</sup> Famously brave, Crazy Horse not only cunningly led warriors, but he inspired other warriors with his heroic deeds.

### Battle Narrative

General Sheridan developed the plan that would be executed during the Great Sioux War. The plan was essentially a three-pronged approach by different columns that would converge on the most likely location for the Indians.<sup>57</sup> The columns would be led by Crook in the south, Terry in the east, and Gibbon in the west. However the plan might have looked on paper, in execution it proved impossible for these columns to communicate with each other and coordinate movements. Crook's column was the first to make contact with the Indians in the vicinity of the Rosebud River, where his force was essentially defeated and forced to turn back to its supply base. Gibbon was unable to maintain contact with the Indians and eventually joined forces with Terry.<sup>58</sup> Terry, approaching from the east, first sent Major Reno on a reconnaissance mission which discovered the fresh trail of a large Indian village. Based upon this information Terry changed his initial plans and divided his forces, giving Custer the bulk of the cavalry forces creating a fast strike force consisting only of mounted troops. Terry took the remainder of his forces to the mouth of the Bighorn, while Custer would proceed to the mouth of the Rosebud.<sup>59</sup> However, Terry's written orders to Custer gave him enough

leeway to exercise his judgment concerning the specific direction.<sup>60</sup> Custer would take full advantage of this discretion.

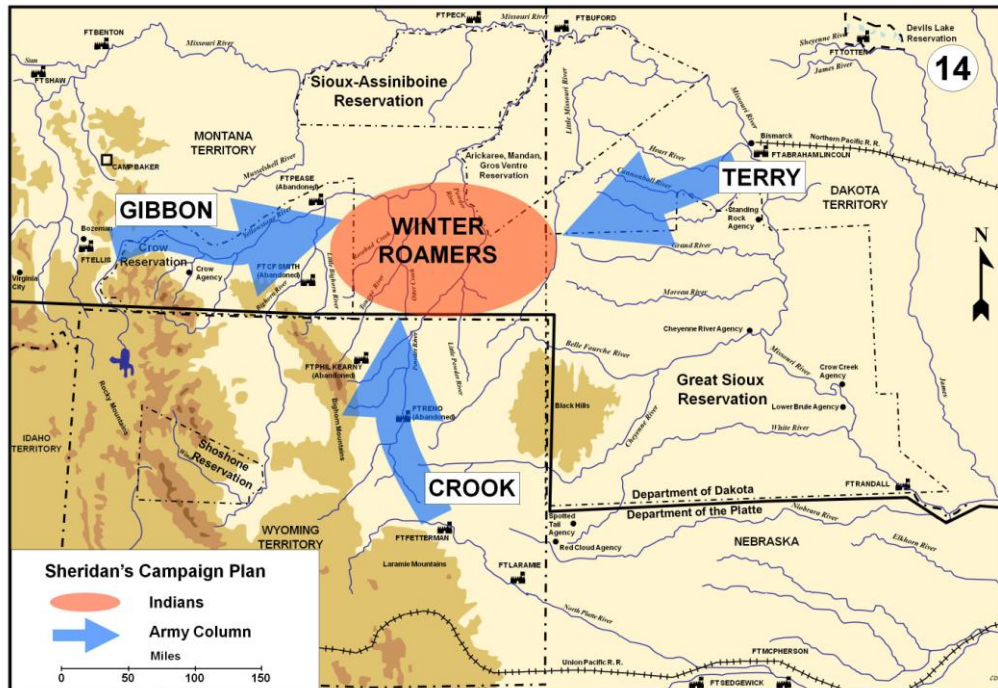


Figure 2. Sheridan's Campaign Plan

Source: Collins, *Atlas of the Sioux Wars* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006), 14.

Custer's strike force was organized for speed and mobility. In his column were all the companies that comprised the Seventh Cavalry. A number of Indian scouts, both Crows and Arikaras, augmented the cavalry. Custer had received a greater share of the scouts than Terry's force, both in quality and quantity.<sup>61</sup> In the scout contingent were two famous scouts, Charlie Reynolds and Mitch Boyer, both of whom had spent many years on the frontier and had excellent reputations as scouts and hunters. The force drew

rations for twelve days, and on the march Custer warned them that the expedition might be even longer than that.

As interesting as the forces that Custer took are the forces that he left behind. General Terry offered Custer the use of four troops from the Second Cavalry, but Custer declined them, stating that the Seventh was a sufficient force.<sup>62</sup> Custer also declined to bring the Gatling gun battery.<sup>63</sup> The Gatling guns had proved cumbersome on Reno's ill-fated recon mission, and had slowed him down considerably.<sup>64</sup> Custer was trying to keep his force as mobile as possible, and chose to sacrifice the firepower offered by the Gatling guns in order to maximize his force's speed. As it was, the slowest element in Custer's column was the pack mules carrying extra ammunition and rations, while all of the other combat forces were mounted cavalry.

Custer started out along the Rosebud River on the morning of June 22. Upon reaching the Indian village trail discovered by Reno, Custer decided to exercise the leeway in his orders and followed the trail to the west, rather than continuing down the Rosebud.<sup>65</sup> Custer knew that the village he was following could contain up to 800 warriors, and given likely arrivals from the Indian reservations the troopers could be facing up to 1500 warriors.<sup>66</sup> Custer was determined to find the Indians and bring them to battle before they could escape. Following the trail Custer very soon came upon signs of a large gathering of Indians, including the remains of a Sun Dance. The Crow and Arikara Indians accompanying Custer studied the site intently, and determined that the Sioux had "powerful medicine", and were determined to fight and win.<sup>67</sup>

The trail became fresher as the group followed it, hinting that the troopers were starting to close in on the village. Custer pushed his Crow scouts ahead, along with

Mitch Boyer and Custer's chief of scouts, Lieutenant Varnum. Eight miles ahead of the main column, and atop a high hill, the Indian scouts managed to catch sight of a vast pony herd, the tell-tale sign of a large Indian village.<sup>68</sup> Boyer was convinced that the Sioux village was near and filled with warriors. After Custer received the news back at camp, he pushed the column forward until it came to the hilltop location. There Custer tried to see the village himself, but was unable to do so. Boyer insisted emphatically that the Indians were there.<sup>69</sup> Custer would have preferred to wait and properly reconnoiter the area before he made an attack on the village, preferably at dawn. However, events conspired against him. Several sightings of Sioux Indians, including an incident where soldiers going back for a fallen pack came upon Indians rifling through the baggage, convinced Custer that the Indians either knew of their presence, or would know of it shortly.<sup>70</sup> With the element of surprise lost Custer's fight would be made more difficult, or, even worse, the village might have time to break up and scatter into small groups. Custer hoped for a decisive battle to end the campaign, and so instead of conducting a full reconnaissance Custer ordered an immediate attack.

After reporting his men ready for movement first, Benteen received the honor of leading the attack.<sup>71</sup> Before they approached the Indian camp, however, Custer gave him other orders. With the lesson of the Washita battle probably on his mind, Custer ordered Benteen to scout to the south and west to determine if there were any other satellite camps separate from the main Indian camp.<sup>72</sup> If there was no contact Benteen was to return to the column, but Custer was not going to take the chance of being surprised by a large number of Indians grouped on his southern flank. Benteen was far more capable than Reno, and was the only choice for an independent force of several companies. In

addition, Custer knew that Terry would be approaching from the north, so to ensure that the Indians were trapped between the two forces Custer needed to know the southern limit of the Indians. Benteen, however, was less than pleased by these orders.<sup>73</sup> He would no longer have the privilege of leading the attack, and was sent on what he considered a diversion designed to keep him from participating in the actual attack, reserving the glory for Custer. Benteen's mindset no doubt affected his later actions.

As they approached the Indian village the Crow scouts observed some Sioux on a ridgeline. Immediately afterward there was a large dust cloud beyond the bluffs. Gerard, one of the scouts, reported that the Indians were "running like devils" and that the village was packing up to flee.<sup>74</sup> Faced with this news, Custer released the scouts and sent Reno forward on an immediate attack.<sup>75</sup> Reno's men would charge the village from the south, while Custer supported his attack from the east. Reno led his men forward at the trot, crossing the Little Bighorn River at a natural ford and advancing several miles across an open plain to the edge of the village. According to the Indian accounts, Custer's quick movements over the past twenty-four hours achieved near complete surprise. The Indian village was not prepared for a battle, and received the first warning of soldiers almost simultaneous with their arrival.<sup>76</sup> The first indication of soldiers for the Indians was the approach of Reno's force and the firing of a few shots. As Reno approached the tepees on the southern end, however, the Indians began to react. A large number of warriors started to gather, and the ones who were mounted began to race around and stir up large clouds of dust.<sup>77</sup> Realizing the numbers and the size of the village he was approaching, Reno decided to stop his charge short of the tepees, dismount his troopers, and form a

skirmish line. The skirmish line began firing into the gathering Indians approximately one half mile short of the first tepees.<sup>78</sup>

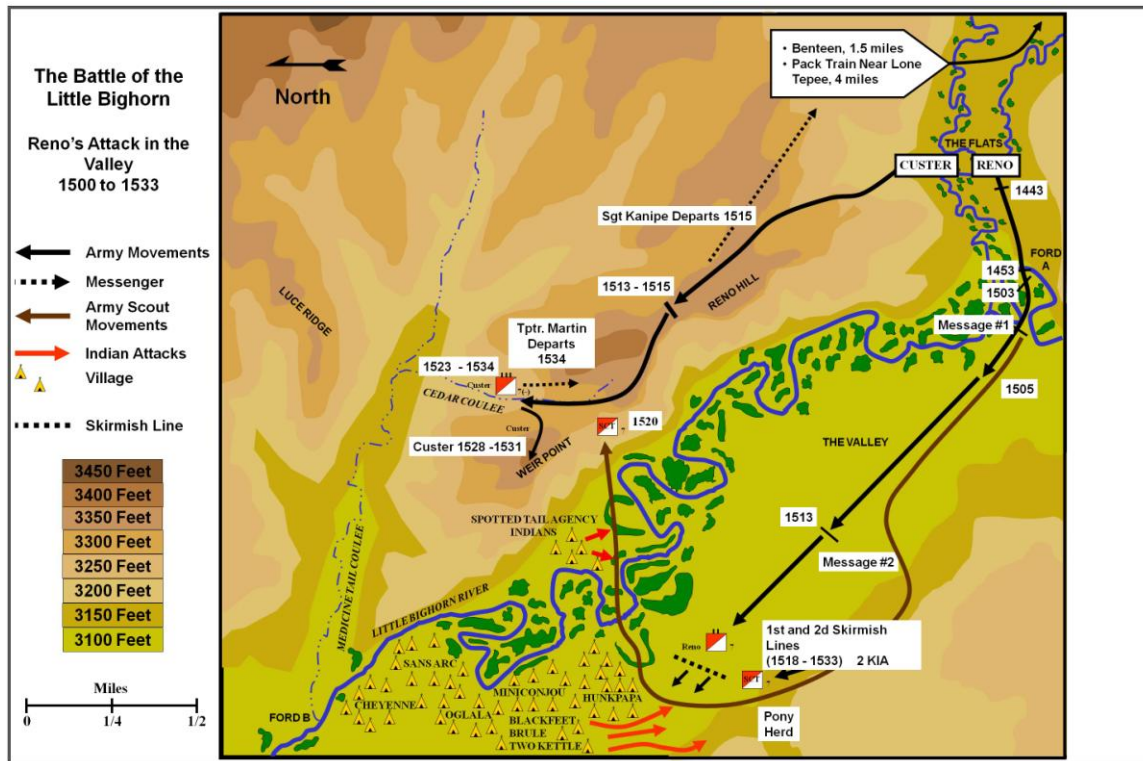


Figure 3. Reno's Attack

Source: Collins, *Atlas of the Sioux Wars* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006), 27.

Some of Reno's soldiers saw Custer at this time on high ground on the opposite side of the river. He took off his hat and waved to them.<sup>79</sup> Custer's column then thundered off heading north, parallel to the village and looking to envelop the enemy encampment and relieve the pressure on Reno's men. Realizing the size of the Indian village and finally determining that the enemy was not fleeing as he initially thought, Custer gave a verbal order through Sergeant Kanipe to hurry the packs forward, and

Benteen if Kanipe encountered him.<sup>80</sup> His next command was to tell Benteen to hurry to the fight and bring the pack train with the ammunition. Custer's adjutant scribbled a hasty note to this effect and sent it back by courier.<sup>81</sup> This courier, Private John Martin, was the last white man to see Custer and still be alive the next day.

As Custer maneuvered his force to the north, the Indians were preoccupied with Reno. After the soldiers dismounted and formed a skirmish line, the Indians quickly began to envelop the troopers, particularly on their left flank. As the number of Indian warriors facing them steadily increased, Reno realized that his position was quickly becoming untenable. In order to secure better defensive terrain, and to prevent his unit from being enveloped, Reno ordered the battalion to occupy the wooded area immediately adjacent to the river where the horses had already been taken.<sup>82</sup> This withdrawal was conducted sloppily, a sign of problems to come. To this point, other than a few soldiers whose wild mounts had carried them forward into enemy lines, Reno had only lost two men.

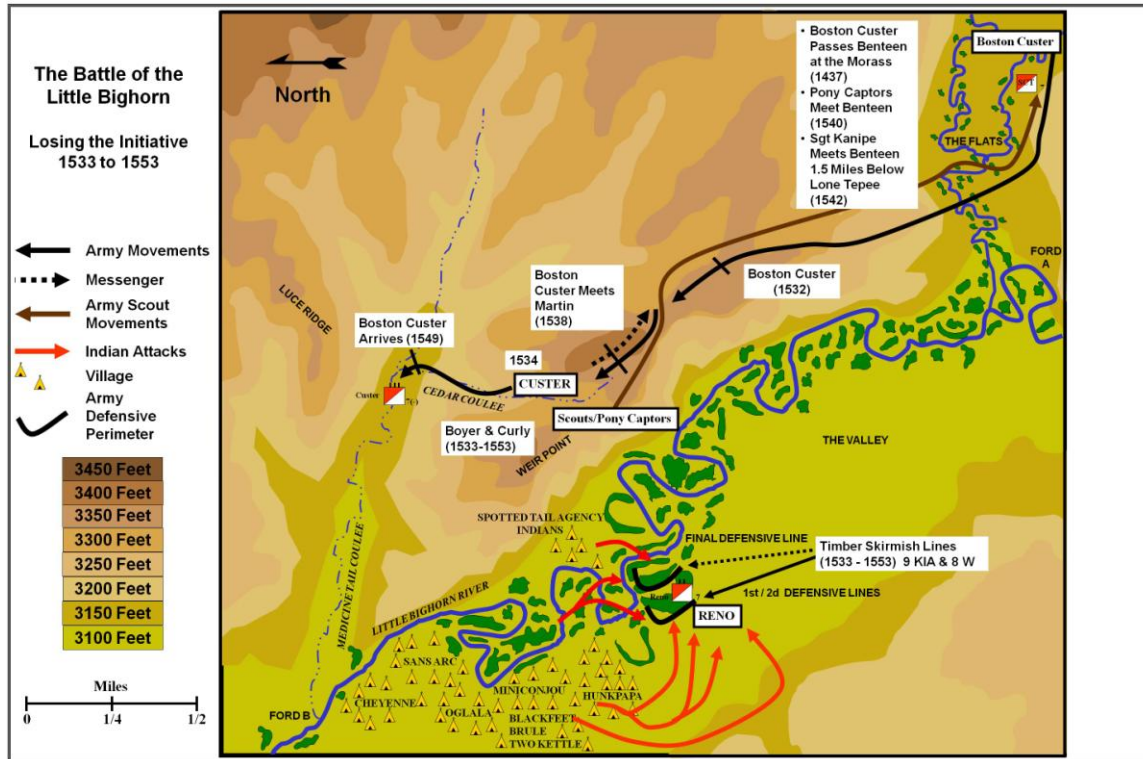


Figure 4. Reno Moves to Woodline

Source: Collins, *Atlas of the Sioux Wars* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006), 28.

