

Custer Battlefield

NATIONAL MONUMENT • MONTANA

Custer Battlefield National Monument, in southeastern Montana, memorializes one of the last armed efforts of the Northern Plains Indians to preserve their ancestral way of life. Here on June 25-26, 1876, in the valley of the Little Bighorn River, over 260 soldiers and attached personnel of the U.S. Army met defeat and death at the hands of several thousand Sioux and Cheyenne warriors. Among the dead were Lt. Col. George A. Custer and every member of his immediate command of about 225 men. Although the Indians won this battle, they lost the war against the white man who finally ended their independent, nomadic ways.

The conflict between the white man and Indian had begun with the arrival of the first settlers from Europe and continued relentlessly for three centuries—sometimes around the campfire, sometimes at treaty grounds, but more often on the battlefield. Custer Battlefield, with its scattered white marble markers, is a reminder of that long struggle for possession of the American continent.

CAUSES OF THE WAR

The end of the Civil War saw a vigorous resumption of the westward movement. With it came the inevitable encroachment on Indian domain with little regard for the sanctity of hunting grounds or treaty agreements. The Indians resisted stoutly. To end the conflict, the U.S. Government in 1868, at Fort Laramie, Wyo., signed a treaty with the Sioux, Cheyenne, and other tribes of the Great Plains, designating a large area in western Dakota and part of eastern Wyoming as a permanent Indian reservation. The Government promised "to protect . . . [them] against the commission of all depredations by people of the United States."

In 1874, gold was discovered in the Black Hills, the heart of the Indian reservation. News of the strike spread quickly and soon thousands of eager gold seekers swarmed into the region in violation of the Fort Laramie treaty. The Army tried to keep them out, but to no avail. The Indians became more defiant over this disregard of the 1868 peace agreement, which resulted in an exodus of Sioux and Cheyenne from the reservation. In December 1875, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs ordered them to return before January 31, 1876, or thereafter be regarded as hostiles "and treated accordingly by the military force." When the Indians did not comply, the Army was called in to enforce the order.

THE CAMPAIGN OF 1876

The Army's campaign against the Sioux and Cheyenne called for three separate expeditions—Gen. George Crook's force from Fort Fetterman in Wyoming, Col. John Gibbon's command from Fort Ellis in Montana, and Gen. Alfred H. Terry's troops from Fort Abraham Lincoln in Dakota Territory. These columns were to converge on the main body of the Indians concentrated in southeastern Montana under the leadership of Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and other famous war chiefs.

Lt. Col. George A. Custer and his Indian scouts on the Yellowstone Expedition, 1873.



Crook clashed with the Indians in March 1876 and again in June, the Indians moving west toward the Little Bighorn. In mid-June Terry and Gibbon met at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Rosebud Rivers. Hoping to find the Indians in the Little Bighorn Valley, Terry ordered Custer and the 7th Cavalry up the Rosebud to approach the Little Bighorn from the south. Terry himself would accompany Gibbon's force back up the Yellowstone and Bighorn to approach from the north.

BATTLE OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN

The 7th Cavalry, numbering about 700 men, located the Indian camp on June 25. Custer, probably underestimating the fighting power of the Indian forces, believed it safe to divide his regiment into three battalions, and by immediate attack, to prevent the Indians from slipping away. One battalion, of three companies, under Capt. Frederick W. Benteen, was sent to scout the bluffs to the south. At the same time, a battalion of three companies under Maj. Marcus A. Reno and one of five companies under Custer marched along opposite banks of a small creek to attack the Indian village in the valley of the Little Bighorn.

When near the Little Bighorn, Custer turned north toward the lower end of the Indian camp. Reno, with orders from Custer to cross the river and attack, advanced down the Little Bighorn Valley and struck the upper end of the camp. Outflanked by the defending warriors, he retreated in disorder to the river and took up defensive positions on the bluffs beyond. Here he was soon joined by Benteen, who had hurried forward under written orders from Custer to "Come on; Big village, be quick, bring packs."

Gunfire from the north caused men to scout in that direction seeking the whereabouts of Custer and

his command. An advance company under Capt. Thomas B. Weir marched about 1 mile downstream to a high hill, from which the Custer battlefield was visible. By this time, however, the firing had stopped. When the rest of the command arrived on the hill it was attacked by a large force of Indians, and Reno ordered a withdrawal to the original position on the bluffs overlooking the Little Bighorn. Here these seven companies entrenched and held their defenses throughout that day and most of the next, returning the Indian fire and successfully discouraging attempts to storm their position. The siege ended when all the Indians broke their great encampment and withdrew upon the approach of the columns under General Terry and Colonel Gibbon.

