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THE NEZ PERCE WAR OF 1877

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Hin-mah-too-yah-lat-kekht (Thunder Traveling to Loftier Mountain Heights), known to the whites as Chief Joseph, led the Wallowa Nez Perces through the war of 1877. One of the most famous of all American Indian leaders, he delivered the surrender speech for his people at the Bear Paws. Less than two months later, aged 37 and bound for exile, he posed in Bismarck, North Dakota, November, 1877, for this photograph by F. J. Haynes.

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by
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The purpose of this narrative is to examine the Nez Perce War of 1877, and to summarize its highlights. In addition, you will see how one army detachment after another, led by Civil War and Indian Campaign veterans, floundered in battle as the Nez Perce conducted a great fighting retreat which almost succeeded. As this treatise is only a summary, the reasons for the war and its background will not be discussed at this time.

I PRELUDE

"Tell General Howard I know his heart. What he told me before I have in my heart. I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. Looking Glass is dead. The old men are all killed. It is the young men who say yes or no. He who led the young men is dead. It is cold and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. My people, some of them have run away to the hills and have no blankets, no food, no one knows where they are, perhaps freezing to death. I want time to look for my children and see how many of them I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead. Hear me my chiefs, I am tired, my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever."

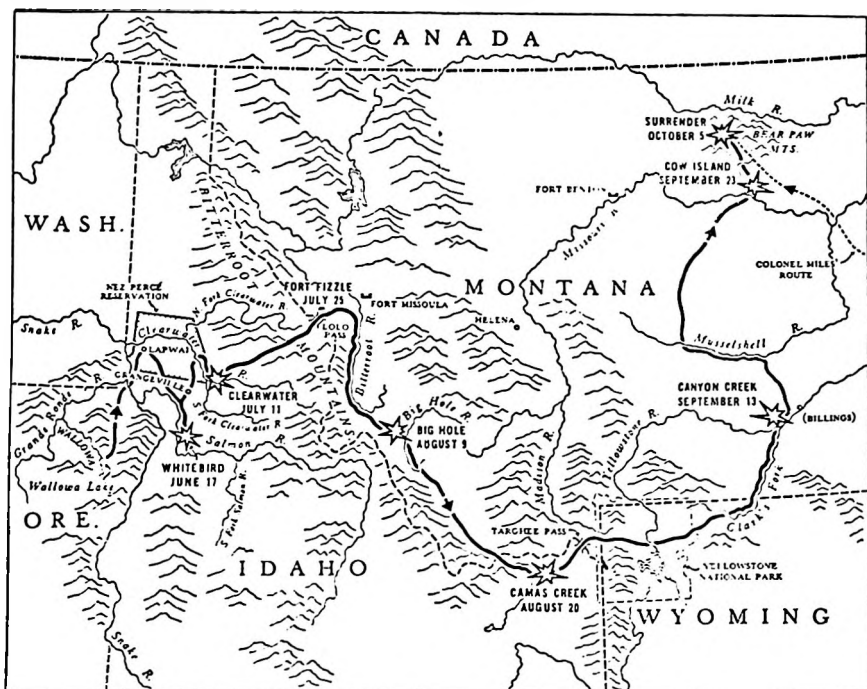
With these poignant words, Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce Indians surrendered his little band to Brigadier General Oliver O. Howard and Colonel Nelson A. Miles in the Bear Paw Mountains of Montana Territory on October 5, 1877. Within a period of eleven weeks, this band of Nez Perce had moved approximately 1,300 miles and had engaged nine separate commands in thirteen different battles and skirmishes. In nearly every case although taking serious losses of fighting men, equipment and livestock, the Nez Perce fought their opponents to a standstill, and in some instances inflicted defeat. General Sherman, the Army's Commanding General, termed the struggle as

"... one of the most extraordinary Indian wars of which there is any record."

II THE BATTLE OF WHITE BIRD CANYON

By June 16, 1877, all of the Nez Perce bands who had not participated in the treaty of 1863 (which gave up specific Indian rights to the land of their ancestors) were required to move onto the reservation with the other bands who previously had agreed

to the terms of the treaty. A few days before the deadline several young warriors, inflamed by alcohol and taunted by an older member of the tribe for not avenging the death of one of their fathers at the hands of a white man, stole away from camp and killed four white men living along the Salmon River. Another white was wounded and all were known to have been hostile to Indians. News of the raid reached Fort Lapwai by Indian messenger who reported that the raid was one of private revenge and not a declaration of war by the non-treaty bands. General Howard, Commanding General of



The Nez Perce retreat covered 1,300 miles in about four months. Miles cut them off just short of Canada and safety.