Once in the wooded area, the Indians applied relentless pressure to the besieged troopers. The perimeter seemed to be holding for the present, but Reno soon gave a series of confusing orders. Bloody Knife, one of Custer's favorite scouts who accompanied Reno on the attack, was shot in the head, and his blood and brains splattered over Reno's face.<sup>83</sup> Following this, Reno ordered troopers to mount, and then to dismount, and finally to mount again, and "charge" back the way they originally came, to higher ground. The troopers mounted and started movement back toward the river. Due to the noise and confusion of the fight, as well as the orders and counter-orders, over a dozen soldiers were left stranded in the woods, a few of which later managed to



extricate themselves.<sup>84</sup> Once again, Reno failed to assign any type of rearguard mission. As a result, as the “charge” surged forward the Indians initially gave way, but then swooped in on the troopers, easily pacing the soldiers’ exhausted mounts. The Sioux warriors likened it to a buffalo hunt, as many of them singled out troopers, separated them, and then cut them down.<sup>85</sup> The crossing point at the river became a bloodbath, as the soldiers and their horses became stuck in the bottleneck. By the time Reno’s panicked soldiers gained the high ground on the bluff, 32 troopers lay dead or dying strewn along the path of the retreat.<sup>86</sup> As the men turned around and prepared to defend themselves, the Indians suddenly started pulling back, and groups of them began heading back north. In the distance Benteen’s column was closing on Reno.

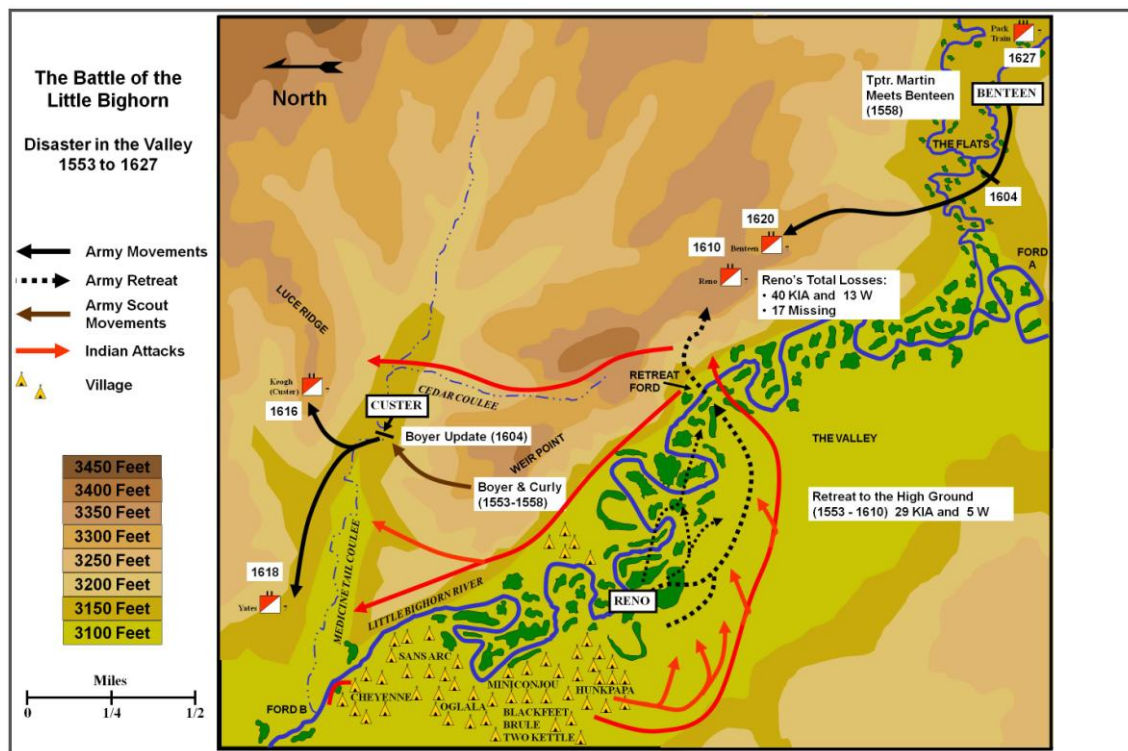


Figure 5. Reno Retreats

Source: Collins, *Atlas of the Sioux Wars* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006), 29.

Custer's column was continuing an advance down the Medicine Tail Coulee. At this point Custer's scout Mitch Boyer informed him of Reno's disastrous retreat from the woodline.<sup>87</sup> After this momentous news, Custer ordered a halt. In order to relieve the pressure on Reno and draw the attention of the warriors, Custer decided to conduct a feint on the village. With Indians to the south and west, Custer was faced with the option of retreating to the north, away from his detachment and effectively abandoning half of his command, or conducting a holding action to fix the enemy force while the remainder of the regiment under Reno and Benteen closed on the Indians from the south. Custer, with his mind always on the offensive, and perhaps remembering the stinging criticism of Washita, chose the latter option. With the Indians fixated on Custer's men, a converging column led by Reno and Benteen from the south would catch the warriors by surprise and send them in sudden retreat. Once the regiment was rejoined, the superior firepower of Custer's united command would enable a decisive attack.<sup>88</sup>

In accordance with this plan, Custer ordered two companies under the command of Captain George Yates to charge down to a ford at the river that led directly into the Indian camp. Custer would lead his own column of three companies further up to the north and east. Upon reaching the ford Captain Yates' troopers encountered resistance and began to return fire. Staying mounted, the soldiers began to fall back.<sup>89</sup> Once the Indians discovered the imminent threat to the village, they rapidly began converging on Custer's position. Indians left in or around the village were the first to react, while messengers informed the other warriors pursuing Reno. Some of Reno's men relate seeing large numbers of Sioux warriors streaming north.<sup>90</sup> The full fury of the Indians was now starting to concentrate on Custer, and unbeknownst to him, Custer had lost the

initiative; the Sioux were now dictating the fight. Some of Reno's soldiers reported hearing heavy firing just about the time that Reno and the first troops arrived at the top of the bluffs. George Herendeen, the frontiersman who had been among those left in the woods, reported heavy firing began coming from the north shortly after the retreat from the woods, and that a heavy volume of fire persisted for 45 minutes to an hour.<sup>91</sup>

Meanwhile Benteen had executed his scouting mission and determined that there were no satellite Indian camps and that the terrain to the south was near impassable. He made his way back to the main trail and began following Custer and Reno. The movement was almost pointedly slow, a fact that a number of the men later mentioned.<sup>92</sup> The reason for the delay is difficult to determine; most likely Benteen was reacting to the slight he felt Custer had given him. After the messenger arrived from Custer, the pace was still not greatly improved. Benteen finally arrived at Reno's position atop the bluffs just as Reno's men were consolidating.<sup>93</sup> Even more remarkably, both Reno and Benteen did not move from the position to join Custer. Reno was in charge due to his more senior ranking, but he was not exhibiting any control over his troops. Throughout the retreat from the wooded position Reno had exerted command only over himself and his horse, and the situation did not change on top of the bluffs. Reno, concerned about the loss of his adjutant during the retreat, left the command for about thirty minutes to search for Lieutenant Benjamin Hodgson, leaving Benteen in charge.<sup>94</sup> As the sounds of heavy gunfire drifted down from Custer's last known position, both Reno and Benteen sat immobile on the hill, formed in a defensive position. The men on the hilltop could hear a heavy volume of fire to the north, steadily increasing all the while. It seemed clear to all

that Custer was heavily engaged.<sup>95</sup> Some of the junior leaders became restless, wondering when the order to move would be given.

Custer's situation, meanwhile, began steadily deteriorating. Yate's men conducted their charge to the ford as a feint, and then after a demonstration moved back obliquely from the river. Once on high ground, the soldiers dismounted and formed a skirmish line. The soldiers were trying to buy time for the other elements of the command to come up and reinforce. In the meantime the companies continued to move to the north and east toward higher ground, and toward a reunion with Custer's companies.<sup>96</sup> The men performed the rearguard action from the ford bravely, but were pushed back by an ever increasing number of Sioux warriors. Yates eventually made the reunion with Custer's forces, but by this point the Indians were attacking in earnest and from several different directions.

Complicating Custer's position, the Indians managed to essentially immobilize one of the companies. While dismounted in a skirmish line and fighting Indians to the front, other Sioux warriors managed to find the troopers' horses. By targeting the horseholders, and then waving blankets to stampede the horses, the Sioux were able to strand the dismounted soldiers.<sup>97</sup> With a company-sized force unable to escape by horse, and more mounted Sioux warriors arriving by the minute, Custer could not leave behind that number of men to be slaughtered. The soldiers loaded and fired their weapons in several unified volleys, a signal of distress meant to guide the rest of the regiment to them.<sup>98</sup> Custer's command moved to high ground to make a stand. Mitch Boyer released the young Indian scout called Curley, telling him that all were likely to be killed and that Curley should make his way out and send word to General Terry.<sup>99</sup> After Curley left, the

Indians established a cordon around Custer's companies, where the troopers vainly waited for Benteen and Reno's columns. As the casualties mounted, and their fate became apparent, the reduced group around Custer led their horses into a small circle and shot them to form a primitive barricade. Amid the dust and chaos of the battlefield, the Indians attacked the last remaining knot of soldiers from every side, finally overcoming all resistance. The last act of the soldiers was a brave yet hopeless charge of a dozen or so men down to the river.<sup>100</sup> The Indians cut them all down before they could make the stream. This occurred in the total time of less than an hour from when the first soldiers conducted a feint at the river crossing.

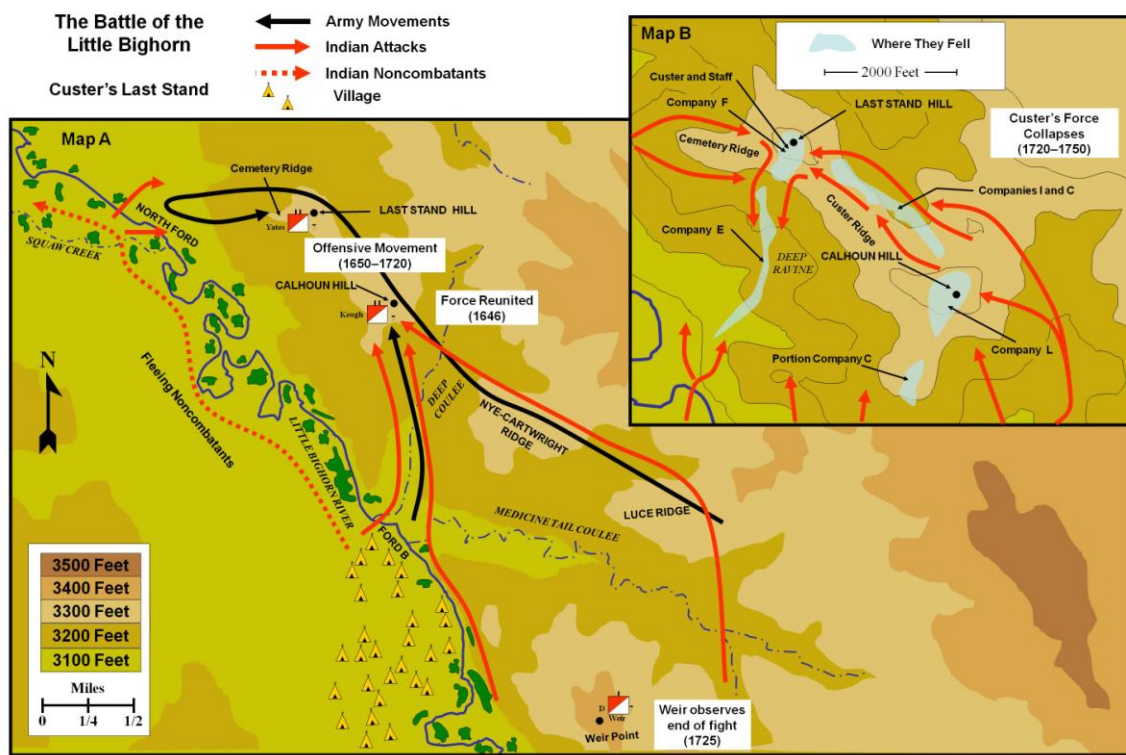


Figure 6. Custer's Last Stand

Source: Collins, *Atlas of the Sioux Wars* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006), 31.

The delay of Reno and Benteen finally ended when one of the young commanders, Captain Thomas Weir, began to move toward the firing on his own initiative.<sup>101</sup> Reno and eventually Benteen with the rest of the command began to follow. By this time the firing in the distance was sporadic and much reduced in volume. Captain Weir advanced along the ridges until he spotted what he thought was a group of cavalry. These were actually Sioux, wearing captured pieces of uniforms, who were advancing to finish off Reno's men after the defeat of Custer.<sup>102</sup> Under heavy contact Lieutenant Edward Godfrey's company managed to perform a rearguard action, on his own initiative and with no guidance from Reno, that allowed the force time to move back to the original location and reform. Primarily under Benteen's leadership, the besieged soldiers managed to hold off the Indians for the rest of that day and the next, venturing out only for water. Custer's fate was unknown to them until General Terry's column came upon them and two days later informed them of what lay on the hill several miles to their north. In total the regiment lost 263 soldiers with over 60 additional casualties from Reno's and Benteen's commands evacuated from the field.<sup>103</sup>

### Analysis

Assigning blame for the Custer defeat has consumed American historians for over a century. In the end, a number of factors become clear in explaining the defeat of the American forces by the much more primitive Sioux tribes. One of the most repeated reasons for the defeat is the behavior of Custer's subordinates in the battle, and there is much substance to this argument. The personal relationships between all three commanders, Custer, Reno, and Benteen, were very poor. Both Reno and Benteen disliked Custer, although Benteen bore a grudge against Custer that bordered on hatred.

