

Custer Battlefield

National Monument
Montana

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Eric von Schmidt's painting of the Battle of the Little Bighorn (above) is considered by Custer

historians to be the most accurate portrayal on canvas of the battle and topography. Based on

years of historical research, Schmidt's 13-foot painting is also the first to show the battle

from the vantage point of the soldiers atop Custer Hill.

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Sioux Chief Sitting Bull, an architect of Custer's defeat

A Clash of Cultures

Custer Battlefield National Monument memorializes one of the last armed efforts of the Northern Plains Indians to preserve their ancestral way of life. Here in the valley of the Little Bighorn River on two hot June days in 1876, more than 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 Armstrong Custer and every member of his immediate command. Although the Indians won the battle, they subsequently lost the war against the white man's efforts to end their independent, nomadic way of life.

The Battle of the Little Bighorn was but the latest encounter in a centuries-long conflict that began with the arrival of the first Europeans in North America. That conflict between Indian and white cultures had continued relentlessly, sometimes around the campfire, sometimes at treaty grounds, but more often on the battlefield. It reached its peak in the decade following the Civil War, when settlers resumed

their vigorous westward movement. These western emigrants, possessing little or no understanding of the Indian way of life, showed slight regard for the sanctity of hunting grounds or the terms of former treaties. The Indians' resistance to these encroachments on their domain only served to intensify hostilities.

In 1868, believing it "cheaper to feed than to fight the Indians," representatives of the U.S. Government signed a treaty at Fort Laramie, Wyo., with the Sioux, Cheyenne, and other tribes of the Great Plains, by which a large area in eastern Wyoming was designated a permanent Indian reservation. The government promised to protect the Indians "against the commission of all depredations by people of the United States."

Peace, however, was not to last. In 1874 gold was discovered in the Black Hills, the heart of the new Indian reservation. News of the strike spread quickly, and soon thousands of eager gold seekers swarmed into the region in violation

Maj. Marcus A. Reno was Custer's second in command. His handling of the retreat from the valley during the Little Bighorn fight was severely criticized. An 1879 court of inquiry exonerated him from any direct responsibility for the defeat, but the stigma of the controversy haunted him for the rest of his life.



of the Fort Laramie treaty. The army tried to keep them out, but to no avail. Efforts to buy the Black Hills from the Indians, and thus avoid another confrontation, also proved unsuccessful. In growing defiance, the Sioux and Cheyenne left the reservation and resumed raids on settlements and travelers along the fringes of Indian domain. In December 1875, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs ordered the tribes to return before January 31, 1876, or be treated as hostiles "by the military force." When the Indians did not comply, the army was called in to enforce the order.

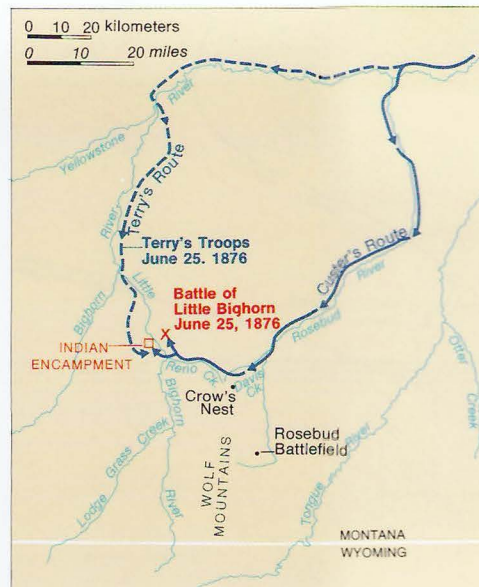


Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer, 7th Cavalry Commander

The Campaign of 1876

The army's campaign against the Sioux and Cheyenne called for three separate expeditions—one under Gen. George Crook from Fort Fetterman in Wyoming Territory, another under Col. John Gibbon from Fort Ellis in Montana Territory, and the third under Gen. Alfred H. Terry 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 war chiefs.

