

CUSTER BATTLEFIELD

NATIONAL MONUMENT • MONTANA





Custer Battlefield National Monument

Scene of one of the last important Indian resistances to the westward march of the white man's civilization, in which Lt. Col. George A. Custer and his immediate command met defeat and death.

On two hot June days in 1876, the valley of the Little Bighorn River in Montana was the scene of bitter warfare between white man and Indian. Here, 261 regular soldiers and attached personnel of the United States Army lost their lives in one of the most important battles of the northern Indian Wars.

For the troopers of the 7th U.S. Cavalry Regiment who fought here, the Battle of the Little Bighorn was another of the fierce struggles in the Indian Wars which finally resulted in conquest of the Great Plains. For the Sioux and Cheyenne Indians, it was a great victory, but their last, in their stubborn defense of an independent, nomadic way of life.

During the battle, Lt. Col. George A. Custer and every member of his immediate command of about 225 men were killed. They were 5 miles north of the rest of the regiment when they made their stand against the Indians and not one man survived to tell the story of this part of the battle. Ever since this somber news first shocked the Nation more than 80 years ago, mystery has surrounded "Custer's Last Stand."

This National Monument memorializes the sacrifices and heroism of the United States Army in the conquest and pacification of the western frontier. Appropriately, remains of many soldiers who were killed in other battles

of the Indian Wars have been reinterred in the National Cemetery at this monument.

Causes of the Campaign Against the Sioux in 1876

When the Civil War ended in 1865, the white man's great westward emigration resumed with vigor. Collisions with the Indians inevitably arose. The frontiersmen pushed into the Indians' domain with scant regard for the sanctity of hunting grounds or the fine print in treaty agreements. The Indians, shoved farther and farther back by this relentless tide, resisted the invaders.

To bring an end to the Indian conflict, the Government, in 1868 at Fort Laramie, Wyo., induced about one-half of the hostile Sioux and Cheyenne to sign a treaty. By its terms, they were given the western half of present South Dakota for a permanent reservation, with hunting rights extending to the Big Horn Mountains of Wyoming.

Less than 6 years later, in 1874, Colonel Custer led the 7th U.S. Cavalry Regiment on an official reconnaissance into the Black Hills, heart of the Indian reservation. Prospectors who accompanied the expedition discovered gold. When the news spread, hordes of gold seekers invaded the region.



*Maj. Gen. George A. Custer in 1865.
Courtesy, Signal Corps, U.S. Army.*

The Indians saw that their treaty guarantees meant nothing to these men. They watched the sincere but unsuccessful efforts of the Government to halt the stream of miners coming into the Indian lands. They saw that even when the Army evicted hundreds of miners, thousands more came to fill their places. Finally, convinced that the peace agreed to in 1868 had been broken, the Indians began to leave their reservations and to listen to those among their chiefs who counseled renewed resistance to the white man.

The Indians became more and more hostile. In anticipation of an outbreak, the Indian Commissioner, in December 1875, issued an ultimatum to the Indians ordering them to return to their respective reservations before January 31, 1876. Weather conditions prevented the peaceful Indians from complying with the order; the more hostile groups made no attempt to obey it. The Secretary of the Interior, who administered Indian affairs, then called upon the War Department to enforce the order.

A Three-pronged Campaign

The main body of hostile Indians concentrated in southeastern Montana Territory, south of the Yellowstone River. Here were their hunting grounds. Here, too, as a rallying point for resistance, was the dynamic Sioux leader, Sitting Bull.

Army plans called for three converging columns—from south, west, and east—to close in upon the Indians and force them to return to their reservations. The first contact was a battle in March, fought by part of Brig. Gen. George Crook's column approaching from the south. Later, on June 17, Crook was attacked by a large Sioux-Cheyenne force about 25 miles southeast of Custer Battlefield. After a hard-fought battle, Crook withdrew and played no part in the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

Meanwhile, the columns from west and east marched to their meeting place at a point on the Yellowstone River about 70 miles northeast of Custer Battlefield. Col. John Gibbon's column had marched from Fort Shaw, Montana Territory. Brig. Gen. Alfred H. Terry, who commanded the entire expedition, had led the other column from Fort Abraham Lincoln, near Bismarck, Dakota Territory. The 7th Cavalry made up the largest contingent of this latter column.

