

CUSTER ON THE WASHITA

by REGINALD S. CRAIG, CMI

It was a clear, crisp day near the middle of October, 1868. The white tents of the Seventh Cavalry stood in orderly rows not far from the north bank of Bluff Creek in southern Kansas about thirty miles southeast of Fort Dodge. Along the creek, patches of scarlet sumac stood out in occasional contrast to the yellow and gold background of the brushy timber, which had been turned to fall colors by the early frost. All around the camp the vast prairie was covered with endless fields of tall, blue-stem grass waving in the wind.

George A. Custer, who had risen to the rank of major general during the Civil War and was now serving as a lieutenant colonel in the regular army, sat down with his officers to an early evening meal in the officers' mess tent of the regiment. Having just been recalled to active service to lead the Seventh in a winter campaign for General Philip Sheridan, after a suspension by a court martial of some nine months previous, he had arrived that afternoon and assumed command. There was some tension in the air, since several of the officers present had been active in preferring the charges upon which the general had been convicted. However, Custer, himself, was determined to consider the incident closed and, to the fullest possible extent, to treat all of his officers solely on the basis of their performance of duty. The commander had taken only one mouthful when the meal was interrupted by a series of loud war whoops accompanied by rifle fire.

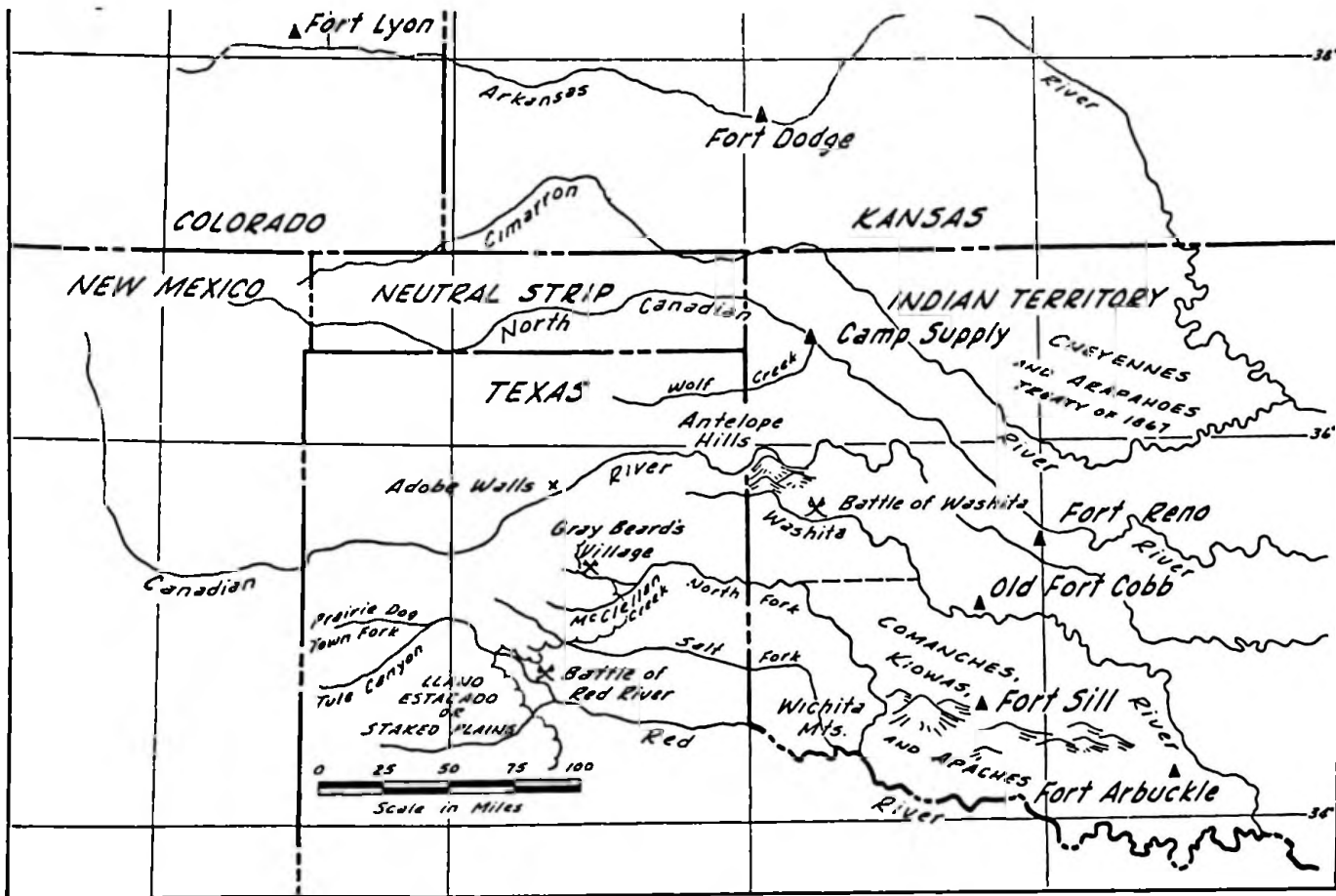
All of the officers rushed outside, seized rifles and joined the soldiers in returning the fire of a considerable body of warriors who were riding past the camp at full gallop. After passing the full length of the camp on one side, the red men swung around the end of the tent area and rode full speed down the other side of the camp. Riding in single file, they displayed great boldness and superb horsemanship. Upon completing the circle of the camp, they disappeared behind a low hill several hundred yards to the east. Within a few minutes they emerged again, whooping and firing as they made another circuit of the camp. This maneuver was repeated several times with the apparent intention of enticing the soldiers to follow them. However, Custer had learned about Indian tactics in the campaign of 1867 and had no intention of being led into an ambush.