Map from American Heritage

the Department of the Columbia at Fort Vancouver, just happened to be at Fort Lapwai on an inspection trip at that time. He believed this news as the truth until correspondence was received from one L.P. Brown, a hotel keeper at Mount Idaho. In effect, Brown indicated that the non-treaty bands had been gathering at one place and had become insolent and threatening to settlers moving to the security of Mount Idaho. Since the local citizens of Mount Idaho had not heard about the slayings on the Salmon River, it is quite possible that Brown was trying to drum up justification for the forceable removal of the Indians from his locale in order to quiet the populace.

However, on June 15 a pair of whiskey freighters abandoned their load when attacked by Indians who, after consuming some of the captured booty, attacked a refugee party. Some whites were killed and others wounded. Meanwhile, hearing reports of the Salmon River killings, Brown sent a second message to Howard. In this communication he stated that the situation was desperate and he pleaded for help in the form of soldiers, arms, and ammunition. A third and final message came from Brown an hour later and it repeated the urgent call for assistance. Based upon the unsupported statement of this one man it was apparent that the country was involved in an Indian uprising. General Howard quickly assembled his available forces and prepared for an attack upon the Indian encampment located at the base of White Bird Canyon. This armed force was commanded by Captain David Perry, and initially consisted of 93 men of Companies F and H, 1st U.S. Cavalry, and two other companies brought from the Wallowa Valley by Captain Whipple. Infantry troops were to come later from Walla Walla, and additional soldiers and supplies were requisitioned from Fort Vancouver, located near the mouth of the Columbia River. Captain Perry had been promised a large force of volunteers at Grangeville if he attacked at once, but when he was ready to depart, only eleven volunteers had joined his command. A little after midnight on June 17 the command, now approximately 117 men including twelve treaty band scouts, reached the ridge above White Bird Creek. Here they waited for first light to guide them down the canyon to the Indian village. Alert Indian sentries previously had warned the village of their approach. The route the soldiers would have to follow wound along a treeless, rolling land with ridges and hills on either side. The village itself lay behind two buttes at the bottom of the slope. The total fighting strength of the encampment was approximately 150, but many warriors were unable to fight due to drunkenness. Others had no weapons or were too old, too sick, or too frightened to use them. Altogether, there were not more than sixty or seventy warriors with bows and arrows, shotguns, muskets and a few modern rifles. The chiefs were uncertain whether to resist, but reaching a decision, they organized a truce team to try to arrange a meeting. Being cautious, however, the old men, women, and children were directed to drive the livestock to safety while the warriors prepared for the worst, concealing themselves along each side of the draw.

Before 3:00 A.M. the troops were again in motion and within an hour emerged from the draw. At that time, a group of six Indians under a flag of truce was observed directly to their front.

There had been no hint of an ambush or a surprise attack but the fighting began with two wild shots fired by a civilian volunteer by the name of Ad Chapman. Sergeant McCarthy stated in retrospect that,

“some wild firing was done by our people from horseback, a rather short sighted thing to do; for we had only an average of fifty rounds in the whole command.”

The nature of the terrain, with many hiding places for ambush, should have put the troops on their guard, but since they were anticipating a surprise charge into the village, they ignored their surroundings. Other Nez Perce warriors waited behind the

truce committee to see what would happen. As previously stated, the "volunteers" opened fire without waiting for Perry's command and it was returned by the warriors in the rear of the truce committee. In this exchange Trumpeter Jones, one of the two buglers, was killed. As the Indians started firing Perry hastily deployed his troops across the draw and placed the volunteers to his left on a high knoll. The men in the center were dismounted while the ones on the right flank remained mounted. The battle was fought without any plan and the Nez Perce seized the initiative by charging the volunteers on the left flank, which sent them reeling to the rear in panic. This action exposed Perry's left flank while at the same time a charge led by Ollokot, Chief Joseph's brother, on the right flank of the line frightened the horses of the mounted troopers.