Yet Reno and Benteen did not get along well with each other, either. Although there is no clear evidence that Custer bore ill will towards Benteen, Custer clearly did not consider Benteen to be in his inner circle. Concerning Reno, Custer had good cause for antipathy since Reno had tried to usurp Custer's command after Custer fell out of favor with President Ulysses S. Grant. That Custer bore an active dislike for Reno is abundantly clear when Custer wrote an anonymous letter published in a newspaper that offered a scathing rebuke of Reno's failed scouting mission earlier on in the Great Sioux War campaign. The end result of such acrimonious feelings between the three major commanders in the Little Bighorn fight was a lack of cooperation. Although Reno and Benteen mostly followed at least the letter of their orders, neither of them exercised the practical initiative expected of subordinate commanders in such a fluid fight. At least a portion of the blame for Benteen's failure to move rapidly, and Reno's refusal to move to the sound of the guns and reinforce Custer, lies with the poor personal relations among all of the commanders. It was no accident that those officers most loyal to Custer all died with him near Last Stand Hill.

Another contributing factor in the defeat was the near exhaustion of Custer's troops and horses on the day of the attack. Fearing that the Indians would scatter before they could be decisively attacked, Custer pressed his men hard once he found the Indian camp trail. In the twenty-four hours prior to the battle Custer's men had ridden over a hundred miles through rough terrain with only a few hours of sleep. Some of these men, indeed the companies that died with Custer, had been with the scouting trip with Reno where they had ridden hard for twelve days with low rations for the soldiers and the horses.<sup>104</sup> These troopers and their mounts had very little time to rest before Custer

moved out, so they started the journey worn down. Fatigue among the men could have led to poor decisions, both by the commanders and individual soldiers. Exhaustion was likely a contributing factor in the panicked behavior shown by Reno's men both during their skirmish and after the retreat to the bluff. Worn-out mounts would have made maneuvering for the troopers more difficult, especially during combat among the hills and ravines where Custer's companies fought. Although there are understandable reasons for Custer wanting to push his men, namely that they had to move fast in order to catch the Indians before the soldiers were detected, the end result proved detrimental for Custer; he attacked with soldiers and horses that were exhausted before the battle even began.

There is also evidence that elements of "Victory Disease" contributed to Custer's downfall. In most (successful) engagements during the Indian Wars, soldiers took offensive actions against Indian villages, attempting to destroy supplies and shelter as well as killing enemy warriors. In one of the precursor actions prior to the summer campaign, soldiers successfully attacked a village on the Powder River in such a manner.<sup>105</sup> Custer's only other experience in a large battle against Indians, at the Battle of Washita, was along much the same lines. Custer used the same previously successful tactics at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. He moved fast and attacked the camp simultaneously from different directions, while guarding his pack train and ensuring his flank was not threatened. These are very reasonable dispositions for such an offensive maneuver, and had worked previously in a number of battles. However, at the Battle of the Little Bighorn the offensive dispositions proved to be Custer's undoing. When coordination proved impossible, the Indians attacked his forces piecemeal, and managed



to destroy the main maneuver force. Custer's force quickly lost the initiative, and the Indians with their superior numbers finished him off.

Another aspect that contributed to Custer's defeat was his rejection of resources and equipment that would have added to his firepower. General Terry offered the use of four companies from the 2nd Cavalry to Custer prior to Custer's departure. Custer, however, turned down these forces. Four additional companies might have provided the additional edge that would have enabled Custer to at least survive the battle, if not emerge victorious. The reason that Custer gave for turning down these companies was that the Seventh Cavalry was capable of defeating any Indian force it might meet. While this seems rather brash in hindsight, prior to the battle it was hard to imagine any force of Indians that would stand their ground and fight against over five hundred armed and mounted cavalymen. When he rejected the additional cavalry, Custer also decided not to take the Gatling guns. These weapons could fire approximately 350 rounds per minute, which was a devastating rate of fire during that time period.<sup>106</sup> The weapons were top-heavy, however, and difficult to maneuver, as evidenced during Reno's reconnaissance effort. Although the firepower advantage afforded by the weapons was significant, Custer decided that speed and maneuverability were more important. All of these decisions were predicated on the assumption that the most difficult task would be finding the Indians and bringing them to battle.

This overconfidence of the American forces led to an emphasis on the enemy's intentions rather than capabilities. Perceiving that the Sioux would seek to break contact if surprised by mounted troopers, Custer disposed his forces his forces accordingly. What Custer did not perceive was the capability inherent in the Sioux's warriors.

Inspired by the defense of their village, rallying behind a recognized leader, and newly armed with advanced repeating rifles, the Indians would act in an unexpected manner at the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

The adoption of a certain aspect of technology greatly increased the capability of the Sioux warriors. Although their society did not have agriculture, or permanent structures, trains, or any of the other technological advantages that the Americans possessed, the Indians did seek certain narrow fields of technology. The Sioux warriors' use of repeating rifles would have a devastating effect on the battle. Even though a relatively small percentage of their force was armed with this weapon, the larger numbers of the Sioux meant that they might have enjoyed a one-to-one ratio of these weapons with the cavalymen.<sup>107</sup> Although not as accurate as the Springfield carbines that the troopers carried, the repeaters made up for this in volume of fire, and Indian tactics of infiltration negated the need for greater range in a weapon.

In addition to their equipment, the Sioux tribes, once united with each other and their allies, chose to change their tactics. Whether Sitting Bull's vision of soldiers falling into the camp was divinely inspired is not a fruitful debate, but the fact is that the tactical innovation of defending their camp worked to the Sioux's advantage. Previously, when surprised in their villages, Indians had almost always abandoned the village, and fought a delaying action that sought to preserve fighting capability. Again, two well-known examples that support this are the Battle on the Washita and Reynold's fight on the Powder River. In both of these instances the Indians fled initial contact, abandoning their supplies. The Indians did resist, but in a way that minimized their risk and did not take full advantage of their numerical superiority. In both of these examples a smaller number

of cavalymen were able to take on and defeat a much larger force of Indian warriors who had the capability to resist them. In the Great Sioux War the Sioux changed this approach. General Crook was actually the first to encounter this new tactic. His defeat on the Rosebud, and subsequent retreat back to his base showed the effectiveness of the new tactic. General Crook had information that might have made a dramatic difference for Custer if this information had been available for all.<sup>108</sup> General Terry would not receive news of this battle until after the Battle of the Little Bighorn. By changing tactics, counter-attacking instead of defending and delaying, the Sioux emerged victorious over Custer's men, who were not expecting such a reaction.

The motivation for the Sioux, and another factor that Custer did not consider, came from their societal structure. The Sioux tribes were, above all else, a warrior society. Leaders were able to achieve power only through prowess in battle, both on an individual and group level. Warrior societies, such as the Strong Heart or Kit Fox societies, formed the basis of many of the social interactions of males in the society. Faced with the imminent demise of their way of life and their culture, the Indians resisted violently. The cultural forces at work in Sioux society reinforced the desire to militarily defeat the American forces. The Americans demanded a change and lifestyle that was unacceptable to the Sioux tribes. Since their society's value structure rested on the ability to perform in combat, such a change was not going to come without a great deal of violence.

Even more than societal structures, the cultural influence of religion played a significant role in the Sioux victory. Sitting Bull's vision of soldiers falling into camp served to steel the resolve of the warriors. For the Indians such a vision served as divine

guidance. The vision proved a rallying point, and all of Sitting Bull's followers were quick to embrace the new tactics suggested by this vision. The Indians would wait for the white soldiers to come to their camp; the Sioux would then fight and achieve a great victory. The Indian warriors believed in this vision, and their resolve carried the day for them.

This chapter provided a general overview of the strategic and tactical situations, the leadership, and the battle. Prior to the Battle of the Little Bighorn, it was hard to imagine that a primitive society such as the Indian plains tribes could defeat the forces from such a technologically superior culture. One of the most obvious reasons for the result of this battle is the behavior of Custer's subordinates. There were strained relations between all of them, and Custer's subordinates failed to support him properly during the battle. Custer moved his men quickly in order to find the Indians, and so he attacked with exhausted troopers and horses. Custer also succumbed to "Victory Disease" during his planning. He placed his troops in a predictably offensive disposition, which left them vulnerable to an Indian counter-attack. Custer also turned down resources that could have helped him in the battle, such as additional soldiers and technologically advanced equipment. The Sioux, for their part, adopted certain narrow aspects of technology, namely repeating rifles, that gave them a parity or even advantage in some technological aspects. The Indians also altered their tactics, choosing to defend their villages aggressively and attack the forces attacking them. Cultural influences helped to dictate the outcome of the battle. The threatened change to the societal structure of the Sioux forced them to coalesce behind a single leader, and adopt a new strategy. Religion in the form of Sitting Bull's vision united the warriors from the various tribes and bands, and

encouraged them to stand and fight for their village. All of these reasons combined in a complicated manner with the end result of the death of Custer's command in an outcome that few would have predicted.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles M. Robinson, *A Good Year to Die* (New York: Random House, 1995), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Jim Donovan, *Custer and the Little Bighorn* (Stillwater: Voyageur Press, 2001), Inc., 31.

<sup>3</sup> Robinson, *A Good Year to Die*, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., xxiv.

<sup>6</sup> It was difficult for Indians to understand the white man's idea of land ownership; for Indians land use was communal, and not easily divided. Donovan, *Custer and the Little Bighorn*, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Donovan, *Custer and the Little Bighorn*, 105.

<sup>8</sup> Robinson, *A Good Year to Die*, 41.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>10</sup> Donovan, *Custer and the Little Bighorn*, 83.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Gregory F. Michno, *Lakota Noon The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat* (Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 2004), 49.

<sup>16</sup> Donovan, *Custer and the Little Bighorn*, 191.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Jerome A. Greene, *Battles and Skirmishes of the Great Sioux War, 1876-1877* (Lincoln: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 14.

- <sup>19</sup> Donovan, *Custer and the Little Bighorn*, 63.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 67.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 78.
- <sup>22</sup> Mark V. Hoyt, *The U.S. Army's Sioux Campaign of 1876: Identifying the horse as the center of gravity of the Sioux* (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: USA CGSC, 1998), 5.
- <sup>23</sup> Donovan, *Custer and the Little Bighorn*, 209.
- <sup>24</sup> William K. Powers, *Indians of the Northern Plains* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1969), 91.
- <sup>25</sup> Michno, *Lakota Noon The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat*, 106.
- <sup>26</sup> Powers, *Indians of the Northern Plains*, 86.
- <sup>27</sup> Robinson, *A Good Year to Die*, 30.
- <sup>28</sup> Donovan, *Custer and the Little Bighorn*, 75.
- <sup>29</sup> Powers, *Indians of the Northern Plains*, 102.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., 92.
- <sup>31</sup> Donovan, *Custer and the Little Bighorn*, 118.
- <sup>32</sup> Robinson, *A Good Year to Die*, xxix.
- <sup>33</sup> Donovan, *Custer and the Little Bighorn*, 188.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., 127.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., 20.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., 24.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 17.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., 106.
- <sup>39</sup> James Donovan, *A Terrible Glory; Custer and the Little Big Horn the Last Great Battle of the American West* (Little, Brown and Co., 2008), 115.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 93.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 168.

- <sup>42</sup> Donovan, *Custer and the Little Bighorn*, 200.
- <sup>43</sup> Donovan, *A Terrible Glory; Custer and the Little Big Horn the Last Great Battle of the American West*, 56.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., 67.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., 193.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., 289.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., 75.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., 76.
- <sup>50</sup> Robinson, *A Good Year to Die*, 132.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., 123.
- <sup>52</sup> Donovan, *A Terrible Glory; Custer and the Little Big Horn the Last Great Battle of the American West*, 78.
- <sup>53</sup> Michno, *Lakota Noon The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat*, 89.
- <sup>54</sup> Powers, *Indians of the Northern Plains*, 211.
- <sup>55</sup> Donovan, *Custer and the Little Bighorn*, 89.
- <sup>56</sup> Michno, *Lakota Noon The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat*, 265.
- <sup>57</sup> Donovan, *A Terrible Glory; Custer and the Little Big Horn the Last Great Battle of the American West*, 97.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., 160.
- <sup>59</sup> John S. Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 198.
- <sup>60</sup> Robinson, *A Good Year to Die*, 162.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid., 163.
- <sup>62</sup> Donovan, *A Terrible Glory; Custer and the Little Big Horn the Last Great Battle of the American West*, 174.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid., 175.

- <sup>64</sup> Ibid., 163.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid., 199.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid., 175.
- <sup>67</sup> Robinson, *A Good Year to Die*, 167.
- <sup>68</sup> Donovan, *A Terrible Glory; Custer and the Little Big Horn the Last Great Battle of the American West*, 205.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid., 207.
- <sup>70</sup> Robinson, *A Good Year to Die*, 174.
- <sup>71</sup> Donovan, *A Terrible Glory; Custer and the Little Big Horn the Last Great Battle of the American West*, 210.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid., 211.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid., 213.
- <sup>74</sup> Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed*, 275.
- <sup>75</sup> Donovan, *A Terrible Glory; Custer and the Little Big Horn the Last Great Battle of the American West*, 213.
- <sup>76</sup> Michno, *Lakota Noon The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat*, 32.
- <sup>77</sup> Donovan, *A Terrible Glory; Custer and the Little Big Horn the Last Great Battle of the American West*, 225.
- <sup>78</sup> Ibid., 224.
- <sup>79</sup> Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed*, 294.
- <sup>80</sup> Fox, Richard Allan Jr. 1993. *Archeology, History, and Custer's Last Battle*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 307.
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid., 307.
- <sup>82</sup> Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed*, 289.
- <sup>83</sup> Robinson, *A Good Year to Die*, 182.



<sup>84</sup> Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed*, 305.

<sup>85</sup> Michno, *Lakota Noon The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat*, 88.

<sup>86</sup> Donovan, *A Terrible Glory; Custer and the Little Big Horn the Last Great Battle of the American West*, 248.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>88</sup> Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed*, 361.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Donovan, *A Terrible Glory; Custer and the Little Big Horn the Last Great Battle of the American West*, 255.

<sup>93</sup> Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed*, 308.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>95</sup> Donovan, *A Terrible Glory; Custer and the Little Big Horn the Last Great Battle of the American West*, 260.

<sup>96</sup> Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed*, 369.

<sup>97</sup> Michno, *Lakota Noon The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat*, 177.

<sup>98</sup> Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed*, 370.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>100</sup> Michno, *Lakota Noon The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat*, 270.

<sup>101</sup> Donovan, *A Terrible Glory; Custer and the Little Big Horn the Last Great Battle of the American West*, 275.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>105</sup> Jerome A. Greene, *Battles and Skirmishes of the Great Sioux War, 1876-1877* (Lincoln: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 14.

<sup>106</sup> Donovan, *A Terrible Glory; Custer and the Little Big Horn the Last Great Battle of the American West*, 175.

<sup>107</sup> Robinson estimates that perhaps a third of the Indians had repeating rifles. Using an estimate of warriors from 1,000 to 2,000 we find that three hundred to over six hundred Sioux warriors might have carried these weapons. That puts the number of warriors so armed close to the number of troopers in the Seventh Cavalry on this campaign, approximately 550. Robinson, *A Good Year to Die*, xxix.