On June 21, Terry outlined his plan of attack. The plan was made without knowledge of Crook's fight just 4 days previously. Custer was to proceed southwestward and place his force south of the Indian concentration, which was supposed to be in the valley of the Little Bighorn River. Gibbon, with Terry accompanying, was to march up the Yellowstone River, then up the Bighorn and Little Bighorn Rivers, placing his force across the Indians' northern line of retreat. Terry's objective was to catch the Indians between the two forces, thus compelling them to make a stand.

The Battle Begins

Custer began his march to the south on June 22. At dawn of the 25th, his column was a few miles east of the divide that separates

the valleys of the Rosebud and Little Bighorn. From a high point on the divide, Custer's scouts spotted signs of the Sioux-Cheyenne encampment about 15 miles away in the valley of the Little Bighorn. At almost the same time, a few Indians, erroneously presumed to be scouts from the Indian encampment, were discovered near the cavalry column.

Fearing that the Indians in the valley would be warned and would escape if he did not act immediately, Custer ordered his troops forward. The divide was crossed about noon. During a short halt, Custer reorganized the regiment into 3 battalions. He retained 5 companies under his immediate command; 3 companies each were assigned to Maj. Marcus A. Reno and Capt. Frederick W. Benteen; and 1 company was assigned to guard the slow-moving pack train.

Immediately, Benteen was ordered to scout the bluffs to the left of the main force. As soon as Benteen had left, the Custer and Reno battalions took leave of the pack train and headed down what is now Reno Creek toward the Little Bighorn River and the supposed

Maj. Marcus A. Reno, Seventh United States Cavalry. Photo by D. F. Barry.



location of the Indian encampment.

About 2 p.m. as they neared the river, they sighted a band of Sioux warriors a short distance ahead. Custer ordered Reno to pursue them.

Urging his command forward at a sharp trot, Reno took after the fleeing Indians. He pursued them to the Little Bighorn, crossed the river, and continued down the valley. As he neared the present site of Garryowen Post Office, the Indian village came into view. From its southern fringe, Sioux warriors in heavy force rode out to intercept him.

After Reno's battalion left the main column, Custer continued on north along the east side of the river.

Reno's Fight in the Valley

When the Indians rushed out to fight him, Reno formed his men into line. Forward they rode, appalled by the numbers of Sioux ahead. Reno believed that his force could not charge through the horde in front of him and that his best chance was to dismount his men and fight on foot. The order to dis-

Capt. Frederick W. Benteen, Seventh United States Cavalry. Photo by D. F. Barry.



Looking across the Little Bighorn to the scene of Reno's action in the valley from a restored trench at the Reno-Benteen defense site on the bluff.

mount was given and a line of battle was quickly formed while the horses were led to the timber near the river. Outflanked by warriors, the troopers themselves soon withdrew into the timber.

Indians infiltrated this wooded area and eventually surrounded the battalion. To save his men from certain destruction, Reno led them in a wild retreat across the river and up onto the bluffs on the east side. Sioux warriors attacked the troopers unmercifully during the retreat, and casualties were high.

It was about 4 p.m. when Reno's battalion finally reached the bluffs. Routed, exhausted, and nearly out of ammunition, they might have been annihilated if the main body of Sioux had not now hurried northward after Custer's column. A few moments later, Benteen, back from his scout to the left, joined the shaken Reno.

The Reno-Benteen Siege

The combined command now made ready for action. Sounds of heavy gunfire to the north indicated that Custer was engaged. As soon as the pack animals came up, ammuni-

tion was distributed. By about 5 p.m., laboriously carrying their wounded, Reno's column began moving northward to join Custer.

When they reached a high bluff now called Weir Point, about a mile from their starting place, they observed many mounted Indians milling around in the distance, about 4 miles ahead (on what is now called the Custer Battlefield). But nothing could be seen of Custer or his men.

The mass of Indians sighted the troopers on Weir Point and began to gallop toward them. Soon the soldiers were on the defensive, fighting off the Indians. Judging that their original position on the bluffs was the best one for defense, Reno and Benteen made an orderly withdrawal to it.

Fierce fighting continued, finally broken off by the Indians when darkness came. As the tired men rested fitfully, they wondered about Custer. They assumed that he either was holed up like themselves or had been forced northward toward the Terry-Gibbon column. No one dreamed that he and all his men lay dead on their battlefield to the north.