The troops in the center, seeing their flanks exposed and nothing but confusion all around, gave way and rushed for their horses. In a matter of a few moments, the whole command had been cut into small groups fighting desperately for their lives. Nineteen men with Lieutenant Theller tried to make a stand but were cut down against a rocky cliff. The remainder of the command fled the battlefield in panic leaving a total of thirty-four dead. The Nez Perce gave chase as the Army fought a token rearguard action in the direction of Mount Idaho where the Indians gave up the pursuit and returned to the village. The Nez Perce casualties were light with only two wounded and none dead. The most important result of this impromptu battle, besides spreading the alarm of an impending Indian war, was the fact that sixty three rifles, a number of handguns and a considerable amount of ammunition were captured by the Indians.

Perry's forces were not outnumbered, nor had the Indians been better armed. In fact some of the warriors who participated in the battle acquired their weapons from fallen soldiers. Historically, the Battle of White Bird Canyon has been classed with the Battle of the Little Big Horn as an overwhelming defeat. Actually the two are only similar in respect to lack of military caution and accessible reserves. Manpower was equally balanced but Indian maneuvering and marksmanship were decisive. It is also apparent that mediocre leadership and poorly trained troops contributed to this defeat. The loss of both trumpeters at the outset, leaving Perry with no means of control, also might have been highly significant. In addition, the command had been worn out by thirty six hours of marching and two nights without sleep. However, many people were ready to believe that the Nez Perce were supermen led by military geniuses. As a note of interest, Captain Perry later faced a court of inquiry regarding his leadership in the battle but was exonerated.

III THE BATTLE OF THE CLEARWATER

The Battle of White Bird Canyon, not only alarmed the settlements of the Northwest, but angered the rest of the nation whose memory of the Custer disaster of the year before was still vivid. As a result, and because it was apparent that the victory might encourage other Northwest tribes to rebel, General Howard sent for reinforcements throughout the west. Some were to come from as far away as Georgia and Alaska. Howard soon realized, however, that there were no real signs of a general Indian uprising, and he felt that a strategic emplacement of regulars would be all that

was required. Howard also believed that a posture of watchfulness by the settlers and their volunteer militia would aid in preventing the danger of an all-out war in the area.

Within a week, General Howard took to the field with a force of 227 troops, twenty civilians and a large group of packers and guides. He marched directly to the Indian village only to find that the original band had been joined by another group returning from hunting buffalo in Montana, and that they had moved the entire village to the south side of the Salmon River. Howard commented that

"... no general could have chosen a safer position, or one that would be more likely to puzzle or obstruct a pursuing foe. If we present a weak force, he (Joseph) can turn upon it. If we make direct pursuit, he can go southward toward Boise for at least thirty miles, and then turn our left. He can go straight to his rear and cross the Snake at Pittsburg Landing. He can go on down the Salmon and cross in several places, and then turn either to the left, for his old haunts in the Wallowa Valley, or to his right, and pass our flank, threatening our line of supply, while he has at the same time, a wonderful natural barrier between him and us in the Salmon. . . ."

While the troops were planning to cross the river information was received that Looking Glass, a famous tribal war chief, was planning to leave the reservation and join the hostile band. Accepting this as fact, Howard divided his forces and sent Captain Whipple with two troops of cavalry to intercept Looking Glass. As Whipple departed Howard received boats and started his crossing of the Salmon River only to see the Indians disappear into the wilderness.

During the time Howard was wearily pursuing his enemy, Captain Whipple located Looking Glass's peaceful village. After an attempt to talk to Looking Glass with no success, Whipple without warning launched a vicious attack on the encampment. The Indians fled from the village to the other side of the river where they were rallied by their outraged chief. Looking Glass previously had desired peace, but as a result of the attack was left homeless. Consequently it is not surprising that the members of this band with few exceptions hastened to join the hostile tribe as the latter reached the Clearwater River.

About that time, Whipple received word that the main hostile band had evaded General Howard and had crossed back to the north bank of the Salmon River. Howard had tried to follow the hostiles, but couldn't cross to the north bank unless he retraced his steps to where he had left the boats. This is exactly what happened, and Howard's prey gained valuable time. For the time being Looking Glass was forgotten and Whipple dispatched Lieutenant S.M. Rains with ten men to reconnoiter his rear as the hostile Nez Perce were now in that proximity. He dug in to await results which were not long in coming. In attempting to find the enemy, Rains and his men were annihilated and another group of scouts and civilian volunteers were mauled.