The command was soon organized for defense. The troops took cover and began a deliberate and effective fire which quickly discouraged the warriors, and the attack ceased as suddenly as it had begun. The officers returned to their supper and Custer asked for information on the significance of the attack. "This sort of thing is an almost daily occurrence," said Lieutenant Moylan, the regimental adjutant, "and, as a result, we have been placed in what amounts to a state of seige." Several detachments were sent out that night in a fruitless search for the camp of the hostiles. Custer then broke camp and made a seventy mile scout to the east, but he failed to find the Indians' base of operations. Finally, he abandoned the area south of the Arkansas, which the red men regarded as their own, and established his camp on the north bank of the river about ten miles below Fort Dodge. Here, in the vicinity of other troops being concentrated by General Sheridan for a proposed winter campaign, he was free from harassment.

The Indian war of 1868 was the result of a long series of incidents in the settlement of the western frontier. Following the gold rush of 1859, white settlements had been established along the base of the Rockies on lands which had previously been occupied by the Cheyennes and Arapahoes. Although the government subsequently negotiated a treaty under which the two tribes gave up all claim to their traditional hunting grounds in return for a small reservation, their dissatisfaction grew until they took the warpath in the spring of 1864 and kept up their attacks until a new treaty was signed in the fall of 1865. They remained relatively quiet during 1866, but the following spring they again went to war in alliance with the Sioux. This conformed to the normal practice of the plains Indians, who liked to make peace in the fall so they could go into warm, safe quarters for the cold weather and resume their raids in the spring when the new grass would support their ponies and there was plenty of game.

Pursuant to the report of a congressional committee which placed the blame for Indian wars on aggression by the army and the settlers, a "Peace Commission" was created to deal with the western Indians. This commission met the southern plains tribes on Medicine Lodge Creek in southern Kansas in October, 1867, where they negotiated the government's last treaties with the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Comanches, Kiowas and certain minor tribes. In these documents, the Indians agreed to give up war, to settle on new reservations in Indian Territory and learn to farm.

The Cheyennes and Arapahoes remained generally quiet until August, 1868, when they again began to raid the Kansas settlements. General Sheridan, the commander of the Military Department of the Missouri, was unable to follow the fast moving raiders in the summer, and asked his superior, General Sherman, for authority to mount a winter campaign against the hostiles. At a stormy meeting in Chicago, Sherman finally secured the approval of a majority of the members of the peace commission, and on October 15 he issued his orders for the operation.



CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN PLAINS
1868-1874

This was the first action leading to the pacification of the central and southern frontier, although it was seven years before this end was accomplished. From this point on, the Indians had Sheridan to deal with. He refused to accept any excuses for their raids, and continued his efforts to enforce the terms of their treaties with unshakable tenacity until the southern tribes were finally forced to settle peacefully on their reservations. Sheridan's plan called for a main striking force, which would march south from Fort Dodge while two other columns were converging on the same objective, one moving easterly from Fort Bascom, New Mexico and the other marching southeasterly from Fort Lyon, Colorado. While he waited for orders to advance Custer was engaged in perfecting the training of his regiment, with intensive target practice as a major activity. Since it was announced that the forty best shots would be assigned to an elite corps under the command of Lieutenant, formerly Colonel, W. W. Cook, there was intense rivalry and all of the men showed great improvement in marksmanship. Custer also arranged at a nearby village of friendly Osages to recruit a group of Indian scouts consisting of Chief Little Beaver, a medicine man called Hard Rope, eleven warriors and an interpreter. An old frontiersman known as California Joe and a dozen other white civilians completed his scout detachment. Joe was a loquacious character, who apparently had roamed the entire west and had numerous hair raising adventures, if his stories were to be believed. He had a heavy beard and long hair and usually wore a huge, black, slouch hat, a soldier's overcoat and wool trousers tucked in the top of knee boots. He was never seen without his stubby pipe, and he always rode a finely formed mule instead of a horse.

Due to the distance from Fort Dodge to the probable winter quarters of the wild tribes, Sheridan decided to establish a temporary base about one hundred miles to the south, and four hundred wagons were loaded with supplies for this facility. Although the Nineteenth Kansas Cavalry, which had been raised especially for the campaign, had not arrived, Sheridan ordered the advance, and, on November 12, the Seventh Cavalry forded the Arkansas and took up the march for Indian Territory. Riding a spirited horse at the head of the column, young Custer was an inspiring figure, slender and of medium height, with a hawk-like nose, a mass of curling, yellow hair reaching to his shoulders and a long, flowing moustache. Wearing black, cavalry boots, cavalry trousers, fringed buckskin shirt and a broad-brimmed slouch hat, he was not dressed in the regulation fashion for an officer in the field. By nightfall he had made camp on Mulberry Creek, where he was joined by the wagon train and five companies of infantry under Colonel, formerly General, Alfred H. Sully, the district commander, who took active command of the entire expedition.

Resuming the advance the next morning, the column continued southerly for several days without encountering any signs of Indians. On the fifth day out from Fort Dodge, as they were moving down the valley of the North Canadian River, sometimes referred to as Beaver Creek, the Indian scouts discovered the trail of a war party, from 100 to 150 warriors strong, moving in a northeasterly direction. When camp was made that night Custer requested General

Sully for permission to follow the Indian trail back to its source and attack the village from which it originated. Sully disapproved the request on the basis that it would be impossible for such a large force to move through the Indian country without being discovered.

Early the next afternoon the expedition reached the previously selected location for the base of future operations in the angle between Wolf and Beaver Creeks just above their confluence, which they designated as Camp Supply. Three days later General Sheridan arrived with an escort of three hundred men and assumed command of the expedition. Preparations were immediately started for Custer to continue the advance with eleven troops of the Seventh Cavalry and his scout detachment, a force of from eight to nine hundred men. A wagon train was organized and loaded with a thirty day supply of rations and forage, and, on the night of November 2, Sheridan issued orders for the movement to begin at daylight the next morning. His orders to Custer were to search for and attack or destroy the winter villages of the hostile bands. That evening it began to snow and continued all night.

Early the following morning the men fell out in the storm and quickly ate their breakfasts standing around their campfires with the snow nearly up to their boot tops. It was still a few minutes before daylight when Custer rode over to Sheridan's tent for a final report. "What do you think of this snow storm?" asked the department commander. "Nothing could be better for our purpose," replied Custer. "We will be able to move without any great difficulty, but the villages will be immobilized." Sheridan wished him success and the cavalry commander galloped back to his men. The bugles sounded "To horse," and each trooper stood in line at his horse's head. The command "Prepare to mount" and "Mount" were given, followed by "Advance." The band struck up "The Girl I Left Behind Me," and the column moved out in a blinding snow storm.