<sup>108</sup> Steven M. Leonard, *Clausewitz, Complexity, and Custer; an Analysis of Decision Making in a Nonlinear System* (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: USA CGSC. 2000), 38.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE BATTLE OF MAIWAND

“But I wish I was dead ‘fore I done what I did,  
Or seen what I seed that day!”

— Rudyard Kipling, *That Day*

While the United States was expanding westward across the North American continent, Great Britain was expanding its empire around the world. By the end of the nineteenth century, the British Empire was approaching its zenith. Similar to the United States’ experience during expansion, however, Great Britain encountered indigenous peoples hostile to their intentions. A notable example of this occurred in Afghanistan, where Great Britain fought three different wars and exercised political power for nearly a century. During the course of the Second Afghan War Great Britain triumphed in the majority of battles, with one notable exception; the Battle of Maiwand. Here, in an echo of Custer’s last battle, a loose conglomeration of regular Afghan infantry, cavalry, and religious warriors managed to overwhelm and decisively defeat a smaller though well-equipped and well-trained British force, including the near annihilation of a regiment of British regular infantry. The intent of this chapter is to examine how this Afghan force was able to emerge victorious over a technologically superior enemy, and to connect this battle with others discussed previously.

#### Strategic Situation

##### The British

The British Empire in the latter half of the nineteenth century extended around the globe. A particular point of interest for the Empire was India, where a large military

presence protected a vested economic interest in the area. A key part of the Empire, Great Britain was determined to safeguard India from what was perceived to be a constant threat from Russia.<sup>1</sup> When a war started between Tsarist Russia and the Ottoman Empire in 1877, many thought that England would become embroiled in the conflict as well.<sup>2</sup> One of the places where the two countries faced each other was in Central Asia. As the Tsarist Empire continued to expand to the east into Central Asia, Great Britain began to send out feelers to the west from India. One of the places that proved to be middle ground between the countries was Afghanistan. Both countries devoted resources to gathering detailed intelligence on the probable invasion routes, in a series of activities referred to as the Great Game.<sup>3</sup>

Previous to 1876 the British strategy for the protection of India was passive, and sometimes referred to as “masterly inactivity.” When the new viceroy to India, Robert Lytton, set out for India in 1876 he implemented an entirely new strategy built around an active defense beyond India’s territory.<sup>4</sup> Instead of relying upon existing borders, Lytton hoped to stymie the continued expansion of Tsarist Russia at a natural line of defense along the Hindu Kush.<sup>5</sup> Instead of taking overt control of Afghanistan, Lytton hoped to control eastern Afghanistan through the existing government under Amir Shere Ali. Lytton was to have little success, however, because of previous British mistakes. Earlier Shere Ali had asked for a clear agreement of British protection in the event of a Russian invasion.<sup>6</sup> When such an agreement was not forthcoming, Shere Ali effectively wrote off the British and prepared to cut a deal with the Russians. In June 1878 Sher Ali accepted a Russian delegation led by General Stolyetov.<sup>7</sup> Shere Ali’s refusal to accept a British

diplomatic mission at the same time led to the start of the Second Afghan War as the British sought to maintain a buffer zone in Afghanistan.

Because of the failure of Shere Ali to accept a British diplomatic mission, the British exercised a military option. British forces opened a road to Kabul by force. A small garrison was then installed in Kabul along with an envoy, all of whom rioting Afghan soldiers murdered after the main British force left.<sup>8</sup> The British forces quickly returned on a punitive expedition. After seizing Kabul and Khandahar, the British decided to garrison Kabul with the better regiments and their best general due to its political importance. The British assumed risk in relatively calm Khandahar with a smaller force as a garrison under General J. M. Primrose.

### The Afghans

The Afghan situation was more nuanced and complicated than the straightforward position of the British Empire. The British had been politically and militarily involved with Afghanistan for a number of years (starting prior to the First Afghan War in 1839). After the death of Dost Muhammad in 1862 there was a period of civil war and internal strife until after six years, Sirdar Shere Ali gained control of most of the country.<sup>9</sup> Throughout this time, however, the Afghans resented foreign involvement and perceived meddling in their political affairs.

The societal structure of Afghanistan itself led to fragmentation and strife. Afghanistan in the nineteenth century had a very tribal structure, where loyalty to close kin ties was the most valued relationship. In such a society alliances and agreements could be very fleeting, and tribal leaders were apt to change sides as they continued to pursue the best interests of their individual tribes above all other competing concerns.

This situation made it very difficult to maintain a centralized government, and led to the anarchy and civil war that prevailed when these leaders died or were deposed. In addition, leaders could lose the loyalty of the people by appearing to be a puppet of a foreign power. Conversely, leaders could also gain power and prestige by opposing foreign armies.

There was also a religious dimension to the frustration felt by the Afghans. Islamic radicalism prevailed throughout much of rural Afghanistan, and the population tended to view foreign intervention by Christians as an attack on their religion. Some of the leaders of the insurrection that started the Second Afghan War were Muslim clerics.<sup>10</sup> Afghans had a history of strongly resisting foreign invasion, especially when the foreigners were infidels.<sup>11</sup> The savvy leader could tap into the religious element of resistance in order to achieve his own political aims.

The situation following the fall of Kabul and Khandahar to the British in the Second Afghan War was chaotic. After the British victories on their march to Kabul the amir sought refuge in the north of Afghanistan, where he soon died.<sup>12</sup> His son, Yakub Khan, took over leadership and signed a treaty with the British acknowledging British control over Afghanistan's foreign affairs. Following the massacre of the British garrison in Kabul, the British forcibly retired Yakub Khan (who claimed to have had no control over the Afghan mutineers who attacked the British) and sent him to India.<sup>13</sup> The British then installed Sirdar Abdur Rahman, a son of Shere Ali's brother.<sup>14</sup> Ayub Khan, another of Shere Ali's sons, seized control of Herat in the west. Having knowledge of British intrigues with the Persians concerning the fate of Herat, Ayub Khan felt he had to take the offensive or risk losing control of his province.<sup>15</sup> With his own Herati army, and

remnants of his father's army from Kabul, Ayub Khan set out to face the British in the east. He successfully appealed to the masses by proclaiming himself a liberator of the Afghans, as opposed to the puppet Abdur Rahman in Kabul.

Within the framework of ends, ways, and means, British policy had the end of preventing the spread of Russian influence in Central Asia. The way to achieve this was through political manipulation and diplomatic pressure, to be followed by military force if necessary. The means initially was diplomatic delegations sent from India. In the event of a military conflict, the means would be the British and Indian regiments that answered to the Indian viceroy.

Using ends, ways, and means, the end for Ayub Khan was the restoration of the amirship of Afghanistan free from foreign political control. The way to do so was the defeat of a British force and the seizure of several major Afghan towns, which would hopefully convince the British to cut their losses and leave, which had happened previously in the First Afghan War. The means to do so were the military forces under Ayub Khan's control, which included regular infantry and cavalry, irregular tribal cavalry, other tribal allies, and fanatic *ghazis*, who were Islamic religious zealots determined to force the infidels from Afghanistan.

### British Army Tactics

The force that the British fielded during the Second Afghan War came from British India. There was a complicated system in place at this time in India where both British regular infantry and native regiments served. These native regiments were divided into three Presidencies, which were largely autonomous except in the event of a large-scale war.<sup>16</sup> Following the Indian Mutiny in 1857 the organization of the native

contingents was adjusted; the natives were no longer allowed to man artillery (which became exclusively British), and recruitment shifted to the so-called martial races of India.<sup>17</sup> Closer attention was also paid to the ratio of British versus native units, ensuring that the native contingents did not greatly outnumber the British.<sup>18</sup> The native units had British officers as well as native officers. There were a total of seven British officers assigned to each native infantry and cavalry regiment for command and administration.<sup>19</sup> The native officers were not all of the same caliber as their British counterparts, as some were quite aged. Indian infantrymen were called sepoy, while the cavalrymen were called sowars.<sup>20</sup>

The weapons of the British regiments and the Indian regiments were not the same, with the native regiments intentionally equipped with rifles one generation behind those of their British regular army counterparts.<sup>21</sup> The primary infantry weapon for the British regiments was the Martini-Henry rifle. At the time it was considered to be one of the best rifles in the world.<sup>22</sup> It had a superior rate of fire (up to eight well-aimed shots per minute), was accurate out to 1,000 yards, and fired brass cartridges.<sup>23</sup> There were some drawbacks, including stoppages under sandy conditions and extended firing, but the Martini-Henry overall proved a tremendous advantage to British infantry. The rifle was also equipped with a bayonet which was used to defend against cavalry, and proved useful in close quarters combat.

British artillery in the war consisted of either Royal Artillery batteries or Royal Horse Artillery (RHA). The RHA typically used smaller caliber guns, thus granting them increased maneuverability. The RHA employed a 9-pounder Rifled Muzzle Loading (RML) gun of similar range to the field artillery's 13-pounder, approximately 4,000



yards.<sup>24</sup> There were no British field artillery units present at Maiwand, so the 9-pounder was the heaviest gun available to provide support for the British.

The native Indian infantry regiments did not field any artillery pieces at all. The infantrymen, or sepoy, carried the Snider rifle, which in British regiments had been replaced by the Martini-Henry. The Snider-Enfield was actually an adaptation of the Enfield rifle that had previously been in service. A breech-loading apparatus was retrofitted to the muzzle-loading Enfield, so that the new Snider rifle was breech-loaded resulting in a faster rate of fire with few other changes to the weapon.<sup>25</sup> The rifle had sights up to 1,000 yards, and was .577 caliber. The rate of fire of the Snider was significantly better than the Enfield, although the Martini-Henry was much more advanced than the Snider.<sup>26</sup>

The Indian cavalry squadrons that accompanied the British in the Battle of Maiwand were commanded by British officers, and organized the same as British cavalry. The cavalry were supplied with Snider .577 inch carbines, which were generally disliked by the troops due to its recoil and tendency to jam.<sup>27</sup> The main weapons for cavalrymen, however, were sabers and lances.<sup>28</sup>

The tactics that the British forces used was based upon the triad of nineteenth century warfare; infantry, artillery, and cavalry. Each of these arms supported the other, and the key to a successful battle was to employ them properly against the opposing arm. British doctrine at the time was in a stage of transition, and was somewhat behind the realities of the technological advances of the weapons.<sup>29</sup> These technological advances created some inconsistencies for which the British had yet to account. Infantry small arms could now reach the standard range at which artillery was employed, so the use of

artillery in this manner was somewhat questionable.<sup>30</sup> Also, the cavalry were becoming less effective against other arms, especially in massed charges with sabers. In the American West at this time cavalry effectively functioned as mounted infantry or dragoons, dismounting in order to engage the enemy. British doctrine still emphasized the shock value of a massed cavalry charge with sabers, a tactic which was becoming less and less feasible with the additional firepower that the infantry possessed.<sup>31</sup> Still, when facing the relatively primitive foes that Britain fought in small colonial wars during this time period, such tactics could still be successful. It was not until the Boer Wars that Great Britain realized more of the true nature of modern warfare.

The Battle of Ahmad Khel, which happened in April of 1880 in Afghanistan, is an excellent example of British tactics. Here Sir Donald Stewart's force was marching to Kabul, and was attacked by a numerically superior force of Afghans. The Afghan infantry managed to charge the British formations and penetrate along parts of the line, and the Afghan cavalry attacked the flanks and deep rear of the British position.<sup>32</sup> However, the infantry managed to form company squares and pour deadly volleys of rifle fire into the Afghan sword-wielding infantry. British cavalry also attacked and cleared the field of the tribal cavalry and ghazis. As their attack faltered, the Afghans began to flee the field, eventually turning the battle into a complete rout.<sup>33</sup> British discipline, superior firepower, and use of combined arms had gained them the victory against a numerically superior foe.

#### Afghan Tactics

Ayub Khan led the Afghan forces which took part in the Battle of Maiwand, and his particular situation as ruler of the province of Herat dictated to a large extent the

composition of his army. There were a number of distinct groups in his formation, and the differences between these groups were sometimes rather blurred. Regular infantry from Herat formed the nucleus of Ayub Khan's army, but he also had regular infantry forces that had defected from Kabul.<sup>34</sup> At the time of the Battle of Maiwand, Ayub Khan also had present under his command the infantry mutineers from the Wali of Khandahar's army. One of the strong points in Ayub's army was the artillery. These were manned by regular soldiers with excellent training, and included modern weaponry. Regular cavalry forces were part of Ayub Khan's army, although they were not of superior quality.

Ayub Khan also controlled (or at least attempted to control) large numbers of irregular tribal cavalry. Their loyalties were somewhat suspect, but they were firmly committed to ousting foreigners from Afghanistan, especially if there were opportunities for looting. Tribesmen also formed an irregular infantry of sorts. These tribesmen had much the same motivation as the tribal cavalry, they were just without horses. The final component of this army was the *ghazis*. These were religious fanatics, often dressing in flowing white robes, who had sworn to kill all those who did not follow the prophet Mohammed.<sup>35</sup> In this way they would be able to attain Paradise, or so they hoped. The training, motivation, and abilities of each of these components of the army varied considerably, although they were universally opposed to continued British occupation of Afghanistan.

The number of Ayub Khan's forces, counting the irregular horsemen but not counting the tribesmen acting as infantry or the *ghazis*, is as follows: the total number of regular infantry from Kabul was 2000. Herati infantry numbered 1,100, while the mutineers from Khandahar numbered approximately 500, for a grand total for regular

infantry of 4,100. The artillery consisted of thirty guns and 500 men. The regular cavalry was 900 troopers, while the number of irregular horse stood at approximately 2,000. The core of Ayub Khan's force thus numbered 7,500.<sup>36</sup>

Approximately half of Ayub Khan's infantry carried British Enfields. These were muzzle-loaders that were two generations behind the weapons currently fielded by the British army, and had a rate of fire of two rounds per minute.<sup>37</sup> The rest of the regular infantry were armed with locally manufactured copies.<sup>38</sup>

Artillery was a definite strength for Ayub Khan. The majority of the thirty guns were muzzle-loading smoothbores that fired six pound projectiles. However, six modern Armstrong Rifled Breech Loading (RBL) guns were manned by trained crews. These 14-pounders were heavier weapons than any that the British force at Maiwand fielded, since there was only a RHA contingent present.<sup>39</sup> The artillery was well-trained, and officered by the Kizilbash, a group of ethnic Persians living in Afghanistan who were known for their discipline.<sup>40</sup>

The cavalry, both regular and irregular, were armed with a variety of weapons. These included firearms, swords, and lances. The cavalry were not organized in the mold of a classic European army, and were incapable of the same type of disciplined charges. They were, however, quite formidable horsemen, and in sufficient numbers even the irregulars could threaten British forces.