Yellow Wolf, when queried years later as to the hasty return of the belligerents back across the Salmon River, replied,

"It was from the first so fixed. We intended turning back if soldiers followed us south. That was how the war was to be carried out. The chiefs wanted the soldiers out of the way."

The Nez Perce then bypassed Whipple's force and the barricaded towns of Cottonwood and Grangeville to head for a hiding place on the South Fork of the Clearwater River. Here they were joined by the people of Looking Glass's band. This addition provided another forty warriors, but also raised the total of women and children to approximately 450.

General Howard assumed that Joseph was the one responsible for the masterly way in which the Nez Perce had achieved success and for conducting the war with "White men's rules" as well. There had been no scalping and body mutilation by the hostiles, and noncombatants, including women, were treated with humanity and friendliness. The truth was that the Nez Perce had succeeded from a combination of overconfidence and mistakes on the part of the whites, and Indian courage coupled with a rugged terrain advantage. Also, it was a fact that Joseph sat in council but since he had never been a war chief, men like Ollokot, his brother, Five Wounds, Toohoolhoolzote, Rainbow, and White Bird were the actual combat leaders.

On July 11, Howard, now with 400 troops and 180 scouts, packers, and teamsters, took up the pursuit once more. The hostile camp was spotted on the opposite side of the Clearwater, and the troops opened fire with a four-inch howitzer and two Gatling guns in preparation for an attack. Taken by surprise, but not hesitating, Toohoolhoolzote, with two dozen warriors crossed the river, scaled a bluff to the same level of the soldiers and engaged them with accurate and deadly fire. This allowed time for more Indians to get into the fight with the intent of encircling their foe. Howard, surmising this, formed his troops in a square and ordered them to dig in. The fighting continued all day and to the next morning. The Nez Perce, outnumbered almost six to one, and occasionally under artillery fire, kept the command pinned down and on the defensive with expert marksmanship. Several hand-to-hand fights broke out and at one point the supply train was almost captured. Additionally, the Nez Perce controlled the only spring in the area. This further discouraged the troops already suffering from thirst under a merciless sun. By noon of the second day the chiefs decided that there had been enough fighting without a decision and decided to withdraw. Joseph was given enough time to move the village and livestock. One by one the Indians ceased fighting and withdrew from the battlefield, and Howard's troops followed across the river to an abandoned camp. The Army lost 13 killed and 27 wounded, of which two died later, while the Indians suffered a total of four dead and six wounded. They had escaped from Howard once again.

Although the Indians had not been defeated, the troops had survived a battle and the Indians were driven from the field. Howard's failure to rapidly pursue his enemy was probably his most serious mistake of the entire campaign. The Indians themselves called Howard "General Day-After-Tomorrow" because of his policy of giving them a two day lead. General Howard, instead of hounding the Nez Perce, who most likely would have dispersed their shattered bands and ceased their resistance, postponed pursuit until the following day. By that time it was too late, and the opportunity to end the uprising was gone.

From the beginning, Howard had underestimated his opponents even when his knowledge was based upon accurate information.

IV FORT FIZZLE

The Nez Perce crossed the Clearwater north of Howard's location and paused to determine their next move. They reluctantly decided to leave Idaho, thinking that if that were the case General Howard would leave them alone. Looking Glass was of the opinion that once in Montana, with which he was familiar, the band would join the Crows and hunt the plains in peace. It was a difficult decision to make because it meant leaving their homeland behind. Looking Glass was declared supreme chief for the trek to Montana and subsequently the homeless band started over the difficult Lolo Trail through the Bitterroot Mountains. Howard took up the pursuit which was as difficult for the pursued as for the pursuers.

In all fairness to the Army, it should be pointed out here that part of Howard's force was infantry and that he was attempting to capture an elusive and cunning mounted foe. A few days later in Montana, at the eastern exit to the trail a force of thirty five soldiers of the 7th Infantry and 200 citizen volunteers under the command of Captain C.M. Rawn, attempted to establish a log barricade in order to halt the Nez Perce retreat.