That night they camped on Wolf Creek only fifteen miles from their starting point. It stopped snowing that night, and for the next two days the command continued to move southwesterly up the valley of Wolf Creek under better traveling conditions. The next day they turned south. Passing over a divide and traveling slowly through the deep snow, they made camp that night on a small stream about a mile from the Canadian River.

After talking with his Indian and white scouts, Custer decided that the raiders which made the trail the troops had crossed on the way to Camp Supply might now be on their way back, and that they would probably cross the river at some point upstream not more than fifteen miles away. Accordingly, he decided to send Major Joel Elliot with three troops up the north bank of the river to search for evidence of passage of Indians. He instructed the major to take up the pursuit at once if he found a trail, and to send word back of the estimated number and character of the Indians and the direction in which they were moving. In the meantime the main body would cross the river, and, if no word was received from Elliot, continue on over the Antelope Hills in a southerly direction to a camping ground on one of the small streams near the head-

waters of the Washita River. Promptly at daylight, Elliot moved out with his command, accompanied by four Osage trackers and two white scouts. About an hour later California Joe reported that he had found a place where the wagons might cross the swift, swollen river, and the movement began. The mounted troopers had no difficulty, but bringing the wagons over was a slow and laborious operation.

The Antelope Hills are a prominent landmark consisting of five separate elevations rising from one hundred and fifty to three hundred feet above the surrounding plains. Custer stood on a flat area near the top and surveyed an immense circle of white extending to the far horizons. The last wagons were approaching the top of the terrace, the rear guard of cavalry was just leaving the river and the remaining troops had closed up and dismounted. The commander was about to order the advance resumed when he saw the figure of an approaching horseman, which he soon recognized as Elliot's scout Corbin. Within a short time the scout galloped up and informed him that the major had discovered and was following the trail of an Indian war party about 150 strong, which had crossed the Canadian less than twenty-four hours earlier and taken a course a little east of south.

Corbin was provided with a fresh horse and sent on to overtake Elliot with orders to continue the pursuit and information that the main body would advance in a direction to intercept the Indians' trail by dark. Custer held a hasty conference with his officers and announced his plan of action. One officer and a guard of eighty men were assigned to remain with the train with instructions to follow the main body as rapidly as possible. Tents and extra blankets would be left in the wagons, and, after twenty minutes allotted for preparation, the remainder of the command was to advance in light marching order.

At eleven o'clock, when the specified time had elapsed, the advance was sounded and the expedition moved down the south slope of the hills and across the open plain, which was covered with snow one foot in depth. They traveled rapidly throughout the rest of the day without halting for rest or refreshment, and, in the early evening, they found the trail of the war party with indications that Elliot had also passed in pursuit. The general scanned the area ahead. Since the land stretched level and unbroken for miles, it was obvious that the major was far in advance. He could see that they were slowly descending into a valley, and far ahead there was the dim outline of distant timber, which probably marked the edge of a stream. He sent a few of his best mounted troopers on ahead with instruction for Elliot to halt at the first point where wood and water were available and await the arrival of the main body. Hour after hour they struggled on with both men and horses suffering from hunger and thirst. Finally, at nine that night, they reached the point where the advance party was waiting for them on the banks of a small stream.

Custer ordered an hour of rest. Saddles and bridles were removed, and the horses watered and given a feed of oats. Small fires were built in the shelter of the deep creek banks, and officers and men made their supper from a few pieces of hard bread and a cup of hot strong coffee, their first refreshment

since four that morning. Promptly at ten o'clock the command formed silently in a long line and filed off in a column of fours. Far in advance two of the Osage scouts followed the trail by the light of the moon, gliding sliently over the surface of the snow. Marching behind them at a distance of three to four hundred yards to avoid alarming the enemy, were the rest of the white and Indian scouts led by Custer. The troops followed behind at a distance of a quarter to a half a mile. Except for the tread of the horses feet, the column moved in silence.