The tribesmen and ghazis carried weapons ranging from those equivalent to Snider rifles to the *jezail*, an antiquated musket.<sup>41</sup> In addition to firearms, the tribesmen and ghazis also wielded swords, daggers, and Khyber knives. Although obviously not

effective from a distance, if allowed to close in hand-to-hand combat these forces could be quite deadly.

In battle the regular forces attempted the tactics then standard among European armies. Infantry advanced in line, artillery supported the advance, and cavalry screened, covered flanks, and served a reconnaissance and pursuit role. The tribesmen were born in a warrior culture and were vicious fighters. They could move long distances at great speed, and were accustomed to deprivation. If required, the tribesmen also had great skill in vanishing and avoiding pursuit in the deserts and hills.<sup>42</sup> Their martial abilities were tempered with caution and a pragmatic approach to the odds of a fight. Allegiances among tribal units could quickly shift. The *ghazis*, however, were of a different nature. If whipped up into a frenzied state by the mullahs they were capable of near suicidal mass charges. In this role they could also serve to inspire other units around them.<sup>43</sup>

### Leaders

The British commander at the Battle of Maiwand was Brigadier-General George Burrows. He was 53 years old, and most recently had served as the Quartermaster-General of the Bombay Presidency.<sup>44</sup> His reputation was that of an efficient staff officer, although Burrows had not been involved in combat or on an active campaign since the Great Mutiny in 1857.<sup>45</sup>

The British cavalry commander during the battle was Brigadier-General Thomas Nuttall. General Nuttall was junior to Burrows, and so acted as his direct subordinate, but there was some disadvantage in having two brigadiers in the brigade rather than a major general commanding and a brigadier general underneath him.<sup>46</sup> Another disadvantage with Nuttall is that he was not a cavalryman. He had supposedly never

served in a cavalry regiment, and commanded an infantry brigade in the conflict before he gaining command of a cavalry brigade after the army reorganized.<sup>47</sup> He had an excellent reputation as an officer, but having never commanded cavalry, much less in combat, was a definite liability.

The Afghan leader, as stated previously, was Ayub Khan. He was the former amir's youngest son, and was judged by some to be the most competent among his brothers.<sup>48</sup> He was just short of thirty years old, and already a veteran of several campaigns. Ayub Khan had lived in exile in Persia, and developed into quite a statesman while there.<sup>49</sup> Military leaders and units had come to his palace after the British defeated them in Kabul. In Herat he also had with him many of the most militant figures from Khandahar, who had fled from there to his court.<sup>50</sup> These individuals assured him of local support if he decided to march on Khandahar. Ayub Khan also received a green Islamic banner from an Arab who had obtained the banner from a holy man in Bagdad. The holy man had instructed that the banner be presented to the Governor of Herat, who would bear it to a great victory over the infidels.<sup>51</sup> Ayub Khan was determined that this victory would come soon, and he began preparations in May of 1880 for movement against the British in the east of Afghanistan.

#### Battle Narrative

Fearing an imminent invasion from Ayub Khan, the Wali of Khandahar, Sher Ali Khan, decided to take his army to Girishk to forestall a peasant uprising.<sup>52</sup> After arriving, however, he received word that Ayub Khan had already crossed the borders of his own province and was headed for Khandahar. The Wali realized that his troops were unreliable, and unlikely to defeat Ayub Khan on their own, so Sher Ali requested support

from the British garrison at Khandahar. Although it would seem straightforward that the British should provide assistance, there was a great deal of debate over the issue.<sup>53</sup> The British political advisors felt, rightly so, that the Wali should be reinforced, and that failure to do so would be interpreted as an act of betrayal. On the other hand, the British military had assumed risk in the size of the garrison at Khandahar, and General Primrose was reluctant to send any additional soldiers away from the defense of the garrison. In the end Primrose decided in favor of the political arguments, and sent a strong force under General Burrows to the support of the Wali at Girishk while retaining approximately 2,300 for the garrison at Khandahar.<sup>54</sup>



Figure 7. Afghanistan

*Source:* Jalali, Ali and Grau, Lester, <http://www.smallwars.quantico.usmc.mil/search/LessonsLearned/afghanistan/maiwand.asp> (accessed May 15, 2009).

General Burrow's force consisted of the 66th Regiment of Foot, the 1st Bombay Native Infantry (Grenadiers), and the 39th Bombay Native Infantry (Jacob's Rifles). General Nuttall's cavalry brigade also accompanied them, which included a battery of the RHA, the 3rd (Queen's Own) Bombay Light Cavalry, and the 3rd Sind Horse. The combined fighting strength was 53 officers, 507 sabers, and 1,885 rank and file soldiers.<sup>55</sup> The force set out from Kandahar on July 4th bound for Girishk and the Helmand River, which they reached in a week.<sup>56</sup>

Once Burrows arrived at Girishk, he quickly realized the sorry shape of the Wali's army. As Ayub Khan's army approached, the soldiers were becoming more and more unreliable, and Sher Ali feared a revolt. In consultation with the British, it was decided to use British soldiers to disarm the Wali's troops before they could change sides.<sup>57</sup> This operation, however, was not executed in time. When told to begin movement, the Wali's infantry and cavalry mutinied, and headed west towards Herat.<sup>58</sup> Initially the Wali's cavalry stayed loyal but then large numbers of them left and returned to Khandahar. The Wali was left with a handful of retainers, and the British were faced with the predicament of supposedly allied troops rushing to join the enemy.

Although Burrows did not react immediately, at length he did determine to do what he could to stop the mutineers, being especially concerned with the guns. Burrows dispatched cavalry and infantry to chase down the mutineers. Once cornered, the Afghan infantry and artillery put up a short fight, but this soon turned into an all out retreat after a sharp British assault.<sup>59</sup> The mutineers abandoned the smoothbore cannons, although they did take time to cut the harnesses before they fled. A number of the mutineers were killed, but a large portion managed to evade the British and join with Ayub Khan.



Burrows, somewhat inexplicably but with the ostensible reason of a lack of draught animals, decided to dump the majority of the ammunition for the cannons into a deep part of the river.<sup>60</sup> The nearest resupply of the rounds was in Khandahar. Burrows did, however, decide to man the guns, and a detachment of infantry soldiers under the command of artillerymen kept the smoothbores in service for the British, although the cannons were short on ammunition.

After the Wali's troops joined Ayub Khan, Burrows decided that his current position was untenable. He therefore determined to move back closer to Khandahar and consider his options. Judging that Ayub Khan's strategic goals could be either Ghazni or Khandahar, and with orders to keep Ayub Khan out of both, Burrows searched for a way to intercept Ayub Khan's army. General Burrows found this at Khusk-i-Nakhud, where he could command the direct approach to Khandahar, but also move quickly to Maiwand if necessary to stop Ayub's advance on Ghazni.<sup>61</sup> Despite having intelligence that Ayub Khan might be taking the route through Maiwand, Burrows remained in his position at Khusk-i-Nakhud. Finally, at 1030 at night on the 26th of July after additional scouting reports Burrows became convinced that Ayub Khan was travelling through Maiwand the next day, and determined to meet him there.<sup>62</sup> The lateness of this decision had unfortunate repercussions for his soldiers. The camp first had to be broken down, and all of the provisions and supplies had to be packed on animals. The end result is that most of the soldiers spent all night preparing to leave at 5:30 the next morning, so very few had any sleep before the march to Maiwand began. Although the British forces had managed a breakfast, the Indian soldiers had not eaten since the previous evening, and would not

eat again until after the battle.<sup>63</sup> It was a tired and hungry army that started the march to Maiwand.

After numerous difficulties with the baggage, requiring multiple stops, the British column arrived near Maiwand at midmorning. Once there, the pace of the battle began to quicken. Scouts quickly informed General Burrows that enemy cavalry was in the area in force. Not long afterwards, the British determined that masses of Afghan infantry were marching in the distance.<sup>64</sup> Given the particular situation, General Burrows did not have many options. His orders were to attack the enemy force if he felt himself strong enough and prevent Ayub Khan from reaching either Ghazni or Khandahar.<sup>65</sup> If he allowed Ayub Khan's force to pass unmolested to Ghazni, Burrows would fail his mission. General Burrows therefore decided to boldly attack Ayub Khan on the flank while the Afghan's army was still in a column of march.

Burrows was determined to attack knowing the probable strength of the enemy, fully realizing that Ayub Khan's force greatly outnumbered his own.<sup>66</sup> This was not necessarily a huge leap of faith since all British forces of Burrows' size thus far had been successful in every battle against the Afghans. General Burrows decided to launch an attack on the marching columns with artillery, hopefully posing enough of a threat to pull Ayub Khan's forces into battle. Burrows ordered the artillery forward, and the RHA passed the village of Mahmudabad, crossed a ravine to reach an open plain, and then proceeded to fire on the marching Afghan columns.<sup>67</sup> In order to protect the artillery, the cavalry was initially deployed alongside the guns. As the infantry arrived from their line of march, Burrows deployed the infantry beside the artillery. However, he neglected to give new orders to the escort cavalry or to tell the baggage train to halt and find

concealed positions within the village. The baggage train therefore continued on its march, eventually coming to a halt in a ravine just beyond one of the villages.<sup>68</sup> The attack on the Afghan column started shortly before 11:00 am.

The ground that General Burrows chose to fight on was a plain near two villages that lay on the outskirts of Maiwand, Mahmudabad and Khig. The flat plain was parched, without any sign of water or vegetation, and there was no cover present except for several deep ravines that crossed the area. General Burrows decided to deploy his force past the village of Khig and crossed a large ravine to the plain beyond, which left a significant obstacle to his rear between his forces and resupply. The artillery was deployed forward on the highest point of the plain in order to engage the marching Afghan columns. The 66th Foot was positioned to the right of the artillery pieces, and Jacob's Rifles, Sappers and Miners, and then the Grenadiers were to the left.<sup>69</sup> Across the front of the 66th Foot was another ravine that came out from the village area, and most of the area was low ground masked by other terrain. The Grenadiers and Jacob's Rifles, however, were on higher ground alongside the artillery and fully exposed. Burrows deployed some cavalry to the right and left flanks, and left Mayne's force in the rear of the formation. The location in the rear was forward of the ravine, however, and still exposed to enemy fire. The baggage train, once brought to a stop, was located in the general vicinity of the ravine nearest the villages. General Burrows initially retained four companies of Jacob's Rifles as a reserve along with Mayne's cavalry, while companies from various regiments as well as a cavalry detachment guarded the baggage.<sup>70</sup>

The initial artillery fire upon the Afghan columns did not appear to cause large numbers of casualties, as the distance was difficult to gauge across the desert because of

the heat. However, the artillery did have the intended effect of drawing Ayub Khan's attention. Soon the British soldiers could view the Afghan columns turning in the distance and heading towards them. Afghan cavalry arrived and immediately started probing around the flanks of the British formation. Afghan artillery approached and after an initial delay began returning British fire. An artillery duel developed, with the British receiving the worse end of the ordeal.<sup>71</sup> The British gunners were having trouble getting the proper range across the flat plain. The Afghans, however, had the advantage of seeing their targets clearly silhouetted at the tip of the high ground, making British targets easy to determine. In addition, the Afghan gunners were skillfully employing their artillery. They maximized the use of terrain in drawing the guns closer to the British lines, using draws and depressions in the ground to advance the guns, and then firing unexpectedly from new positions. The incoming Afghan barrages began to have effects on the British formations. The exposed Grenadiers and Jacob's Rifles were taking casualties, although the 66th Foot was still shielded in their location.<sup>72</sup> Mayne's cavalry squadron, standing idly in the center, was also taking casualties from the Afghan artillery. This unit would senselessly lose almost one third of its horses before repositioning away from the fire hours later.<sup>73</sup>

By this time, around noon, the initial Afghan infantry units began to arrive. Yet the first force to attack the British was actually Herati irregular horse. The cavalry charged the fully prepared British 66th Foot, who opened up with disciplined volleys.<sup>74</sup> After the infantry repulsed this attack a large group of ghazis approached, coming not from the middle of the Afghan line of march, but from the direction of Maiwand to the east. The ghazis advanced directly towards the 66<sup>th</sup> Foot, with their banners held high.

The 66th Foot calmly sighted the correct range and held fire until ordered by their officers. At 1200 yards the regiment opened fire with company volleys, unleashing a devastating storm of lead on the masses of ghazis.<sup>75</sup> The range was true, and hordes of ghazis dropped under the onslaught. Still the fanatics continued forward. In the end, however, the devastating British rate of fire proved too much for the ghazis, and after taking horrific casualties the advance stuttered and then faltered. The survivors huddled together in a ravine to the front of the 66th, and began harassment fire. To assist the 66th Foot Burrows dispatched an artillery detachment and some cavalry. For the moment the British held firm.

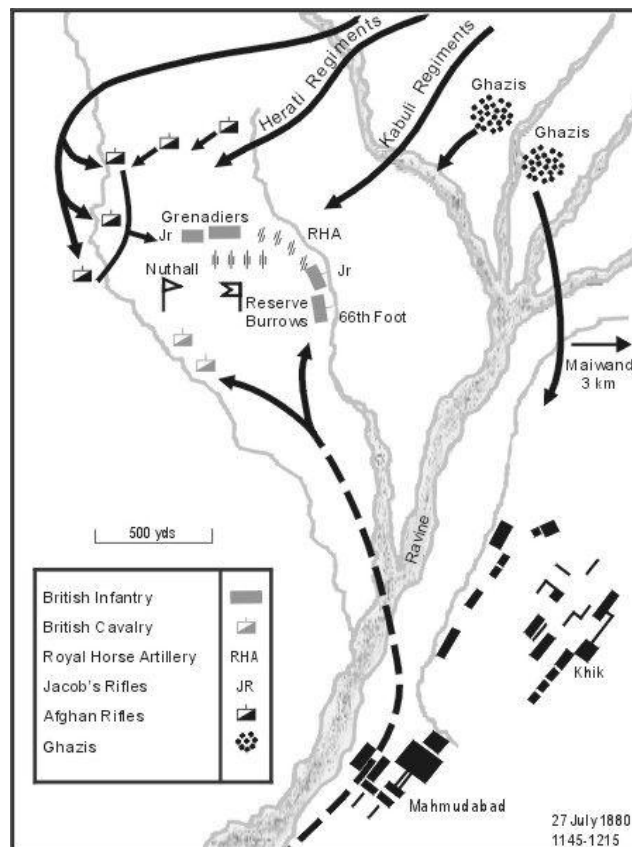


Figure 8. Afghan Attack

Source: Ali Jalali, and Lester Grau, <http://www.smallwars.quantico.usmc.mil/search/LessonsLearned/afghanistan/maiwand.asp> (accessed May 15, 2009).

During this time the British left was under constant pressure from Afghan irregular cavalry. Some British cavalry was deployed on the left flank as a screen force, but the Afghans continued to probe between this force and the infantry companies. Burrows ordered the Grenadiers to refuse the flank, and the left side of the Indian formation bent back to secure the left flank. Still concerned about the flanks, Burrows committed his reserve, four companies of Jacob's Rifles, to extend both the left and right flanks.<sup>76</sup> There were only two British officers with the unit, Major Iredell and a newly arrived 21-year-old Lieutenant Cole. Since the British right had suffered the heaviest fighting so far, Major Iredell took two companies to that side, and sent Cole with two companies to the left.

