

BATTLE DIGEST™

Lessons for Today's Leaders

Volume 1 ★ Issue 4

Early American Wars:

Little Bighorn

DATE:

June 25-26, 1876

LOCATION:

Montana Territory



OPPOSING FORCES

U.S. Army: 7th Cavalry Regiment (700 cavalry and scouts) under the command of Lt. Col. George A. Custer. (Custer was a subordinate of Brig. Gen. Alfred Terry, the overall commander of the operation with a total of 2,500 men.)

Allied Plains Indians: Sioux (including Lakota), Cheyenne, and Arapaho Indians (estimated 1,500-1,800 warriors) under the command of Chiefs Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and Gall.



HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Battle of Little Bighorn, despite its relatively small size, was the worst defeat for the U.S. Army in the Indian Wars. And although it was a clear tactical victory for the Plains Indians, it would be a significant strategic setback for their cause. The outrage caused by the Indian victory only intensified efforts by the U.S. Army and its Department of the Missouri to pacify the Native Americans and return those who resisted to their reservations. Within months of their victory at Little Bighorn, the Plains Indians were defeated in the Great Sioux War of 1876-1877 and their lands in the Black Hills of the Dakota Territory were confiscated.

The controversial career of George A. Custer ended with his death during the bloody defeat at Little Bighorn, popularly remembered as "Custer's Last Stand." His actions have been scrutinized ever since.



STRATEGY & MANEUVER

Actions by U.S. Army – After the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, the senior commanders of the Department of the Missouri, the command echelon of the Army responsible for conducting Indian Affairs, in the interim, realized there still were problems. Further, the Plains Indians refused to abide by the terms of the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. The Army's response was to send troops to the Black Hills of the Dakota Territory to enforce the treaty.

These were the source of their sustenance, and with their pony herds, their transportation. Instead of chasing down warriors, he would attack these centers of gravity with converging columns as he had done previously.

Brig. Gen. Alfred Terry, the Commandant of the Department of Dakota, was placed in charge of this operation in the spring of 1876. Senior army commanders generally agreed that the nomadic villages would eventually be in the area of the Yellowstone, Powder, Rosebud, and Bighorn rivers and creeks – where game and other resources were plentiful. Terry would take independent columns (2,500 total men), converge on this area, and force the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho back to the reservation. (*Map 1*)



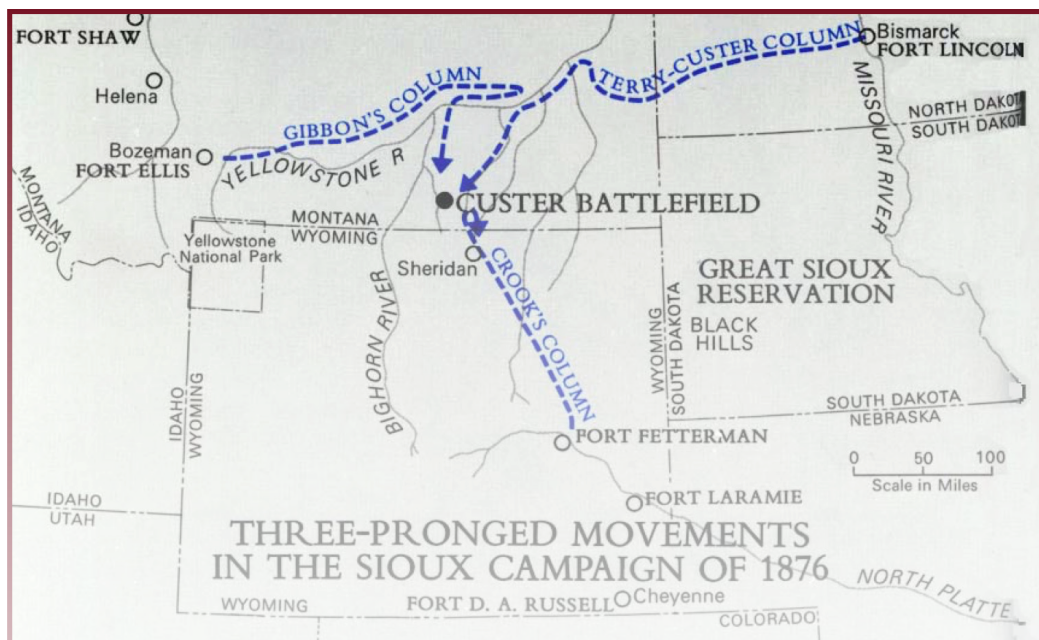
Custer

On 1 April, Col. John Gibbon led the Montana column out of Fort Ellis near Bozeman, Montana, with 450 infantry and cavalry. On 17 May, Terry personally led the eastern column out of Fort Lincoln, with over 900 men (most of whom were in Custer's 7th Cavalry Regiment). And on 29 May, the final column, commanded by Brig. Gen. George Crook, left Fort Fetterman, Wyoming Territory, from the south, with 1,000 cavalry and infantry. (Crook would be stopped

short after facing an aggressive attack on 17 June at the Battle of the Rosebud. Unfortunately, his message relating the event did not reach Terry until 30 June.)



Actions by the Sioux and Cheyenne – The Plains Indians faction, under Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and Gall, among other leaders, sought to remain independent and refused to abide by the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. Not only were the Black Hills sacred lands, but the whole concept of land ownership was different. The Plains Indians viewed land as a common resource, not something to be owned by individuals. The concept of land ownership was a foreign one to them. They did not have a concept of land ownership as the Europeans did.



Map 1: Campaign Overview

The Battle of Little Bighorn was Custer's attempt to seize the initiative by quickly attacking his Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho adversaries before they could attack him or flee. The resulting two-day fight would end in complete disaster and defeat for Custer and his 7th Cavalry Regiment. As Custer's initial attack broke down in the face of superior Indian numbers, and his divided forces were unable to effectively support one another, he failed.