By July 25, after nine days in the mountains with 2,000 horses in addition to noncombatants, the Nez Perce appeared above the log fort. Joseph, Looking Glass, and White Bird went forward to persuade their opponents to allow their passage stating that they were on their way to the Crows and would move peacefully through the valley, respecting the rights of the settlers and paying for what they needed. This satisfied the volunteers who, not wanting an Indian fight, departed for home leaving Rawn and his troops to defend the fort. Fortunately for Captain Rawn whose orders were to resist, the Nez Perce conducted a feint at his position and bypassed it completely on another mountain trail. The log fort was soon dubbed "Fort Fizzle" and Rawn could do nothing more than to withdraw to the settlement at Missoula.

V. THE BATTLE OF BIG HOLE

Keeping their promise, the Nez Perce refugees committed no hostile acts and bought what they needed from the settlers. This friendly attitude was returned by the people of the Bitterroot Valley and did nothing more than to give the band a false sense of security. Consequently, they leisurely continued on their way south to the Big Hole Valley, where they made camp to rest awhile.

At this time, General Howard was struggling along the Lolo Trail across the Bitterroot Mountains in pursuit. Unknown to the Indians at Big Hole, a new element now entered the picture. A force of 163 regulars and thirty five volunteers under the command of Colonel John Gibbon had set out from Fort Shaw, Montana, to intercept the Nez Perce. On the night of August 8th Gibbon's command arrived at a hill overlooking the unsuspecting Indian village, and at dawn he attacked the sleeping encampment in complete surprise. The soldiers charged, firing as they moved, and forded the shallow stream running in front of the lodges. As they swept into the village, shooting and clubbing men, women, and children, some of the victims were able to seize weapons and ammunition while fleeing to the far side of the encampment and the

nearby forest. This group was rallied by White Bird, and standing their ground, fought back desperately against a suddenly faltering line of troops. The commander of the left flank had been killed in the charge, and it was this portion of the line that began to give way under the surprise resistance from the village. The soldiers gave ground to the right, confusing others on the right flank who were trying to set fire to the lodges. At that moment, White Bird struck on the right flank causing further confusion and panic among the troops. Gibbon, seeing the panic and having received a leg wound, ordered the command to withdraw to a position across the stream. As the withdrawal took place Gibbon found himself on the defense as the Nez Perce swarmed after him. Moments later the little command was encircled and fighting for survival.

As the village was abandoned by the soldiers, Joseph rallied the survivors, picked up the dead and wounded, struck lodges, and driving the livestock in front, moved off to the south.

Meanwhile, Gibbon's position had become desperate, as the troops had run out of water. The Indians also captured the howitzer which immediately was run over a steep cliff. The command also lost a valuable pack load of ammunition during the retreat. By eleven that night, and after insuring the safety of the village, the remaining Indian combatants broke contact and performed a rear guard action as they slowly followed Joseph and their village southward.

Gibbon's command, bloody and battered, was in no condition to follow. Thirty-three soldiers were dead and thirty-eight others were wounded. Fourteen of the seventeen officers were casualties, and Howard coming upon them the following day found them in a dazed state trying to take care of the wounded and burying the dead.

The Indians had also suffered, losing between sixty and ninety people, among whom were Rainbow and Five Wounds. Many of their casualties had been women and children.

During the battle, the Nez Perce had set fire to the grass which at the last possible moment changed direction, which was called by those who survived "an act of God," as it saved them all from certain death. Had the Nez Perce war chiefs been able to train their warriors in the use of a howitzer as well as they were trained in infantry and cavalry tactics, the battle may have been a miniature "Little Big Horn."

Coincidentally, Gibbon, upon seeing Howard's advance guard, must have known how Major Reno felt that fatal day on the Little Big Horn, thirteen and a half months before, when Gibbon himself played the role of rescuer.

In retrospect, regarding the Battle of Big Hole there were a few more Indians than soldiers but only a score or so were battle-experienced. Gibbon had within his command sixteen experienced officers and numerous trained men who had the advantage of surprise and momentum. Yet the Nez Perce managed to throw off their attackers once again and in the process almost annihilate them. As a result of this fight the Nez Perce suffered a serious setback, but were able to recover to the point of continuing their flight for another 1,000 miles. Yellow Wolf later stated.

"No Nez Perce were there after those good-bye morning shots. We were not there to see the new soldiers you say came. They must have arrived after we followed the camp. In all the war, General Howard never came where we could see him."