In the meantime, Custer had ridden into history and legend. His movements after separating from Reno's battalion are shrouded in mystery. All that is definitely known is that his command was surrounded and destroyed by the Indians.

In the battle, the 7th Cavalry lost the five companies (C, E, F, I, and L) that were under Custer. The other six companies of the regiment, under Reno and Benteen, suffered additional casualties of 47 dead and 52 wounded. Except for Custer and his officers, those killed in the battle are buried around the base of the granite memorial on the battlefield. Most of the officers' bodies were exhumed and sent elsewhere a year after the battle. Custer's remains are buried at West Point.

Accurate figures of the Indian losses are not known. They removed most of their dead from the battlefield when the large village broke up. The tribes and families scattered, some going south, some north. Most of them returned to the reservations and surrendered in the next few years.

©GPO 1974-595-455/11 REPRINT 1974

THE MONUMENT

Custer Battlefield was designated a national cemetery in 1879, and renamed a national monument in 1946. The monument's 1.2 square miles include that part of the battlefield where Custer and his men died and—in a separate section upstream—the site of the Reno-Benteen defense perimeter.

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, MT 59022, is in immediate charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

National Park Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

Custer Battlefield is in the heart of the Crow Indian Reservation of southeastern Montana. U.S. 87 (Int. 90) passes 1 mile to the west, and U.S. 212 connects the monument with the Black Hills and Yellowstone National Park. Crow Agency is 2 miles to the north, and Hardin, 15. The nearest large cities are Billings, Mont., 65 miles northwest, and Sheridan, Wyo., 70 miles south.

Following are the principal features of interest included in the monument:

Visitor center. You should stop first at the visitor center, on the right side of the entrance road about one-quarter mile from the main entrance. Here museum exhibits, literature, and National Park Service personnel tell the story

of the battle and how best to see the battlefield.

National Cemetery. A short distance west of the visitor center and accessible by foot is Custer Battlefield National Cemetery. Soldiers killed in several notable Indian engagements of the Northern Plains are buried here with veterans of more recent times.

Custer Hill. The road continues beyond the visitor center to Custer Hill, dominated by the monument erected over the mass grave of the soldiers killed in the battle. From here you can get an excellent view of most of the battlefield as well as the valley in which the Indian village was located. On the west side of the hill just below the monument is a cluster of 52 markers showing as nearly as possible where the remnant of Custer's battalion gathered for the "last stand." Custer, his brothers, Tom and Boston, and his nephew, "Autie" Reed, were all found in this group. West of the monument, the markers

indicating where C and E Companies were overwhelmed can be seen on a knoll between the hill and the river.

Battle Ridge. The road continues to the south for about one-half mile along the crest of the ridge. Identified by interpretive signs are groups of markers denoting where the men of Companies F, I, and L fell in the battle. At the end of the ridge a spur road loops around Calhoun Hill, a flank of the L Company position.

Road to Reno-Benteen Battlefield. Those wishing to visit the site of Reno's siege may proceed on a 4-mile road leading across Crow Indian Reservation land to the detached section that contains the battlefield. Visitors must return by the same route. After leaving Custer Battlefield, this road drops close to the Little Bighorn near the mouth of Medicine Tail and Deep Coulees. Here, opposite the center of the Indian village, the Indians crossed the river to make the first

attack on Custer's battalion. About 2 miles farther, the road cuts through Weir Point, the high hill where Captain Weir halted in the attempt to break through to aid Custer on the afternoon of June 25, 1876.

Reno-Benteen Battlefield. The road terminates at the 7th Cavalry Memorial, 1½ miles south of Weir Point. This granite shaft stands on the north edge of Reno's position. Immediately south of it is the depression in which the hospital was located, and beyond the hospital site is the ridge held by Captain Benteen during the battle. Visitors who wish to view the battlefield closely may follow the Entrenchment Trail (a trail guide may be obtained at a self-service box at the Reno-Benteen Battlefield). From Reno Hill is a fine view of the valley from which Reno retreated on the afternoon of June 25.

There are no camping or picnicking facilities at the monument.