The next Afghan charge began forming near the center of the British line, opposite the Grenadiers and artillery. The Afghan forces consisted of a brigade of Herati infantry and three Kabuli battalions. At a given signal the Afghan infantry rose up from the ravine they were sheltering in and launched their assault on the British center. To oppose this assault the British had the Grenadiers, E battery guns, Sappers & Miners, and six companies of Jacob's Rifles.<sup>77</sup> The Indian infantry, armed with their Snider rifles, began a series of devastating volley fires. British artillery fired case-shot with murderous affect. At first the Herati continued advancing, but the British firepower began to tell, and the disheartened soldiers retreated back out of range of the British fire.

At this point in the battle most of the news for the British was good. No Afghan charges had managed to penetrate the British front, and casualties were not excessive, while the Afghans had suffered terribly. But in reality all was not well for the British. The Afghan cannons continued to move forward, and some of the British artillery was

starting to run short on ammunition. The sun was beating down, and with soaring temperatures thirst was beginning to take its toll on soldiers in the line. Due to the open left flank the route back to the baggage area had been cut by Afghan cavalry. Only large escorted forces were able to make their way through. The Indian water bearers were not able to make their way to the front lines, and stretcher bearers were no longer willing to evacuate casualties.<sup>78</sup> Soldiers began to be overwhelmed by the intense heat without water to slack their thirst, and casualties began to overflow the temporary aid stations set up behind the lines. The baggage train was also forced to defend itself against Afghan marauders. Grouped into a mass and sheltered in the ravine, the baggage train was still taking casualties.

The first sign of trouble in the British line came as General Burrows tried to readjust his left flank. He wished to pull the two companies from Jacob's Rifles back 20 to 30 yards further than they had moved earlier when the companies refused the left flank of the British line. After heavy casualties, exhausted by heat and thirst, and led by a lone British officer, Lieutenant Cole, who had newly arrived to the unit, the Indian sepoy started to panic, and some even began moving to the rear.<sup>79</sup> Cole and his staff managed to regain control by berating the soldiers, but General Burrows was profoundly affected by the near collapse and feared making any additional moves.<sup>80</sup>

After firing all morning in support of the left flank, the smoothbore cannons on the left flank of the British line, next to Jacob's Rifles, ran out of ammunition. Unable to receive a resupply because Afghan irregular cavalry had cut the lines from the baggage train to the front, the battery commander quite reasonably decided to retire the guns and return to the baggage train to find more ammunition. The British officers, however,

failed to take into account the psychological impact on the young Indian sepoy of Jacob's Rifles. The sudden movement of the guns to the rear served to unnerve the already shaken soldiers. Watching the artillery pack up and move to the rear, some of them even thought that a general retreat had been ordered.<sup>81</sup> The sepoy were on the verge of collapse.

With less of a British artillery presence the Afghan guns became emboldened. Some of the cannons were blasting away only a few hundred yards away from the British line, and the infantry were suffering serious casualties. One of these casualties was the young lieutenant Cole, struck down by a roundshot.<sup>82</sup> His death left the two Jacob's Rifles companies on the left without any surviving British officers. The soldiers had been without food and sleep since the previous day, had been fighting in the oppressive heat for hours without water, and were running low on ammunition. It was at this time that the Afghans were preparing to charge once more.

The ghazis had been infiltrating towards the British line in a close ravine, and were now ready for an attack. At approximately 2:15 pm the Afghan guns on the line became silent, and some of the British thought that perhaps the Afghans had ran out of ammunition.<sup>83</sup> Suddenly the ghazis jumped up as a single mass and charged at the British lines. There is an Afghan legend that a young maiden named Malala was among the ghazis. She grabbed a banner from a fallen ghazi and urged the men onward to fight, reciting poetry.<sup>84</sup> The British fire ended her life, but not before she had exhorted the masses to success. The Indian sepoy fired several volleys but could not stem the tide. The two companies of Jacob's Rifles, being able to endure no more, suddenly broke for the rear. The exodus in short order spread to the neighboring British units, as the ghazis



charged home and collided with the British infantry. Realizing that the enemy was pressing home their attack, the British officers tried to take action. The adjutant ordered a regimental square formation.<sup>85</sup> Unfortunately this was a more complicated maneuver than a company square, and under the circumstances the sepoys were simply unable to execute it. Within a matter of minutes the sepoys were pressed together in a wedge shape, devoid of any discernible formation. The ghazis began to cut down individual soldiers, and the exhausted sepoys displayed a great deal of apathy.<sup>86</sup> The entire British line was beginning to collapse starting from the left flank and spreading to the right.

Seeing the ghazis were about to overrun their position, the British artillery commander Captain Slade ordered his men to pack up the guns and retreat to the rear.<sup>87</sup> Most of the sections made it away, but one of the sections under Lieutenant Maclaine tried to get one more volley of case shot away. Although those last rounds were surely effective, the ghazis made good their charge and overran the guns. Maclaine escaped with only one limber, the rest of his guns captured by the enemy.<sup>88</sup>

General Burrows watched as the Jacob's Rifles and then the Bombay Grenadiers began to fall apart and flee for the rear. He realized his only hope was to try to use a cavalry charge to restore the situation. Burrows ordered Nuttall to have his cavalry charge the ghazis, hopefully stopping them long enough for the infantry units to reform.<sup>89</sup> The cavalry tried to quickly form in the center and prepared a charge. Time was wasted as small groups of cavalry had to be pulled in from the flanks. Finally, with sabers drawn, the cavalry advanced on the massed ghazis. The left of the line held true, and the shock effect of the charge helped to buy some time for the Grenadiers. The right side of the charge, however, proved ineffective. Nuttall, at the front leading the charge, decided

at the last minute not to charge into the ghazi ranks, but veered off to the right. The Indian sowers followed his lead, with the result that the cavalry charge was not pressed home.<sup>90</sup> The ghazis continued their attacks, and swarmed over the flank and rear of the sepoy's formations. The disjointedness of the cavalry charges sealed the fate of the British infantry forces, and a general collapse began all along the line. Burrows ordered Nuttall to attempt another charge, but Nuttall responded that his men were uncontrollable, but that he would attempt to rally them on the retiring guns.<sup>91</sup> Not even the cavalry would be able to restore the situation at this point, and the left flank began to withdraw to Mahmudabad.

The 66th Foot on the right had been holding well until the British left flank had collapsed under the weight of the ghazi attack. Faced with enemy on the front and the rear, the rear ranks of the infantry turned about and began to engage the enemy. Soon, however, their fields of fire were blocked by fleeing masses of sepoys, intermixed with the enemy.<sup>92</sup> The sepoys rushed into the ranks of the British infantry, spoiling the regiment's formation in the process. The tide of humanity was irresistible, and the 66th proved unable to stand and fight. Retire was sounded, and now the entire British infantry force was in full retreat. Pressure from the retreating sepoys on their flank and rear prevented an organized withdrawal of the 66th. The bulk of the regiment broke into two groups, and continued toward Khig under pressure from the enemy. Ghazis still held Khig, and the 66<sup>th</sup> now had enemy to their front and their rear.

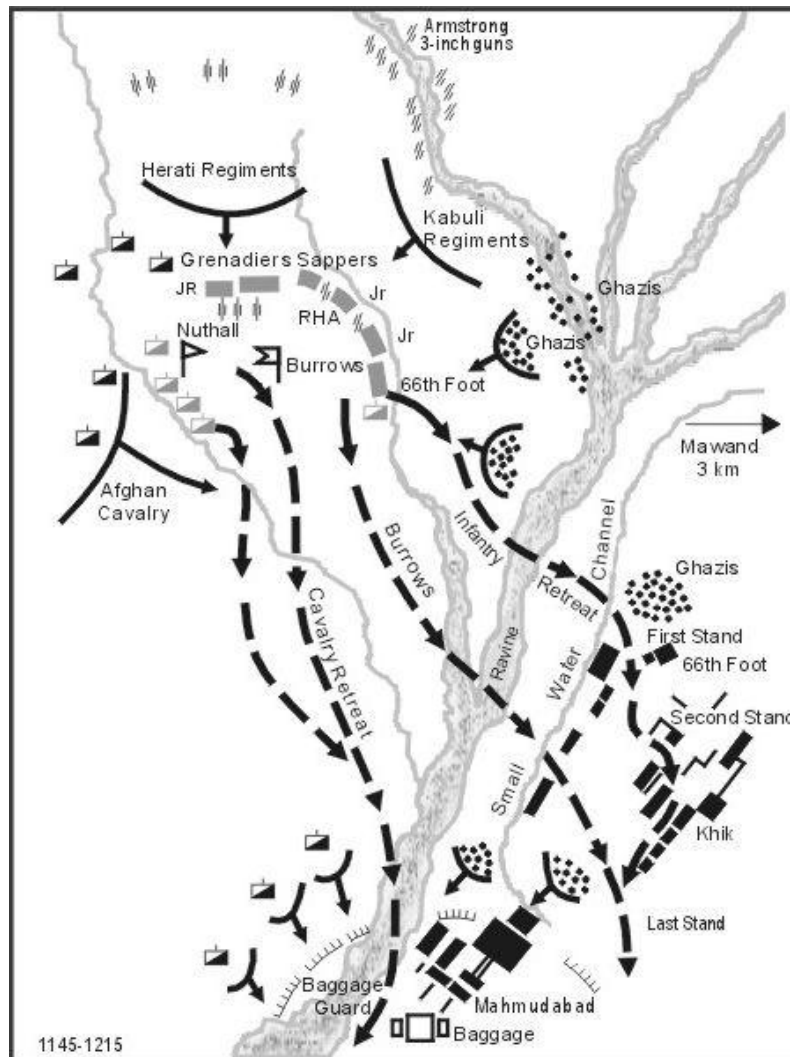


Figure 9. British Retreat

Source: Ali Jalali, and Lester Grau, <http://www.smallwars.quantico.usmc.mil/search/LessonsLearned/afghanistan/maiwand.asp> (accessed May 15, 2009).

Chaos ensued across the battlefield as small knots of sepoys, centered on their British officers, attempted to mount rear-guard operations, while a majority fled with complete abandon. The two companies of Jacob's Rifles and some of the Grenadiers made towards Mahmudabad, while another part of the Grenadiers became entangled with the 66th and fled towards Khig. Colonel Anderson, the commander of the Bombay

Grenadiers, gathered a group of men around him to attempt a rear guard action.<sup>93</sup>

Unfortunately shell fragments quickly wounded Colonel Anderson, and his efforts fell apart. The Indian infantry were now streaming towards Mahmudabad and beyond, heading out on the road to Khandahar.

The ghazis and Afghan infantry were pushing the 66th to the east, towards the village of Khig. By doctrine the 66th should have been retiring by wings, with one wing providing covering fire for the other, but apparently the panic-stricken sepoy, closely pursued by the ghazis, prevented this from happening.<sup>94</sup> Once across the ravine opposite from Khig the soldiers made a total of three desperate stands to fight off the pursuing Afghans. The commander, Colonel Galbraith, brought together some 190 men from across the regiment and they stood their ground on a small irrigation ditch.<sup>95</sup> After much bloodshed, and the death of their commanding officer, the men were pushed back through the village, although they had bought time for their comrades.

Inside Khig, Colonel Mainwaring gathered together approximately 150 soldiers from the regiment and concentrated them in a walled garden. General Burrows, following the 66th's line of retreat, made it into the enclosure as well. Once he realized that the garden would become as death trap as the Afghans surrounded it, Burrows ordered a withdrawal.<sup>96</sup>

The last group of soldiers making their way through the village was under pressure from all sides by the Afghans. Captain Roberts and Major Blackwood were part of this last group, and held off the enemy from inside another walled enclosure. After repeated attacks, eleven men broke out of the garden but were surrounded on the plain by the Afghan army. Led by two lieutenants, this group fought back-to-back until the ghazis

killed them to a man.<sup>97</sup> The sole survivor of this last stand was “Bobbie”, a wounded dog who recovered to earn a campaign medal from Queen Elizabeth herself.<sup>98</sup>

The plains south of Mahmudabad were filled with columns of fleeing British soldiers. The hired hands of the baggage train, upon seeing the tide of human debris sweeping towards them, dropped their loads and bolted to the rear. Surgeon-Major Preston, having been injured earlier, was abandoned by his doolie bearers, and an artillery wagon finally picked him up and saved him from the oncoming foe.<sup>99</sup> The trail of debris left by the fleeing baggage train would actually save a number of lives. The prospect of spoils and loot distracted the pursuing Afghans, and it was likely due to this that many of the fleeing British soldiers were able to make it to Khandahar.<sup>100</sup>

The road back to Khandahar was not an easy one. The tribes along the way were hostile, and many of the sepoys who were leading the way were killed by native tribesmen. Following the retreat, the total casualties of General Burrows’ force was 44 per cent; 962 deaths and 161 wounded out of 2,576 soldiers participating in the action. The Afghan casualties are estimated to be 1,500 killed, with approximately double that number wounded.<sup>101</sup> The low number of wounded for the British is primarily due to the fact that many were abandoned to the merciless tribesmen. General Burrows proved his courage as he was one of the last back to the gates of Khandahar.

Following his decisive victory Ayub Khan decided to advance on Khandahar. He failed to take the city immediately and besieged the British garrison. General Roberts led a relief column from Kabul, and soundly defeated Ayub Khan’s forces at Khandahar.<sup>102</sup> This action in effect ended the Second Afghan War, and Britain left Afghanistan but retained control over Afghan political affairs.

### Analysis

The causes of the British defeat at Maiwand stem from a number of different issues. Although General Burrows made mistakes with the deployment of his troops, there was nothing that was fundamentally flawed with the tactical dispositions of his soldiers. Indeed, the battle is very similar to an earlier battle at Ahmed Khan, up to the point where the British line collapsed. One key reason for the Afghan victory is the change in mission for Burrow's force. Initially Primrose sent Burrows out from Khandahar in order to reinforce the Wali's army. It was not intended for Burrows to fight a stand-alone battle. Circumstances changed for the worse, however, when the Wali's forces deserted. Although Burrows did what he could to rectify the situation, seizing the Wali's artillery and pursuing the force as far as was prudent, none of this mattered; Burrows was now on his own. The odds had shifted considerably against Burrows, for now he not only had to face Ayub Khan's force alone, but he would also fight against remnants of the Wali's army. Due to the superior weaponry and training that the British possessed, Burrows calculated that he could still defeat Ayub's Khan army, although the subsequent battle proved otherwise.