VI THE BATTLE OF CAMAS CREEK

The Nez Perce fled farther to the southeast and, in desperation, only one alternative seemed open to them. That was to turn north to Canada where Sitting Bull and the Sioux had fled before them. Looking Glass was blamed for the disaster at Big Hole, and Lean Elk succeeded him as primary war chief.

Howard missed an opportunity to get ahead of the fugitives because of civilian pressure for soldier presence to the south, but in an effort to cut them off before they reached Yellowstone Park he sent a token force under Lieutenant Bacon to Targhee Pass. When Bacon arrived at his destination there was no evidence of Indians, and after waiting several days he vacated the pass. When Howard finally arrived at the pass after the Battle of Camas Creek, he realized that Bacon had failed by being impatient, and the Nez Perce had evaded him again.

As the Nez Perce headed toward Targhee Pass and Yellowstone park where they intended turning north to Canada, word was brought that Howard was not far behind.

On the night of August 20th, Ollokot and three other chiefs, leading approximately twenty-eight warriors, rode into Howard's camp in a column of fours. They were mistaken for Bacon's detachment by the pickets, and before anything could be done, the Indians stampeded the pack mules out of camp. By this time the soldiers were in hot pursuit, but not close enough to prevent a trap being set. This was the Battle of Camas Creek. The soldiers finally managed to extricate themselves from the ambush, but one troop under the command of Captain Norwood was almost annihilated. Only Howard's timely rescue with more troops prevented another disaster. The night had saved them from the Indians' superb marksmanship.

General Howard now had to stop and procure more mules in the local settlements; thus, he lost his chance to overtake his prey as they crossed the Continental Divide and moved into Yellowstone Park.

VII THE BATTLE OF CANYON CREEK

In Yellowstone Park, the Nez Perce managed to capture several groups of campers including a number of women. They narrowly missed capturing a party of vacationers among whom was General William T. Sherman, the Army's Commanding General. The chiefs would not permit inhuman treatment of their captives, and allowed them to escape as the band made its way across the park.

Having been alerted to the fugitives' whereabouts, the 7th U.S. Cavalry under the command of Colonel Samuel Sturgis attempted to set a trap for the fleeing band in the upper Yellowstone Valley. The Nez Perce bypassed the ambush by going through a mountain wilderness that Sturgis thought was impenetrable, especially to an Indian band driving 2000 head of horses. When the Nez Perce emerged in their rear, the surprised 7th Cavalry gave chase with 300 men toward the present-day city of Billings, Montana.

When they were hardest pressed, the Nez Perce scouts for once failed, as they reported a strong force of troops across the shortest and best route north. Actually, it was only a small detachment of cavalry under Lieutenant Hugh Scott. This information caused the fugitive band to go into a long and difficult detour.

Actually, the Nez Perce were assisted by Colonel Sturgis who, after taking a blocking position at the mouth of Clark's Fork, was persuaded to move. Like Bacon at Targhee Pass, Sturgis was several days early and abandoned his watchful waiting after he received reports that the fugitives were moving toward the Shoshone River. He didn't pause to think that they might double back, which they did. These maneuvers by the Nez Perce once again proved that their scouting and deception were excellent.

At Canyon Creek, the band turned north once more, and on September 13 the 7th Cavalry overtook them. A desperate fight took place as the Indian rear guard, hiding in gullies and behind rocks, held off the troopers while the women and children with livestock, headed for the protection of a narrow canyon. During the fight Sturgis dismounted his men, which proved to be a costly error as this allowed the Nez Perce to escape into the canyon where they were able to build obstacles with boulders and brush, thus preventing the cavalry from following too closely. At dark, with the men tired and running low of ammunition and rations, Sturgis gave up pursuit. He had lost three killed and eleven wounded. The Nez Perce had lost only three, but the long flight was beginning to take its toll. Besides being weary, they were losing horses which when lame had to be abandoned. Others were being lost in the hurry to keep moving.

VIII THE BATTLE OF COW ISLAND

Harassed and fearful of enemies, the Nez Perce intercepted and killed three couriers between Howard's and Sturgis's forces. They next discovered the Crow camp in the Judith Basin, destroyed it, and recaptured some of their horses which had been stolen from them by the Crow.

