

Little Bighorn Battlefield

Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument
Montana

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Official Map and Guide



Eric von Schmidt's painting of the Battle of the Little Bighorn (above) entitled "HERE FELL CUSTER,"

is considered by Custer historians to be the most accurate portrayal on canvas of the battle and

topography. Based on many years of historical research, von Schmidt's 13-foot painting is also

the first to show the battle from the vantage point of the soldiers atop Custer Hill.

©Eric von Schmidt



Sitting Bull, venerated Lakota leader

A Clash of Cultures

Little Bighorn 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 Lakota 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 contact 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 those 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 Lakota, 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 viola-

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.



tion 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 Lakota 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.

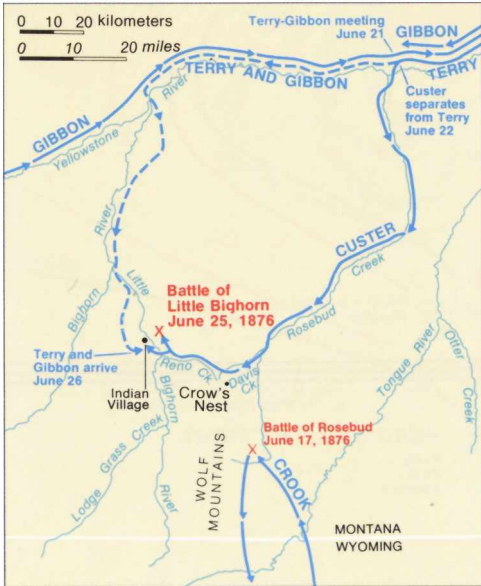


Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer, 7th Cavalry Commander

The Campaign of 1876

The army's campaign against the Lakota 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 Lakota-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 Lakota 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 Lakota 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 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 210 men. Of the other companies of the regiment, under Reno and Benteen, 53 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.

Touring the Battlefield



Reno-Benteen Battlefield



Weir Point



Calhoun Hill



Custer Hill



National Cemetery

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

The battlefield tour begins at the Reno-Benteen site, 4.5 miles from the park visitor center. The outdoor exhibit panels 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 your questions and to help you plan your day. Museum exhibits and literature here will also help you to understand these historical events.

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

1 Reno-Benteen Battlefield Major Reno, leading three companies of Custer's divided com-

mand, attacked the Indian village lying in the valley on the afternoon of June 25, 1876. Forced to retreat, his battered battalion took position on these bluffs, where it was soon joined by Captain Benteen's men. Until the Indians left the next day, Reno and Benteen were surrounded in this defensive position. Interpretive markers show Indian and cavalry movements.

2 Custer's Lookout From the ridge on your right (east), Custer watched Reno's attack under way in the valley. He also saw, for the first time, a portion of the enormous Indian village in the valley—perhaps the largest gathering of Plains Indians ever seen. There were an estimated 1,000 lodges representing approximately 7,000 people, of which at least 1,500 were warriors. In this vicinity Custer sent back the first of two messengers with orders for Captain McDougall and the pack train to reinforce him. From here Custer's five-company battalion continued marching northward, trying to locate the upper end of the village. The marble marker was placed for Vincent Charley, far-

rier of Company D, who was killed in this area during Reno's retreat from Weir Point. Wounded, Charley was left behind, despite pleas by some of his comrades that he be rescued.

3 Weir Point Late on the afternoon of June 25, Capt. Thomas Weir led his company to this high hill, where he was soon joined by other companies of Reno's command. Although heavy firing had been heard earlier, no one could see Custer's command. Only dust and great numbers of Indians moving on the hills to the north. The Indians soon spotted the cavalry on Weir Point and attacked, pushing Reno and Benteen back to their first position on the bluffs.

4 Medicine Tail Ford Here the Little Bighorn River's low banks and shallow depth offered Custer his first opportunity to cross into the Indian village. Indian accounts indicate that at least part of Custer's battalion came to the ford, but whether to press an attack or simply to reconnoiter is uncertain. Perhaps as many as three of the com-

panies remained on Nye-Cartwright Ridge (approximately ¼ mile to your right), probably to attract Benteen. At first only a small number of warriors defended the ford from the west side. They were soon reinforced, compelling the troopers to fall back. Soon hundreds of warriors, released from the fight with Reno, pushed across the ford and pursued Custer's command onto the hills.

5 Calhoun Ridge Indian accounts, supported by archeological evidence, suggest that one company charged into the coulee on your left to break up warrior concentrations. The soldiers came under heavy fire and were forced back to this ridge, where most were killed. The Cheyenne Lama White Man led the attack, but was killed a short time later.

6 Calhoun Hill Markers here indicate where members of Company L were overwhelmed by Lakota warriors. As you proceed along Battle Ridge toward Custer Hill, you will see many mark-

ers scattered along the right (east) side. For the most part these represent the men of Capt. Miles Keogh's Company I. A Lakota force, led by the famed warrior Crazy Horse, struck Keogh's company, now combined with the survivors of C and L Companies, as they fled toward Custer Hill. Keogh and most of his soldiers perished here.

7 Custer Hill Here Companies E and F, along with a few survivors from the other three companies, reunited to make a stand. The markers scattered on the low ridge below, toward the river, may represent a short-lived attempt to stem Indians advancing from the west. The cluster of markers within the fence shows where the last remnant of Custer's battalion fell in the final phase of the battle. Custer, his brothers Tom and Boston, and his nephew Autie Reed were all found in this group.

On June 28 the bodies of Custer and his men were buried in great haste at or near the places they fell. These shallow graves were improved in the next few years. Then, in 1881, those graves that could

be found were re-opened and the bones reinterred in a common grave around the base of the memorial shaft bearing the names of the soldiers and civilians killed in the battle. The remains 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 in West Point, N.Y., on October 10, 1877.

The Lakota and Cheyenne warriors killed in the battle, estimated at 60-100, were removed from the field by friends and relatives.

For a Safe Visit 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.

The park is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. For information, write: Superintendent, Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, P.O. Box 39, Crow Agency, MT 59022-0039; call 406-638-2621.

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

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