After traveling in this manner for a number of miles, the two leading scouts stopped. Word was sent back for the cavalry to halt and Custer went forward. "What is the matter?" he asked. One of the Indians, who could speak broken English, replied, "Me don't know, but me smell fire." Several officers had ridden up, and they all expressed doubt since they could smell nothing. The expedition commander then directed the two Osages to proceed with even greater caution, and the column resumed its march. A half mile further on the guides stopped again, and, when Custer rode up, one of them pointed to the glowing embers of a dying fire about seventy-five yards to the left and said, "Me told you so." From the numerous tracks found in the snow it was decided that Indian boys tending a pony herd had used the fire to keep themselves warm.

With this evidence of the proximity of an Indian village, the advance was resumed with even greater caution. This time, in order to keep in close touch with the situation, Custer himself rode with the two Osages, who continued on foot keeping just in front of his horse while they carefully studied the trail. As they approached each rise in the ground, one of them would go on ahead, leaving the general and the other behind while he carefully crouched and peered over the crest of the hill. Finally, the Indian who had discovered the fire stopped for some time at the top of a low ridge, where he could be seen intently scanning the area beyond. Then he turned and came creeping back to the general's horse. "What is it?" asked Custer. "Heap Injuns down there," replied the Osage. The commander dismounted, handed the reins to the other guide and accompanied the Indian to the top of the rise.

Looking in the direction pointed out by the guide, Custer could dimly make out what looked like a large body of animals not more than half a mile away, but he could see nothing to distinguish them from a herd of buffalo. "Why do you think there are Indians down there?" he asked. "Me heard dog bark," was the reply. This seemed like good evidence, but the general wanted to be sure. He listened quietly and soon heard the barking of a dog in the timber to the right of the herd, followed by the tinkling of a small bell such as Indians tied around the neck of the leader of their pony herd.

Leaving the two Osages to keep watch, Custer hurried back to the other scouts and sent word to the cavalry to halt in place and for every officer to ride forward. When they arrived he took them to the top of the ridge to survey the area. Then they returned and he outlined his plan of battle. The command, which now consisted of about eight hundred men, was divided into four detachments. Major Elliot, with G, H, and M Troops, was directed to move

around to the left of the line of advance to a position nearly in the rear and to the east of the village. A column composed of B and F Troops, under Captain, formerly Colonel, William Thompson, was assigned to march to the right around the opposite side of the Indian camp and to occupy a position adjacent to the troops of Major Elliot. Colonel Edward Myers, with the third column consisting of E and I Troops, was ordered to occupy a position in the timber about a mile to the right of the head of the column as then halted. The fourth column, under Custer's immediate command, which included A, C, D and K Troops, the scouts and Colonel Cook's sharpshooters, was assigned to cover the sector immediately to the front.

Major Elliot and Colonel Thompson moved out at once with their commands, and the other two columns remained in their original positions. As they waited throughout the long, weary hours, the men suffered from the increasingly bitter cold. Custer wrapped the cape of his overcoat around his head and slept for an hour until he was awakened by the cold. Then he got up, walked among the men and tried to bolster their morale with words of encouragement. He found most of them huddled at the feet of their horses in groups of three or four, holding on to the bridle reins and trying to gain some warmth from each other.

An hour before daylight Colonel Myers and his men moved off to the right. All of Custer's men were now in position, and Chief Black Kettie's sleeping Cheyenne village of sixty lodges was entirely surrounded. Earlier in the evening, however, the camp had been far from quiet. Excitement had begun late in the previous afternoon at the arrival of two big war parties under Black Shield and Crow Neck, which were returning from successful raids on the Kansas settlements. They were welcomed with great enthusiasm, and the whole village prepared for a big scalp dance. A large fire was made from dry logs, and when the moon rose the dancers assembled from the lodges along the Washita River in response to the summons of the crier's high pitched voice. With his face covered with the black paint of victory, each young brave wrapped himself in the same buffalo robe with his intended squaw and joined the circle of dancers. Tied together with rawhide ropes to prevent any of them from leaving until the dance was over, they kept moving and chanting to the steady beat of the drums for hour after hour. Many of the young squaws proudly carried the weapons of their heroes, or displayed the bloody scalps they had taken from the tops of long poles. Finally near midnight, the fire burned low, the dancers left for their lodges and quiet settled on the camp.