At dawn on the 26th, the Indians renewed

The National Park System, of which this area is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the scenic, scientific, and historic heritage of the United States for the benefit and inspiration of its people.

their attack against the harried band on the hill. Wounded men suffered terribly from the first in the dusty heat and many heroic deeds were performed that day—some of them by a group of volunteers who left the hill entrenchment to go to the river and get water for the wounded men.

By late afternoon the Indians began to withdraw. A few of them stayed behind, however, to keep the besieged soldiers under fire until 6 p.m. In the valley below, the great Indian encampment filed off toward the Big Horn Mountains.

Terry and Gibbon Arrive—The Custer Fight Reconstructed

Through the night of June 26–27, Reno's command remained on the bluffs. On the morning of the 27th, scouts of the Terry-Gibbon column, which had approached from the north, discovered the dead of Custer's command on the ridge where they fell east of the river. Subsequently, contact was made with Reno's command. It was then that the Reno-Benteen group first learned of Custer's fate.

As soon as the scene of Custer's stand was discovered, attempts to reconstruct his battle plan and actions began; and such is the lure of the battle's mystery that reconstructions are still attempted today. Definitely known are these facts: (1) About 3 p.m. Custer and his immediate command were on the east side of the Little Bighorn, headed in a northerly direction; (2) some miles farther on they moved onto the ridge now called Custer Hill, dismounted, fought, and were destroyed by possibly 2,500 to 4,000 Indian warriors; (3) when Reno's command reached Weir Point between 5 and 6 p.m., observers could not detect Custer's command, although they did see a large mass of mounted warriors about 4 miles northward.

Indian accounts reveal some features of the Custer fight. Early in the struggle, war chief Gall of the Uncpapa Sioux led a mounted charge which apparently overwhelmed the southern part of the battleline. However, most of the fighting was done on foot.

Under war chiefs Lame White Man, Crazy Horse, and Two Moon, the Indians covered their movements by using the many ravines and ridges that mark the battlefield topography. A favorite tactic was to creep up close, then, on the principle of mortar fire, to arch arrows into the groups of soldiers. Thus the Indians wrought havoc without exposing themselves to retaliation. When defenses were weakened, they could then finish the soldiers off in final, deadly rushes.

Beyond these bare facts, little is certain. Custer's actions suggest what his battle plan might have been. Perhaps he intended to ride quickly to the opposite end of the village and deliver a devastating cavalry charge through it from the north, thus catching the village between his and Reno's attacks. Whatever his plan was, it died with him.

In the Battle of the Little Bighorn, the 7th U.S. Cavalry lost the 5 companies that were under Custer. The other 7 companies of the regiment, under Reno and Benteen, suffered additional casualties of 47 dead and 52 wounded. Altogether, the dead numbered 261 officers, men, civilians, and Indian scouts. Except for Custer and his officers, those killed in the battle are buried around the base of the granite memorial on the Custer Battlefield. Most of the officers' bodies were exhumed and sent elsewhere a year after the battle. Custer's remains are interred at West Point.

Indian losses are not known. Probably less than 100 were killed.

The Monument

Custer Battlefield was made a National Cemetery by order of the Secretary of War in 1879. It was transferred from the War Department to the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, in 1940. The name was changed to Custer Battlefield National Monument in 1946. The 1.2 square miles of the monument contain the National Cemetery, the ridge where Custer and his men made their stand against the Indians, and, in a separate section upstream, the site of the Reno-Benteen defense perimeter.



View from Custer Hill: Markers in foreground show where Custer's men fell; visitor center and National Cemetery appear in distance.

How To Reach the Monument

Custer Battlefield is in southeastern Montana, about 15 miles south of the town of Hardin. U.S. 87 passes just a mile west of the monument. State Route 8 connects the monument with U.S. 12 at Broadus, Mont.

About Your Visit

You can visit the battlefield from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., Memorial Day through Labor Day; at other times of the year, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Just inside the monument entrance is the visitor center, open at the same times indicated above, except from 12 noon to 1 p.m. during the off-season. Here maps, photographs, and dioramas tell the story of the battle. We suggest that you come to the visitor center before you begin your tour of the battlefield.

During the summer, National Park Service ranger-historians conduct tours and give historical talks about the area.

You can best reconstruct this historic battle by driving first to the Reno-Benteen defense site (about 5 miles from the monument entrance) where foot trails lead to restored rifle

pits and trenches on the original defense lines. Then, stopping along the route on your return, you can read the interpretive signs and markers located at the other important battlesites.