Another significant factor in the battle was the condition of General Burrows' troops prior to the battle. In the parlance of current Army doctrine, this would fall under one of the three dimensions of the art of tactics; specifically the human dimension. General Burrows ordered an advance on Maiwand on 26 July at approximately 10:30 pm.<sup>103</sup> This late night decision meant that his men would have no rest, and would instead spend the night packing up gear and preparing to move. The British soldiers managed to have a light breakfast, while the sepoys and sowars, due to their habitually later meal,

never had a chance before the battle was joined. Thus Burrows' troops began the fight not having had any sleep, many not having had any food, and having marched nearly twelve miles that morning.<sup>104</sup> During the battle the temperature continued to get hotter and hotter, and for the soldiers fighting on the dusty plain with no shade the conditions were nearly unbearable, especially when water ran low and there was no resupply.

Without question the physical condition of the soldiers impacted the fighting spirit of the men. It was no accident that the first formation to break was two companies of Jacob's Rifles, a sepoy unit that had a large amount of new recruits, no surviving British officers, and endured casualties all morning while on the exposed left flank of the British line.

The breakdown of this unit created a domino effect that spread through the neighboring Bombay Grenadiers, and eventually swept the British 66<sup>th</sup> Foot off the field as well.

The use, or misuse, of the British cavalry contributed to the British defeat since the cavalry was not capable of restoring the situation once the infantry began to fold. Burrows had used the cavalry mostly in a screening role since the beginning of the battle. A large portion of the cavalry was uncommitted, but was left exposed during the battle to Afghan fire while serving no purpose. When the British line collapsed, Nuttall had difficulty gathering the cavalry together and then using them effectively to stop the Afghan advance. Although it is unclear whether a cavalry charge by any force could have restored the situation, the British cavalry would have had a better chance of success if they had had time to consolidate and had not lost so many casualties from earlier shelling. Burrows' early commitment of all infantry reserves left the cavalry as the last hope, and in this case the hope proved forlorn.

The British had enjoyed success previously in every major battle in the war. They used established doctrine, and the British tactics did not change as there had not yet been a need to alter them. The success of the British forces, and their belief in their superior organization, training, and technological edge in weaponry, gave them a false sense of confidence. In retrospect, General Burrows should have realized that the desertion of the Wali's forces completely changed the dynamics of the situation, and that this development placed the British at a serious disadvantage. Burrows, however, did not see fit to adjust his plan. He continued on his mission of intercepting Ayub Khan, and boldly attacked the Khan's army from the flank while the army was in a marching column.

Burrows remained consistently within British doctrine and tactics in the disposition and employment of his troops, relying on the superior firepower of his artillery and infantry to defeat the enemy's overpowering numbers. He initially achieved a measure of success using these methods, inflicting inordinate casualties upon the Afghans. No doubt General Burrows expected this to produce a British victory, as the Afghans could not match the firepower of the British infantry and would likely withdraw after being severely bloodied. Yet Burrows failed to make any adjustments in his plan that dealt with the far superior numbers of the Afghans and their excellent artillery. Instead Burrows focused on what he believed were their likely actions.

The Afghan force, under Ayub Khan, was on the whole a technologically inferior force to the British. The Afghan regular infantry were mostly armed with rifles that were two generations behind what the British regulars carried. The tribesmen and ghazis that augmented Ayub Khan's army were mostly armed with old muskets or swords and long knives. There was one area where Ayub Khan did have technological parity or even an



advantage; this was in artillery. In previous battles in the Second Afghan War, such as Ahmad Khel, there was little or no Afghan artillery present. Ayub Khan, however, possessed over thirty guns, some of which (the Armstrongs) were superior to any cannons fielded by the British on that day. This edge proved to be decisive when some of the British guns ran out of ammunition and were forced to retire.<sup>105</sup> The final position of some of the Afghan cannons proved to be only several hundred yards from the British line. The pounding that the sepoys were taking from the Afghan guns certainly contributed to the loss of their will to fight, both through the number of casualties and the psychological effects of shelling on the troops. After all, it was a cannonball that killed the last British officer of the two sepoy companies that were the first to break.

The final factor behind the Afghan victory over the British was the influence of the Afghan culture. The cultural aspect was manifested in two different ways, a tribal structure and religion. All of Afghan society to a certain extent was tribal, a structure that the terrain and geographical barriers of the countryside helped to influence. The particular environment created a culture of internecine warfare, where tribes could easily shift allegiances based upon what was best for the particular tribe. In such a society it is difficult to create allegiances outside of traditional kin relations. Conversely, when threatened by an outside force these boundaries are easily overcome, and tribes rather quickly put aside their own differences to face a common threat. The British experienced these particular dynamics when confronting Ayub Khan. The Wali's soldiers, instead of remaining loyal to someone they saw as the puppet of foreign overlords, quickly changed allegiances when presented with a viable Afghan option. The resulting battle was a defeat for the British in part because of the level of support that Ayub Khan enjoyed.

Nearly all of the surrounding tribesmen supported Ayub Khan, rather than the British, which resulted in the British standing alone against the Afghans. The particular societal structure in Afghanistan thus aided the Afghan cause.

Religion played a significant role in the Afghan forces' motivation. Ayub Khan's army was a rather disparate group, with infantry, cavalry, and artillery forces from Herat and Kabul, tribesmen and irregular horse from surrounding lands, and large numbers of ghazis, or religious zealots. Despite the societal tendencies to unite against a foreign foe, the real motivation for the bulk of the army came from a religious appeal against infidels. Ayub Khan may have co-opted this motivation for his own purposes, and certainly tribesmen cared a great deal for the loot they might have received, but religion motivated the soldiers and ghazis to bear horrific losses in order to destroy the British. The power of religion is apparent in the narrative of the religious banner handed to Ayub Khan while he was still in Herat. The story of Malala, the woman who died exhorting the men to battle against the infidel, still inspires modern-day Afghans.<sup>106</sup> Religion served as a cohesive agent for the masses, and helped propel the primitive Afghan forces to victory over their more technologically advanced foe.

A variety of causes were put forward to explain the Afghan victory. The defection of the Afghan troops under Wali Sher Khan resulted in a much more difficult situation for the British. The condition of the British soldiers at their arrival in Maiwand was a factor, given that they were exhausted from lack of sleep, a long march, hunger, and (due to the heat and a lack of water) thirst during the battle. The mishandling of British cavalry was also problematic for the British, specifically when the cavalry took unnecessary casualties from shelling and rifle fire, and the failure to drive home the

charge that could have restored the British line. The British did not change their tactics but continued to rely on superior firepower and discipline to overcome the Afghan numbers, disregarding Afghan capability and zeal. The Afghans, for their part, altered their approach by selectively drawing on key components of technology, namely the modern howitzers that caused such casualties among the British. Finally, the cultural influences both of a tribal society and religion proved key in the Afghan victory. The tribal structure facilitated the mutiny that left the British exposed, while religion served as a motivating factor for victory.

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<sup>1</sup> Pierce G. Fredericks, *The Sepoy and the Cossack* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1971), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Mike Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900* (Yorkshire: Frontline Books, 2008), 69.

<sup>3</sup> Leigh Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force* (London: Leo Cooper Ltd., 1979), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900*, 69.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>6</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>8</sup> Brian Robson, *The Road to Kabul The Second Afghan War 1878-1881* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1986), 120, 121.

<sup>9</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>11</sup> John H. Waller, *Beyond the Khyber Pass The Road to British Disaster in the First Afghan War* (New York: Random House. 1990), 203.

<sup>12</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 41.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>17</sup> Robson, *The Road to Kabul The Second Afghan War 1878-1881*, 57.

<sup>18</sup> Fredericks, *The Sepoy and the Cossack*, 177.

<sup>19</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900*, 423.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>22</sup> Robson, *The Road to Kabul The Second Afghan War 1878-1881*, 62.

<sup>23</sup> Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900*, 61.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>28</sup> Robson, *The Road to Kabul The Second Afghan War 1878-1881*, 62.

<sup>29</sup> Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900*, 60.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>32</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 50.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>34</sup> Robson, *The Road to Kabul The Second Afghan War 1878-1881*, 232.

<sup>35</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Metcalfe MacGregor, *The Second Afghan War 1878-1880 Abridged Official Account* (London: John Murray, 1908.477,478.

<sup>37</sup> Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900*, 72.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>39</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 98.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>44</sup> Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900*, 81.

<sup>45</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 65.

<sup>46</sup> Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900*, 81.

<sup>47</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 65.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>50</sup> Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900*, 79.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>52</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 74.

<sup>53</sup> Robson, *The Road to Kabul The Second Afghan War 1878-1881*, 223.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>55</sup> MacGregor, *The Second Afghan War 1878-1880 Abridged Official Account*, 485.

<sup>56</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 78.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>58</sup> Robson, *The Road to Kabul The Second Afghan War 1878-1881*, 224.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>60</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 83.

<sup>61</sup> Robson, *The Road to Kabul The Second Afghan War 1878-1881*, 226.

<sup>62</sup> Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900*, 88.

<sup>63</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 101.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>65</sup> Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900*, 87.

<sup>66</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 110.

<sup>67</sup> Robson, *The Road to Kabul The Second Afghan War 1878-1881*, 231.

<sup>68</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 144.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>70</sup> Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900*, 97.

<sup>71</sup> Robson, *The Road to Kabul The Second Afghan War 1878-1881*, 233.

<sup>72</sup> Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900*, 99.

<sup>73</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 152.

<sup>74</sup> Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900*, 101.

<sup>75</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 130.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 133.

- <sup>77</sup> Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900*, 106.
- <sup>78</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 145.
- <sup>79</sup> Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900*, 107.
- <sup>80</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 145.
- <sup>81</sup> Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900*, 108.
- <sup>82</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 156.
- <sup>83</sup> Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900*, 112.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.
- <sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.
- <sup>86</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 162.
- <sup>87</sup> Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900*, 113.
- <sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.
- <sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.
- <sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.
- <sup>91</sup> Robson, *The Road to Kabul The Second Afghan War 1878-1881*, 235.
- <sup>92</sup> Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900*, 117.
- <sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.
- <sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.
- <sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.
- <sup>97</sup> An Afghan artillery colonel described this last stand. "Surrounded by the whole of the Afghan army, they fought on until only eleven men were left, inflicting enormous loss on their enemy. These men charged out of the garden, and died with their faces to the foe, fighting to the death. Such was the nature of their charge, and the grandeur of

their bearing, that although the whole of the ghazis were assembled around them, no one dared to approach to cut them down. Thus, standing in the open, back to back, firing steadily and truly, every shot telling, surrounded by thousands, these officers and men died! and it was not until the last man was shot down that the ghazis dared advance upon the. The conduct of these men was the admiration of all that witnessed it.” Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 177.

<sup>98</sup> Maxwell, *My God - Maiwand! Operations of the South Afghanistan Field Force*, 242.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>100</sup> Captain Slade’s description is particularly poignant: “All over the wide expanse of desert are to be seen men in twos and threes retreating. Camels have thrown their loads, sick men, almost naked, are astride of donkeys, mules, ponies and camels; the bearers have thrown down their dhoolies and left the wounded to their fate.” Snook, *Into the Jaws of Death British Military Blunders, 1879-1900*, 125.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>102</sup> Robson, *The Road to Kabul The Second Afghan War 1878-1881*, 261.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>105</sup> Ali A. Jalali, and Lester W. Grau, "Expeditionary Forces: Superior Technology Defeated - The Battle of Maiwand," *Military Review* (May-June 2001).

<sup>106</sup> Melody Ermachild Chavis, *Meena, Heroine of Afghanistan: The Martyr who founded RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 12.



## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

War, as Clausewitz reminds us, is an enterprise where the eventual outcome is truly difficult to ascertain. Even when the result of a battle might appear predestined, a completely opposite result is entirely possible. This paper has examined three battles in history where such an upset occurred: the Battle of Teutoburg Forest, the Battle of the Little Bighorn, and the Battle of Maiwand. Prior to any of these battles, odds makers would not have been favorable to the armies that, in the end, proved victorious. Armies from the technologically advanced societies seemed to have all the advantages; well-disciplined and professional soldiers, superior firepower, and superior technology in general. Yet in each case the primitive armies were able to win the battle. The central aim of this study was to determine how these more primitive armies were able to triumph and if there were any corresponding links between the battles.

The answer to such a question is fraught with danger. One must be careful of inferring “lessons” from history and applying them to situations where they no longer hold true. In the case of these battles, a series of unique circumstances combined to produce the end result. A number of variables changed from battle to battle, and it becomes difficult to say that a particular event in one battle carries universal meaning and can be applied to all other battles of a similar nature. The true reality is much more complex, and individual considerations become paramount in determining why a battle ended in a given manner. The Germanic tribes at Teutoburg Forest relied upon deception as a primary part of their plan. Arminius’ betrayal placed Varus in a position from which he could not recover. Custer began the battle at Little Bighorn knowing his enemy well,

but disposed his forces in an extremely aggressive posture which was susceptible to an enemy counterattack. Finally, Burrows did not comprehend the significant advantage that the Afghan artillery afforded them, and Burrows' own forces were not able to defend against a prolonged Afghan assault. The circumstances of the difference battles varied greatly, and so great caution must be taken when attempting to draw universal principles from these battles to assist in understanding their nature, since such a nature might only be transitory and grounded in historicity.

Nevertheless, even though each battle possesses a unique combination of variables, there are striking similarities among all of the battles. These similarities could prove useful for military professionals to observe and act upon in future campaigns. In each of these battles a technologically advanced, professional army faced off against a more primitive, tribal, and less organized foe. There is here a rough correspondence to the symptoms outlined in the so-called "Victory Disease." This theory posits that a nation enjoying previous military success can succumb to arrogance, a sense of complacency, and the use of templated solutions that eventually leads to their defeat.<sup>1</sup> In previous battles from each time period in this study the technologically advanced forces had prevailed; and yet, in ways that were remarkably similar and followed a set pattern, the primitive forces were able to defeat them.

The pattern that existed in each conflict is as follows: the technologically advanced force used predictable tactics that had worked previously; the primitive force changed their strategy, usually employing niche technology to overcome their overall technological handicap; and strong cultural influences were at work that caused the resistance to be far greater than expected. Each of these characteristics are present in

every battle in this study. More importantly, this pattern can help to prepare for future battles of a similar nature.

Interestingly, one element that did not seem to be a factor in the outcome of the battles was the personality of the leaders involved. Although only three battles are discussed here, the leaders of the technologically advanced societies varied considerably in experience and outlook. Varus, the Roman governor of Germania, did not earn his rank through military campaigns but rather through political positions. He did not have the background experience of a military career, although Varus did have valuable experience in commanding Roman legions, notably in Syria during the Jewish revolt. He certainly displayed creative aptitude in solving some of the military and diplomatic problems in that conflict, and likely was doing the same in Germania before the revolt. This profile stands in stark contrast to Custer. General Custer was an exceptionally experienced officer, having commanded in a number of battles during the Civil War and in previous Indian campaigns. He was extremely aggressive, and was known for his risky and sometimes grandiose tactics. Custer's decisions during the Sioux campaign are representative of his ultra-aggressive style. General Burrows, the commander of the British force at Maiwand, was a career army officer, and had previously served in the campaigns of the Great Mutiny in India. Although he had limited time as a commander, Burrows enjoyed an excellent reputation as a staff officer. The decisions that he made during the campaign tended to be cautious and deliberate. Burrows even seemed to border on indecision at times, especially when the enemy situation was not clear to him.