Just before dawn on the morning of November 27, Custer placed his men in line. Colonel Cook and his forty sharpshooters were formed as a separate unit, dismounted and stationed in advance of the left side of the line. In spite of the freezing cold the men were ordered to strip for battle by removing their overcoats and haversacks. It had been understood that each column would advance as close as possible and attack at daylight without further signal, although the band, which accompanied Custer's detachment, would strike up the instant his phase of the attack began.

As the morning light began to show in the east, the general and his command passed over the ridge and started down the slope toward the village. As the light increased Custer began to catch glimpses here and there of the tall, snow covered lodges scattered among the trees on both sides of the river, with smoke from smoldering night fires rising from their tops. The commander was about to give the order for the attack when a single rifle shot rang out from the opposite side of the camp. He quickly turned to the leader of the mounted band and gave the signal for him to strike up "Garry Owen," which had previously been designated as the piece to be used to open the engagement. The familiar notes of the rollicking marching song of the regiment filled the valley, and the music was answered by the cheers of the men in position on all sides of the camp. The buglers sounded the charge, and the battle of the Washita began as the entire command dashed into the village from all directions. Black Kettle ran out of one of the nearest lodges with a rifle in his hand and tried to rally his braves with loud war whoops. Before he could get off a shot, however, he was cut down by the fire of the sharpshooters and his body slid off the bank into the water.

The surprise was complete. Large numbers of Indians ran out of their lodges and jumped into the waist deep, icy water to take refuge under the high banks, or hid behind trees or logs. Many of the women and children scuttled into hiding places in the brush while the men and some of the squaws began to put up a vigorous defense. The deadly fire of the sharpshooters wrought great havoc among them, but they fought desperately from their shelters, returning the fire of the troops with rifles and bows and arrows. At the first attack a considerable number of Indians rushed to the east in Major Elliot's sector, and some broke through and escaped downstream. Orders had been issued to avoid killing women and children, but many of the squaws were as dangerous as the men, while the reckless boys from ten to fifteen years of age were often as expert and determined in the use of weapons as the warriors. Accordingly, it was impossible to discriminate.

After reaching the center of the village Custer ordered his men to dismount and take cover while they dislodged the Indians from their shelters behind trees and logs and beneath the banks of the river flowing through the center of the encampment. As soon as the warriors were driven from the camp area he sent for one of his scouts, a short, heavy-set Mexican who also acted as interpreter. He had spent most of his life with the Indians and married among them. Although his name was Romero, the soldiers had dubbed him Romeo and he answered to that name as readily as his own. On the commander's instructions he visited the lodges where a number of the squaws and children were hiding, instructed them to assemble in several of the larger tepees near the center of the village and, with some difficulty, convinced them they would not be harmed.

At about ten o'clock while the fight was still raging on the outskirts of the camp, Custer was somewhat surprised to see a small party of mounted Indians collected on a knoll downstream from the village in the direction taken by the warriors who had escaped through the lines at the beginning of the attack. He

decided, however, that, after getting away, they had managed to catch up some of the ponies and were anxiously watching the progress of the fight although they were too few in numbers to join in themselves.

In the meantime, large numbers of the Indian ponies, alarmed by the noise of battle, had rushed into the village and were captured by details of soldiers. Riding his favorite mule and swinging a lariat around his head, California Joe drove in three hundred more with the aid of two squaws he found hiding in the brush.

Some time later it was seen that the group of Indians on the hill below the camp had increased to nearly one hundred. Custer examined them through his field glasses, and noted that they were all well mounted, fully armed and dressed and painted for battle, with brightly colored war bonnets and waving lance plumes. Further, more warriors, also mounted, armed and ready for battle, continued to arrive from beyond the hill. This seemed inexplicable. A few of the warriors might have escaped from the village and caught up some ponies, but not that many. Besides, they would have been able to carry nothing with them except their rifles and perhaps a few blankets. In order to solve the riddle the general visited one of the lodges occupied by the women and children, and questioned one of the older squaws with Romero's help. She gave him the surprising information that the Cheyennes the troops had been fighting were only a small portion of the Indians in the vicinity, and that the remainder of the Cheyennes, the Arapahoes, Comanches, Kiowas and some Apaches occupied a string of winter villages extending ten miles downstream from the captured encampment.