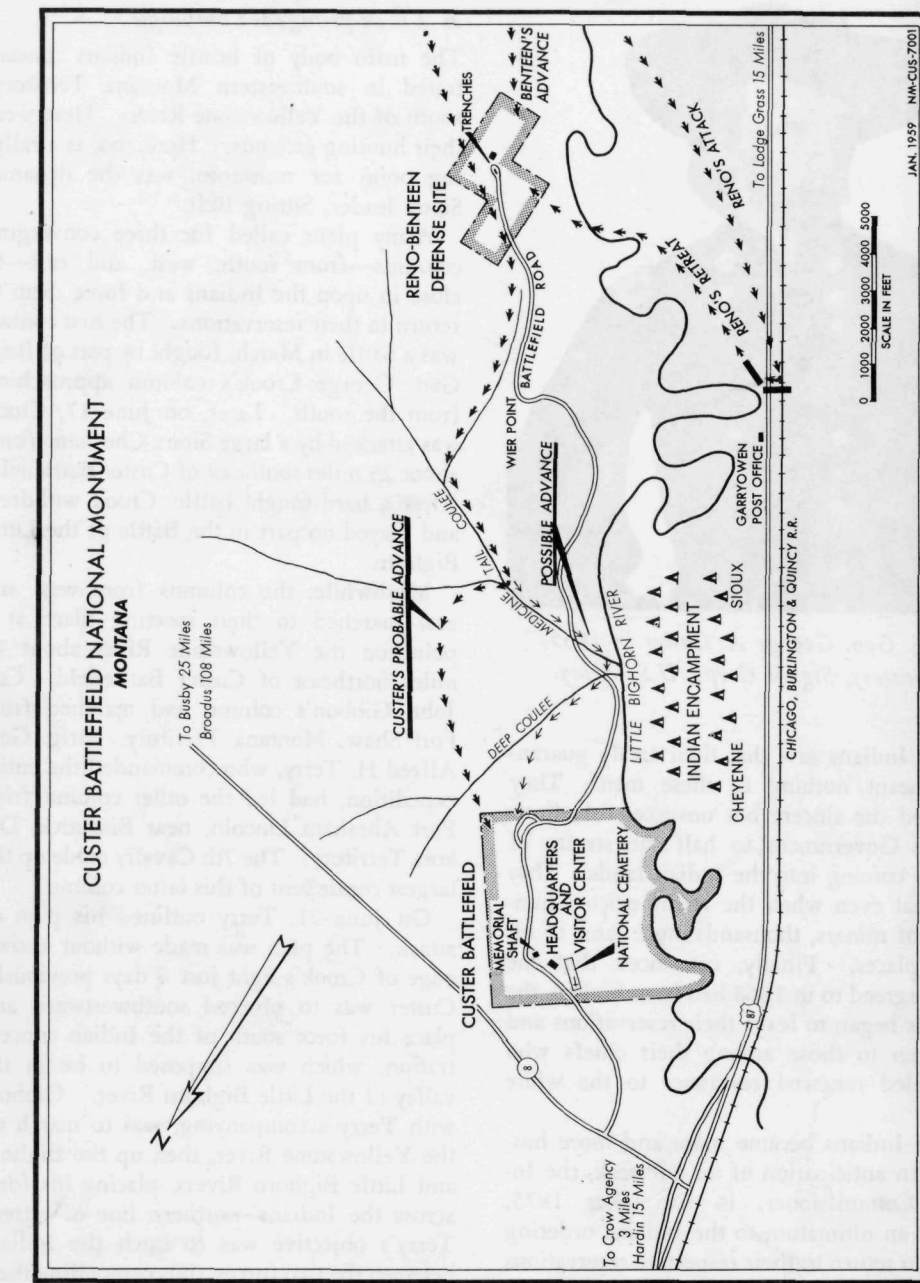
No camping or picnicking facilities are available at the monument. There is a motel near the monument entrance and additional accommodations are at Hardin and Lodge Grass.

Administration

Custer Battlefield National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Crow Agency, Mont., is in immediate charge.

Mission 66

Mission 66 is a program designed to be completed by 1966 which will assure the maximum protection of the scenic, scientific, wilderness, and historic resources of the National Park System in such ways and by such means as will make them available for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.



1959

United States Department of the Interior

FRED A. SEATON, Secretary

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, CONRAD L. WIRTH, Director



U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1959-O-496533

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