Crook's troopers were knocked out of the campaign in mid-June when they clashed with a large Sioux-Cheyenne force along the Rosebud River and were forced to withdraw. The Indians, full of confidence at having thrown back one of the army's columns, moved west toward the Little Bighorn River. Meanwhile, Terry and Gibbon met on the Yellowstone River near the mouth of the Rosebud. 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 Rivers to approach from the north.

The 7th Cavalry, numbering about 600 men, located the Indian camp at dawn on June 25. Custer, probably underestimating the size and fighting power of the Sioux and Cheyenne forces, divided his regiment into three battalions. He retained five companies under his immediate command and assigned three companies each to Maj. Marcus A. Reno and Capt. Frederick W. Benteen. A twelfth was assigned to guard the slow-moving pack train.

Benteen was ordered to scout the bluffs to the south, while Custer and Reno headed toward the Indian village in the valley of the Little Bighorn. When near the river, Custer turned north toward the lower end of the encampment.

Reno, ordered to cross the river and attack, advanced down the valley to strike the upper end of the camp. As he neared the present site of Garryowen Post Office, a large force of Sioux warriors rode out from the southern edge of the Indian village to intercept him. Forming his men into a line of battle, Reno attempted to make a stand, but there were just too many Indians. Outflanked, he was soon forced to retreat in disorder to the river and take up defensive positions on the bluffs beyond. Here he was joined by Benteen, who had hurried forward under written orders from Custer to "Come on; Big village, be quick, bring packs."

No one knew precisely where Custer and his command had gone, but heavy gunfire to the north indicated that he too had come under attack. As soon as ammunition could be distributed, Reno and Benteen put their troops in motion northward. An advance company under Capt. Thomas B. Weir marched about a

mile downstream to a high hill (afterwards named Weir Point), from which the area now known as the Custer battlefield was visible. By now the firing had stopped and nothing could be seen of Custer and his men. When the rest of the soldiers arrived on the hill, they were 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 Indians' fire and successfully discouraging attempts to storm their position. The siege ended when the Indians withdrew upon the approach of the columns under Terry and Gibbon.

Meantime, Custer had ridden into history and legend. His precise movements after separating from Reno have never been determined, but vivid accounts of the battle by Indians who participated in it tell how his command was

surrounded and destroyed in fierce fighting. Northern Cheyenne Chief Two Moon recalled that "the shooting was quick, quick. Pop-pop-pop very fast. Some of the soldiers were down on their knees, some standing. . . . The smoke was like a great cloud, and everywhere the Sioux went the dust rose like smoke. We circled all around him—swirling like water around a stone. We shoot, we ride fast, we shoot again. Soldiers drop, and horses fall on them."

In the battle, the 7th Cavalry lost the five companies (C, E, F, I, and L) under Custer, about 225 men. Of the other companies of the regiment, under Reno and Benteen, 47 men were killed and 52 wounded. The Indians lost no more than 100 killed. They removed most of their dead from the battlefield when the large village broke up. The tribes and families scattered, some going north, some going south. Most of them returned to the reservations and surrendered in the next few years.

Custer Battlefield

ABOUT YOUR VISIT
Custer Battlefield National Monument lies within the Crow Indian Reservation in southeastern Montana. I-90 (U.S. 87) passes 1.6 kilometers (1 mile) to the west; U.S. 212 connects the Monument with the Black Hills and Yellowstone National

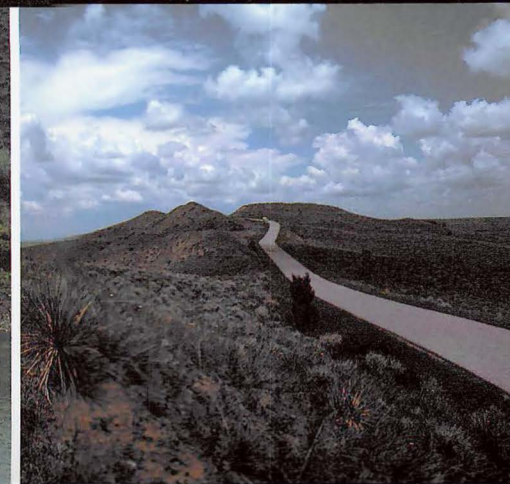
al Park. The Crow Agency is 3.2 kilometers (2 miles) north, and Hardin, Mont., is 29 kilometers (18 miles) north. The nearest cities are Billings, Mont., 105 kilometers (65 miles) northwest, and Sheridan, Wyo., 113 kilometers (70 miles) south.