At Cow Island, the band ran off a frightened sergeant and twelve men at a supply dump located there. After plundering supplies and fighting off a minor attack by a small military force from Fort Benton, the fugitives headed toward the badlands and rolling prairie, getting ever closer to Canada, the Bear Paw Mountains, and destiny.

IX THE BATTLE OF BEAR PAW MOUNTAINS

While the Nez Perce hurried north from Yellowstone Park, Howard sent a message via telegraph to Colonel Nelson Miles at Fort Keogh, Montana Territory (near present day Miles City) suggesting that they attempt to head off the Nez Perce somewhere south of the Canadian border.

As for the Nez Perce, Yellow Wolf afterwards said,

"We knew General Howard was more than two suns back on our trail. It was nothing hard to keep ahead of him."

On September 24, the Nez Perce made an unfortunate change in leadership, which eventually was to lead them to defeat. Whereas Lean Elk was for hurriedly moving and crossing the Canadian border, Looking Glass was again appointed primary chief by the council. He knew Sturgis and Howard were far behind and was for a slower pace.

Upon reaching the Bear Paw Mountains, about thirty miles from the Canadian border, the small band paused to rest, confident that they had outdistanced their

pursuers. Unfortunately they had underestimated the modern Army with its telegraph. Colonel Miles, with a force of 600 men, which included portions of the 2nd and 7th U.S. Cavalry, the mounted 5th U.S. Infantry, and a body of Cheyenne "warriors," hurried across Montana from Fort Keogh in the east for the purpose of intercepting the Nez Perce band.

On the morning of September 30, Cheyenne scouts spotted the Nez Perce camp, and Miles ordered an immediate attack. The 7th Cavalry, supported by the 5th Infantry, charged the village, while the 2nd Cavalry was sent to encircle the camp to cut off escape.

The assault caught the Nez Perce in three groups. The group on the far side of the encampment was able to flee to the north. Some became lost, some were to die of hunger and exposure, and some eventually were to reach Canada in small wretched groups. The second group, to include Joseph, was trapped with the livestock. The third group was in the village which was protected behind a low ridge. This third group commenced firing at their attackers immediately, inflicting heavy casualties among the troops which succeeded in halting the charge just short of the village. Two officers and twenty-two soldiers were killed in the assault while four more officers and thirty-eight troopers were wounded.

The encircling 2nd Cavalry had a better time of it as they were able to stampede the livestock, causing the Indians of the second group to be split into small elements. A few got away but most fought back in hand-to-hand combat or sought cover. After dark some of these were to reach the main body defending the village. One third of their horses had been run off and several of the fighting chiefs had been killed. Among them were Ollokot and Toohoolhoolzote.

Because Colonel Miles had taken heavy casualties in the initial assault, he decided to lay siege to the village rather than risk another assault. In addition, he attempted to cut off the village water supply from the river, but troops detailed for this task reeled back from heavy Indian resistance. As the siege got underway both sides settled down and dug in. It was about this time that the weather turned bitterly cold and on October 1 five inches of snow covered the ground. This added to the suffering of the Indian encampment as they fought for survival.

As the siege continued Colonel Miles became concerned with a rumor that Sitting Bull and the Sioux were coming to the rescue of the Nez Perce. Hoping to hasten a surrender, under a flag of truce he lured Joseph to the Army camp. Joseph came, as he desired an honorable surrender, but he was seized instead and made a prisoner. The same day, however, one of Miles' officers was captured by the Nez Perce so an exchange was arranged and Joseph was returned to his people.

On October 4 General Howard and his command arrived at the battlefield. Upon seeing this, and getting promises from Miles that they would be honorably treated and sent back to Idaho, the chiefs held a final council. White Bird and Looking Glass still opposed surrender, but Joseph, pointing to the extreme suffering of the starving women and children, declared he was going to surrender in order to care for his people. As the council broke up, a stray bullet killed Looking Glass, whereupon Joseph mounted a horse and rode toward the Army's position, where the surrender took place.

After dark and while the surrender arrangements were under way, White Bird and a band of unyielding warriors escaped on foot in small groups toward the Canadian border. On the second day they managed to reach their goal and on the day following, ran into mounted Indians—Sioux from Sitting Bull's village—who immediately took the fugitives under their care.