Apparently, then, a difference in leadership style was not a great factor in the outcome of these battles. It is important to note that these leaders did not necessarily

make any wrong decisions; for the most part they followed the established military doctrine of their army and deployed their forces correctly based upon the conventional wisdom of the time. In retrospect it is easy to fault certain decisions that the generals made that would have severe ramifications later on. The intent of this chapter is not to state that the leaders are blameless; merely that the leaders made correct decisions within the framework of their knowledge, and that unconventional actions or stupidity was not the proximate cause of the defeat of their forces. The defeat of their forces can be attributed to a failure on the part of the leaders to grasp the totality of the situation.

One theme that links the battles in this study is that in every battle the technologically advanced force executed what was thought to be the proper doctrinal response to the situation. The problem was not that incompetent generals failed to enact the correct strategy; the problem was, ironically, the enemy forces were planning on these generals following their doctrine and using established patterns. Arminius, the leader of the Germanic tribes, was intimately familiar with how Roman commanders used Roman legions. He knew that Varus would react immediately with all available forces to quell a rebellion. Arminius' strategy took advantage of this knowledge, and he crafted a plan that allowed him to seize the initiative from the Roman commander. Ayub Khan, the leader of the Afghan army, also relied on British adherence to their own doctrine. Sitting Bull, the famous leader of the Sioux tribes, understood that Custer was coming to attack their villages. Custer would attempt this attack in a way that had proven successful numerous times; this time, however, there was a different outcome. Finally, Ayub Khan knew that the British would rely on their firepower and superior technology to withstand

the numerical superiority of the Afghan forces, even if that technology was not superior in all aspects.

The second theme in all of these battles is that the primitive forces changed their strategy and tactics to take advantage of established patterns and overcome, at least in some respects, the technological advantage of their foes. In the case of the Germanic tribes, the previous battles against Romans had either been short raids, or battles in reaction to a Roman invasion. Although the Germanic tribes had tried ambushing Roman columns before, there was nothing on the level of deception or preparation that was exhibited at Teutoburg Forest. By drawing a large Roman force into an ambush, the Germanic tribes were able to strike the legions while they were still in a marching column. This action avoided a set-piece battle, which played into Roman strengths, in favor of a battle where the more mobile Germanic forces held all of the advantages. The Sioux tribes, while facing the U.S. Army, had been subject to repeated raids on their villages and families. The standard Indian reaction to an attack on their village was to run away and scatter. Sitting Bull decided to change this strategy. The tribes massed for protection, and turned on their attackers when Custer threatened the village. Finally, Ayub Khan faced the British force with his own surprise; modern artillery. The British attacked the numerically superior Afghan force, trusting to their own firepower to even the odds. The Afghan army, however, made excellent use of their modern cannons, and managed to break the British line and send a defeated Burrows back to Khandahar.

Part of the change of strategy on the part of the primitive forces concerned the limited use of technology in specific roles designed to overcome the opponent's advantage. This is not necessarily apparent in the Battle of Teutoburg Forest. This battle

is not very well-documented, with only a few ancient sources surviving, and the battlefield was only recently found. Possibly the Germanic forces did employ specific technology to help against the Roman advantage. A tantalizing clue is found in the fact that most of the recovered Roman remains from the final ambush site bear wounds from swords.<sup>2</sup> The majority of the Germanic forces were armed with spears or clubs, so this might be evidence of better-equipped troops, such as the mutinous auxiliaries, matched against the legionaries in the final action. The niche technology that the Sioux Indians employed is much more obvious. The repeating rifles that the Indians carried, although inferior in range to the cavalry's carbines, had a much greater rate of fire and were more reliable. This proved a decisive edge once the Indian forces maneuvered and isolated Custer's element. The Afghans at the Battle of Maiwand also held one specific technological advantage. Though the majority of their forces had weapons and equipment much inferior to the British, the Afghans actually had better artillery.<sup>3</sup> The Armstrong breech-loaders that the Afghans employed were state-of-the-art at the time, and outclassed any of the artillery that the British possessed at the battle. The use of very specific slices of technology helped to negate the technological advantage enjoyed by the professional armies, and enabled the primitive forces to even the odds.

The third theme that serves to link all of the battles is the importance of cultural influences. The technologically advanced forces often failed to account for the key element of motivation among the primitive forces. In all of these battles cultural elements served to strengthen the resolve of the primitive forces, and even lead them into battles that at the time appeared to be quite irrational decisions. These cultural influences

took two different forms within the conflicts; the societal structure of the primitive forces and the influence of religion.

In the Battle of Teutoburg Forest, the Germanic forces were organized into tribes which were comprised of a warrior society. Male members of the tribes, from the chieftain to the lowest ranking man, achieved rank and honor by performance in battle. When the Roman forces occupied Germanic territory, the Romans reserved the use of force for themselves (not to mention the increased tax burden). This in turn threatened the entire societal structure of the Germanic tribes, and provided an immense motivation to resist, even at long odds. The Sioux society was organized along similar lines. Males competed with each other for military honors, and the entire rank structure of the society was predicated upon warfare and success in battle. By attempting to force these tribes on reservations and changing them from nomads to sedentary farmers, the U.S. was tearing apart the very fabric of Sioux society. Although in the end resistance to the greater technology and numbers of the U.S. proved pointless, the danger posed to Sioux society resulted in violent opposition. In a similar way, Afghan society also coalesced around resistance to a foreign power. Afghan society was tribal, and although it was not a warrior society on the scale of the Sioux, there was still a great emphasis placed on bravery in battle and the power that men could attain by force of arms. The British intrusion stirred up strong resistance among the tribal societies and served to unite them in opposition.

The other cultural component was the effect of religion on the primitive forces. Again, the evidence for the effect of religion is least concerning the Battle of Teutoburg Forest. The use of religion as a motivating factor is not specifically mentioned by any of

the ancient sources. However, it is probable that religion played a part in the resistance shown by the Germanic tribes. When the Romans took over Germania, they brought their own gods, including the cult of the Emperor, with them. Strikingly the Germanic tribes celebrated their victory at Teutoburg Forest by sacrificing Roman soldiers to Germanic gods on altars set up in forest glades. The area where the battle took place became a sacred site for the Germanic people, and the trespass of Germanicus' Roman forces several years after the battle infuriated the Germanic tribes. The role of religion for the Sioux is better documented. Sitting Bull received a vision of the battle to come that he shared with all of the other tribes and bands. This vision of soldiers falling into the camp was interpreted as an omen for victory, and led to the Indians opposing Custer's troopers instead of fleeing from the village as was the norm. The role of the religion for the Afghans was the most prominent of all of the battles. The majority of Ayub Khan's force was composed of the so-called ghazis, religious fanatics who practiced near suicidal tactics with the goal of killing infidels. Religion served as a catalyst for the rebelling Afghan forces, helping to cause a mutiny among the Wali's soldiers and undermining the power of any leader who worked with the infidels. Religion served to inspire the Afghans to victory over the British, even in the face of horrific casualties.

### Significance

Since these three conflicts possessed similar patterns, it is worthwhile to consider whether these patterns are applicable to future battles that have analogous characteristics. This is especially applicable for military leaders within the U.S. Army, which currently dominates technologically every other army in the world. We have seen in three previous battles examples of instances where a technologically superior, professional army fought



a more primitive, tribal force and lost. Simply stated, three themes from these battles are that the technologically superior force does not change tactics, the primitive force adapts and changes their strategy, and cultural influences provide the motivation for seemingly irrational resistance. To avoid a loss under similar conditions, there are preventative measures that leaders in the technologically advanced force can take.

First, concerning the use of similar tactics and the resulting predictability of action, the root cause for this behavior is actually found in the estimation of the enemy. The leaders of the technologically superior force did not feel there was a need to change tactics, and so they maintained their set patterns. To prevent such a situation from developing, leaders must continually *question* their own tactics, and determine if their own course of action presents the best option given the circumstances. A failure to plan thoroughly and adequately because such plans have always worked before is indicative of “Victory Disease,” and so commanders must be cognizant of these symptoms and work to avoid falling prey to complacency.

In these battles the leaders did not change their plans or tactics due to fundamentally incorrect assumptions about the enemy, specifically concerning the enemy’s intentions. Varus did not believe that a large number of tribes intended to revolt in Germania. Even though the enemy had the *capability* of massing large numbers of warriors and striking the Roman legions while in a vulnerable marching configuration, Varus did not plan for this contingency. When the Germanic tribes struck in such an unexpected manner, Varus was unable to react. The same can be said for Custer and the Sioux. Although Custer knew the enemy had the capability of massing warriors, and obviously could mount an aggressive attack, Custer did not consider this to be the

enemy's intention. Therefore Custer divided his forces and placed them in an offensive disposition designed to counter the enemy's perceived intentions of scattering and fleeing. By ignoring the Indians' inherent capabilities, Custer exposed his forces to a counterattack that destroyed his command. Finally, General Burrows and the British held a fatally flawed assumption about the Afghan forces. Burrows believed that the Afghans would not press an attack against superior British firepower. Trusting in the disciplined application of technologically advanced weapons, Burrows ignored the latent capability of the Afghans to subvert such advantages with technology of their own and an ability to sustain heavy casualties.

The key lesson is that these leaders focused on the perceived intentions of the enemy, rather than their capabilities. To avoid such consequences current leaders must plan for enemy capabilities as well. A modern parallel of such a tendency recalls MacArthur's troubles in Korea. By focusing on the perceived intentions of the Chinese forces while ignoring their capabilities, MacArthur left his own forces exposed to a Chinese counter-attack.

The second established pattern in these battles was that the more primitive forces created new innovative strategies that served to negate some of the technological advantage of the opposing forces. Varus' weakness was the inability to fight effectively from a column formation in restricted terrain. Germanic tactics seized on this weakness, and destroyed the better-equipped and better-trained Roman forces. The weakness in Custer's forces was their relatively small numbers compared to the Indian warriors. By changing tactics and defending their village, rather than fleeing, the Indians were able to capitalize on their numerical advantage and the fighting potential of their warriors. Much

the same is true of Burrows in Afghanistan. By deploying a relatively small number of soldiers and trusting in the advantage afforded by more powerful weapons and better-trained soldiers, Burrows exposed his force to an overwhelming attack by the Afghans.

For leaders of a technologically advanced army the key to preventing the success of new enemy strategies is found within the leaders' own forces. By understanding and making a clear assessment of their own weaknesses, commanders of technologically advanced forces can prevent the enemy from successfully employing a new strategy and retain the initiative. Oftentimes, when a primitive force changes strategy to combat the technologically advanced force, this action is enough to give the primitive force the initiative, eventually resulting in the defeat of the professional force.<sup>4</sup> Commanders can avoid this by accurately predicting their own weaknesses, and making plans to mitigate these risks. Had Varus realized the extent to which his legions were vulnerable in a march formation, he could have assigned more forces to reconnaissance and flank protection. If Custer had understood how exposed his forces became to defeat in detail after he divided them, Custer could have kept his troopers together. And finally, if Burrows had known that his Indian regiments were at such a risk of collapse he could have chosen more defensible terrain and not let the Afghans bring concentric artillery fire to bear on his army.

The change in strategy by the primitive forces was often related to a niche technology that helped negate the advantage of the better-equipped opposition. Although the evidence is somewhat ambivalent in the battle at Teutoburg Forest (the battlefield was only recently discovered and the battle itself was not well-documented), the evidence of such technology is very clear at the Battle of the Little Bighorn and the Battle of

Maiwand. The repeating rifles that the Sioux carried and the modern Armstrongs that the Afghans employed served to level the odds, and without doubt contributed greatly to the victory.

The present day commander of the technologically advanced force must be aware of what technology can fall into the hands of an opponent and the effect this development can have on a conflict. Some modern day examples are the widespread proliferation of handheld Global Positioning System (GPS) devices, or the real time intelligence value of video-equipped cell phones. Relatively primitive forces in today's world can use such devices as combat multipliers and negate some of the advantages enjoyed by modern armies.

The final pattern apparent in these battles was the strong impact of cultural influences. In effect these influences served to raise the level of resistance, motivating the primitive forces to take on odds that in many cases seemed irrational. One of the reasons that the Battle of the Little Bighorn still has such resonance today is that the odds were considered so overwhelming for a force of nomadic tribesmen to massacre the command of a famous Civil War general. Yet it was cultural beliefs and values that drove the primitive forces to fight despite these odds.

The influence of culture took two different forms in these battles; pressure generated by stress on societal structures, and the role of religion. Modern commanders can not necessarily overcome these cultural influences, at least not in a short span of time, but they must be aware of them. Current U.S. Army doctrine has cultural understanding as a part of Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB), but the idea of cultural awareness is gaining traction, especially in a counterinsurgency. By

understanding the cultural influences that are at work, commanders of technologically advanced forces can help predict the level of resistance they might expect in a particular conflict. At the very least such knowledge could help to avoid complete intelligence failure, such as happened to Varus in Germania. A more advanced use of such cultural knowledge could be to actively manipulate the environment, and use cultural influences to either diminish support of opposing forces or further their own mission. Commanders ignore cultural knowledge, however, at their own peril.

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Karcher, *Understanding the "Victory Disease," From the Little Bighorn to Mogadishu and Beyond* (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: USA CGSC), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Murdoch, *Rome's Greatest Defeat: Massacre in the Teutoburg Forest*, 113.

<sup>3</sup> Ali A.Jalali, and Lester W. Grau. "Expeditionary Forces: Superior Technology Defeated - The Battle of Maiwand," 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Karcher, *Understanding the "Victory Disease," From the Little Bighorn to Mogadishu and Beyond*, 43.

## GLOSSARY

Baritus. Germanic tribal war cry as described by Tacitus, usually employed at the beginning of a battle as a psychological tactic.

Comitatus. A group of warriors in ancient Germanic society which was composed of fighting men from the nobility and the free farmer class. This group protected the leader, the chief, and formed the military unit for the tribe. The comitatus, however, served a public role and was not private in the sense of belonging to a leader.

Counting Coup. A Plains Indian custom where a warrior could win prestige by performing an act of bravery against an armed opponent. Some tribes had elaborate systems for determining the prestige given, depending on whether the opponent was alive or dead and other factors.

Cursus Honorum. A sequential order of public offices held by aspiring members of Roman aristocracy.

Framea. A short stabbing spear carried by Germanic tribesman during the Early Iron Age.

Ghazi. In Afghanistan a religious zealot who has devoted himself to fighting opponents of Islam.

Gladius. The primary weapon of a Roman legionary soldier which was a short sword mostly used for thrusting attacks.

Jezail. A traditional Afghan musket of limited range used by local tribesmen.

Pilum. A heavy javelin carried by Roman legionary soldiers which was intended to be thrown just prior to closing with an enemy formation.

Roundshot. A solid spherical projectile without an explosive charge that is fired from cannon.

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