The soldiers succeeded in quelling resistance in the vicinity of the camp, and Custer took advantage of the lull to check his casualties. He found that Captain Hamilton had been shot from his horse during the first charge and died instantly. Colonel Barnitz was mortally wounded, and Major Elliot was missing and presumed dead although his body had not been found. Two other officers had been wounded, Walter Kennedy, the sergeant major of the regiment, was missing, and there were a number of other dead, wounded and missing enlisted men. Large numbers of warriors could now be seen on all sides, and it was apparent that the troops were surrounded.

Two hundred men were assigned to destroy the village. They tore down the lodges and placed the material in huge piles with the property found in the camp, which included plunder from the Kansas settlements, 1123 buffalo robes, quantities of arms and ammunition and large amounts of dried meat and other provisions. Torches were applied and the camp was soon reduced to ashes. This seemed to enrage the Indians, who attacked vigorously at all points, but Custer remounted several squadrons and assigned them to an attack. Heavy fighting continued until three o'clock when the warriors fell back.

Concerned for the safety of his train, and fearing disaster if he retreated encumbered with 875 captured ponies, the general decided to destroy most of the animals. The squaws were taken out to the herd and told to select mounts for themselves and the children, and a firing party proceeded to kill the remaining

ponies. Details were sent out to look for the dead and wounded on both sides. They found the bodies of 103 Indians, including a few squaws who had fought with the men or had been killed by accident. No more dead or wounded soldiers were discovered, and the fate of Major Elliot and his missing men remained undetermined. Finally, one of the scouts came forward with the information that the major had tried to capture the Indians who had been escaping through the gap in the lines at the beginning of the fight. He called for volunteers and rode off with the sergeant major and eighteen men, calling back in a joking sort of manner, "Here goes for a brevet or a coffin!" Several parties were sent out in the direction indicated by the scout, but after searching for nearly two miles, they all returned without finding any traces of the major or his men.

An hour before nightfall Custer assembled the entire command near the site of the village. Led by a strong force of skirmishers and with the band playing and colors flying, he started the column down the river directly towards the hills where strongest bodies of Indians were collected. For a few minutes the warriors stared in amazement, but they soon realized that the pony soldiers were bearing down on their villages, which might suffer the same fate as Black Kettle's camp. Without firing a shot, they turned, and moving rapidly down the valley soon disappeared except for a few warriors, who had been left to hover on the flanks of the troops. The march continued until it was dark enough to provide concealment. Custer then gave the order to face about, and the column set out on the back track to find and join the wagon train.

At two in the morning they went into bivouac, and the men were permitted to build fires from the timber along the river, but there were no rations. At daylight the troops were again in the saddle, and by ten o'clock they had joined the train. The teams were immediately reharnessed, and the entire command moved out without stopping for food. Finally, in the early afternoon, they went into camp and enjoyed a full meal, the first food for many of them since the handful of crackers they had eaten at nine o'clock the night before the attack.

The march was resumed the next morning, and several days later the command reached the last camp on Wolf Creek. By exchange of messages, carried by scouts between Custer and Sheridan, it was agreed that the department commander would review the returning troops near camp headquarters. They started on their last march on December 2, and by midmorning they were approaching Camp Supply. The snow had melted and the weather moderated. The command crossed over a slight ridge and began descending the long slope leading to the camp. Custer rode in the lead, wearing fringed buckskin shirt and leggings and with his rifle across his saddle. He was followed by the Osage trackers, dressed and painted in their war costumes. As they advanced they chanted war songs, fired their guns triumphantly, and at intervals uttered shrill war-whops. Next came the white scouts, followed by the prisoners mounted on Indian ponies. Some distance behind the prisoners, the troops marched in column of platoons, led by the band playing "Garry Owen." The troops passed the reviewing station with the lines perfectly dressed and at the

correct intervals, and were conducted to an area on the edge of Beaver Creek where they pitched their tents and settled down for a brief rest.

This was the end of the first phase of the campaign of 1868. It was the opening move of Sheridan's policy that "punishment must follow crime," although the last act was not to take place for nearly seven years, when the southern plains tribes finally straggled back to their reservations after defeat in the campaign of 1874-75.



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