There are no camping or picnicking facilities at the Monument. Federal law prohibits the removal or disturbance of any marker, artifact, relic, or historic feature. Metal detecting on the Monument land or adjacent Indian land is prohibited.

The Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is P.O. Box 39, Crow Agency, MT 59022, is in immediate charge.



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With its ravines, gulches, and ridges largely unchanged since 1876, Custer battlefield is a place "where the ghosts still walk in broad daylight."

Touring the Battlefield

The Battle of the Little Bighorn has fascinated people around the world for more than a century. For most, it has come to illustrate a part of what Americans know as their western heritage. Heroism and tragedy, brashness and humiliation, victory and defeat—these are things people come here to ponder.

The battlefield tour begins at the Reno-Bentzen site, 7 kilometers (4.5 miles) from the park visitor center. (Wayside exhibits are best understood if viewed in sequence on the return trip.) We suggest you stop at the visitor center before starting your tour. Park rangers are on duty to answer questions and help you plan your day. After the tour, a second stop at the visitor center,

which has museum displays and literature about the battle, will make your visit complete.

The following brief descriptions of the tour stops are keyed by number to the map below.

1 Reno-Bentzen Battlefield Major Reno, leading three companies of Custer's divided command, met the first attack of Indian warriors on the afternoon of June 25th. Forced to retreat, his men took positions on these bluffs and were soon joined by Captain Bentzen's men. Until the Indians left the next day, Reno and Bentzen were held to defensive action in the vicinity of the 7th Cavalry Memorial. Interpretive markers show Indian and cavalry movements.

2 Weir Point Hoping to locate Custer, Captain Weir moved forward to this high hill. By the time he reached here, however, the firing had stopped. Another Indian attack forced Weir off the hill.

3 Calhoun Ridge Interpretive signs along the crest of this ridge identify groups of markers where the men of Company L fell in the battle. Marble markers between Calhoun Ridge and Custer Hill indicate where the men of Companies F and I perished.

4 Custer Hill From here you can see most of the battlefield and the valley in which the Indian village was located. On the west side of the hill

just below the monument, a cluster of 52 markers shows 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. The markers indicating where C and E Companies were overwhelmed can be seen west of the monument on a knoll between the hill and the river.

The first graves of Custer and his men were dug in great haste over the entire battlefield in the places where the soldiers had fallen. Then, in 1881, as many graves as could be found were reopened and the bodies reinterred in a common grave around the base of the memorial

shaft bearing the names of all the dead. The bodies of 11 officers and two civilians already had been exhumed for reburial elsewhere at the request of relatives. Custer's remains were reburied at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, N.Y., on October 10, 1877.

5 National Cemetery Within walking distance of the visitor center is Custer Battlefield National Cemetery, a relatively small burial ground contained within the boundaries of the larger battlefield. Of those killed in the battle, only a few unidentified remains and the body of Lt. John C. Crittenden are in the cemetery. Soldiers killed in other Indian engagements on the Northern Plains are also buried here,

along with servicemen of World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. Originally the battlefield was maintained as a national cemetery under the jurisdiction of the War Department. The brown stone lodge, built in 1894, served for many years as quarters for the superintendents, who were known to the Indians as the "Ghost Herders."

For Safety's Sake Remember, you are in rattlesnake country. Please stay on the pathways while walking the battlefield. Rangers will offer prompt assistance in case of accidents, but you can prevent them from happening by being watchful and cautious.