It was later discovered that a large Sioux war party, after some differences of opinion as to the Nez Perce's location, actually had started south to aid the main body of fugitives. They were too late as other fugitives brought news of Joseph's surrender, and so they turned back. It is somewhat interesting to speculate what might have happened to Colonel Miles (U.S. Army Commanding General-to-be) and troops if the Sioux warriors had arrived in time to assist their brothers.

Surrendering with Joseph were eighty-seven warriors, forty-six of them wounded, and 331 women and children.

Later, Miles would write to his wife:

"The fight was the most fierce of any Indian engagement I have ever been in."

X CONCLUSION

In all, nine separate commands had participated in the Nez Perce War of 1877. They were the: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 7th Cavalry; the 5th, 7th, 8th, and 21st Infantry; and the 4th Artillery. Four Civil War Generals had also been involved; Generals Howard, Gibbon, Sturgis and Miles. Altogether there were approximately 500 casualties, which were equally distributed between the warring factions. The total warrior strength of the hostiles had been less than 200. However, if women and children are included, the total tribal population at any one time was approximately 700.

The Nez Perce had opposed approximately 5,000 soldiers, of which 2,000 were met in battle. There had been hundreds of civilians involved, and of the total number of whites, about 266 had been killed or wounded. The fugitives had lost 239 in casualties while they had marched almost 2,000 miles without a supply train and carrying a preponderance of noncombatants. They had come within thirty miles of complete success!

General Sherman, as has been already reported, called this war one of the most extraordinary of which there was any record. He praised the Nez Perce skill in using advance and rear guards, skirmish lines, and field fortifications, and after the outbreak in refraining from scalping, mutilating and wanton slaying of civilians.

In attempts to throw Howard off the trail, the Nez Perce had made several detours. The key point in their strategy had been defense and mobility. The major battles were fought from fixed positions, but mobility had been exercised from within. At White Bird and Clearwater they were ready, as the Army's element of surprise failed. At Big Hole and Bear Paw surprise was the key element, but in the former the pause to burn lodges was the Army's undoing. Their reconnoitering and deceptive tactics were superb, while their marksmanship and use of terrain were outstanding. Finally, a combination of physical elements, together with the telegraph, enabled Colonel Miles to achieve victory over a proud and noble Indian nation. This was not the most glamorous chapter in the history of the U.S. Army as it emphasized the fact

that the "Indian-Fighting Army" was poor and uninspired. Great numbers of warriors had been used as an excuse to explain the disastrous defeats at Fort Phil Kearney and the Little Big Horn, but the small Nez Perce band held their own even when the odds were against them. More often than not the Army's "victories" came from attacks on unsuspecting villages where surprise and overwhelming firepower made the difference.

After Joseph's surrender, the 7th Cavalry stayed in the field to watch the Sioux and capture as many runaway Nez Perce as possible. The feelings of these men, as well as others in the Department of Dakota, were described in an officer's report: Major James S. Brisbin stated that

"Many of the older soldiers say the year of 1877 was the hardest they ever experienced, and if I may be allowed to judge, I will say, I never saw, even during the Civil War, harder or more dangerous service."

XI EPILOGUE

The speech made by Joseph at the surrender was published soon after and touched the imagination of the American public. Overnight, Joseph became the heroic symbol of his people and their cause. The United States Government did not, however, return the Nez Perce to the Lapwai Reservation. Instead, they were sent by flatboat and boxcar first to Kansas, and then to Indian Territory, where many took sick and died. Nevertheless, public sentiment finally forced the government to return the survivors to the Northwest and so, in 1885, eight years after Bear Paw, Joseph and the remnant of his band were sent to the Colville, Washington, Reservation. Many attempts were made to resettle them in their beloved Wallowa Valley, but all failed.

In 1904, at the age of 64, Joseph died on the Colville Reservation. Some people say he died of a broken heart. Perhaps he did, as suggested by the following quote from him, date unknown:

"The earth was created by the assistance of the sun, and it should be left as was . . . The country was made without lines of demarcation and it is no man's business to divide it . . . The earth and myself are of one mind. The measure of the land and the measure of our bodies are the same . . . Do not misunderstand me, but understand me fully with reference to my affection for the land. I never said the land was mine to do with as I chose. The one who has the right to dispose of it is the one who created it. I claim the right to live on my land and accord you the privilege to live on yours."

Thus an era passed from the face of the land.

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