21 June: As Terry's three columns converged, he linked up with Gibbon's column from the west on the 21st. (Map 2) Unfortunately, Terry would not have the advantage of information from Crook further south, who had faced a group of these Indians on the 17th at Rosebud Creek. Crook found these tribes unafraid to attack his large force and even able to push him back. But up north, Terry's scouts had seen smoke rising in the south from the Little Bighorn River along with the discovery of an Indian trail leading that direction.

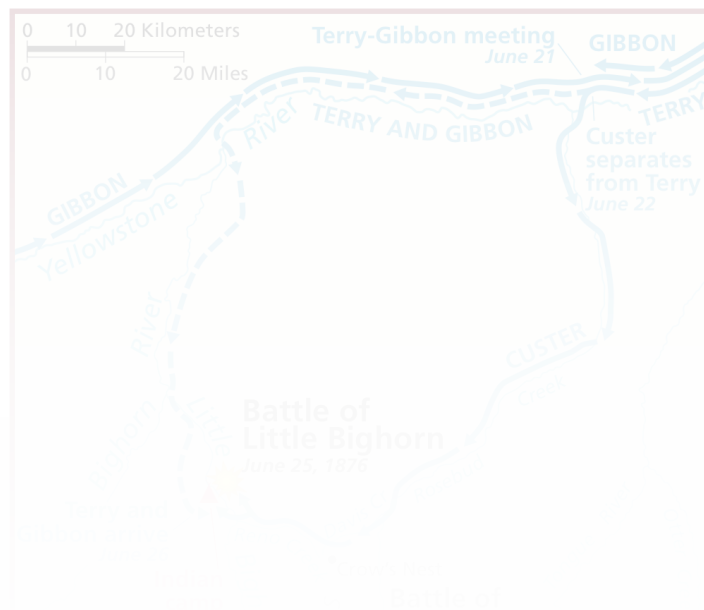
Terry issued his orders the following day. Thinking he had found the main camp, he ordered Custer to take his regiment south before swinging north up the Little Bighorn River. He would be the attacking force to drive the Indians into Gibbon's forces, which would come down from the north and form a blocking position to prevent their escape. Gibbon, with slower moving infantry forces, would not be in place until 26 June. Terry's plan appeared to rest on the assumptions that Indian numbers were smaller than they were, that they would not be able to retreat as they had done at Rosebud, and that they would not be able to coordinate their movements. The plan also assumed that the Indians would not be able to retreat as they had done at Rosebud, and that they would not be able to coordinate their movements.

handle anything it meets," was his reply.¹ He also refused the Gatling gun detachment of the 20th Infantry Regiment which would have vastly increased his firepower. Custer's watchword was speed, and he feared any augmentation of his force might slow its progress. As Terry and Gibbon moved southwest over the next three days, Custer drove his men hard to the south. (Map 2)

24 June: By the evening of the 24th, Custer was 25 miles east of the Indian village. After dispatching scouts to determine the exact location and strength of the enemy, he learned that the village had moved westward toward the Little Bighorn River. It appeared the Indians might be hemmed in against the stream if the

battle were joined rapidly. The scouts also pointed out that it was perhaps the largest such village they had ever seen.

Later that night, Custer moved his force forward to the Wolf Mountains, about 12 miles away from the Indian village. Although Custer initially planned a second night march to close the gap for a dawn attack on the 26th – which would have better aligned with his orders – he changed his plan. Because he had relied heavily on



surprise in the past, he was alarmed when the scouts told him that the Indians were probably aware of his presence.

25 June: Suddenly fearing he would lose the initiative and be attacked by the Indians, or be the one who allowed them to escape before Gibbon and Terry were in position, Custer decided to attack. Employing tactics that had been successfully used previously, he divided his force into three primary elements. Maj. Marcus Reno would lead the main attack squadron (three companies, totaling 140 troopers) and move up the river toward the camp. A supporting squadron of three companies (125 troopers total) under Capt. Frederick Benteen was instructed to proceed southward on a left oblique in search of Indians and block any southeastward escape route. Custer would take the five remaining companies (totaling 210 men) to maneuver around the Indians east of the river to form his own blocking position to catch the Indians after Reno's charge. One company would stay behind to guard the 7th Cavalry's supply train.

With their plan in place, Custer, Benteen, and Reno moved toward the Indian village. It was just before 1500 hrs., when Reno received orders from Custer stating, "The village is only about two miles above and moving away. Move forward at as rapid a gait as is prudent and charge afterward. The whole outfit will support you."²

With that, Reno splashed across the Little Bighorn to advance on the village's southern flank in the broad basin west of the river. (Map 3) Although Reno surprised the Indians, they reacted swiftly. But the village was not on the move, as Custer had believed, and it was full of warriors. Reno quickly determined that he could not charge successfully into such a large camp. Instead, he halted his troopers and formed a defensive line. The Indians surrounded Reno's force and began to kill. The Indians killed 112 of the 140 troopers in Reno's command. The Indians then moved on to Custer's force.

again—this time east of the river. As his men moved, many were cut down by Indians on horseback. When they reached the high ground above the river, Reno gathered the remnants of his command and formed a hasty defensive position. Meanwhile, to the northeast, Custer's force rode along the edge of a deep ravine called Medicine Tail Coulee to get into position to strike the Indian village from the north and complete his trap. Evidence suggests, however, that Custer's northward advance was interrupted by the sudden movement of a band of Indians under Crazy Horse

attempting to execute an envelopment around Custer's force. At this point, Custer moved to the high ground along a nearby ridgeline, but with Reno pinned down, the fury of the Indian response now fell upon Custer.

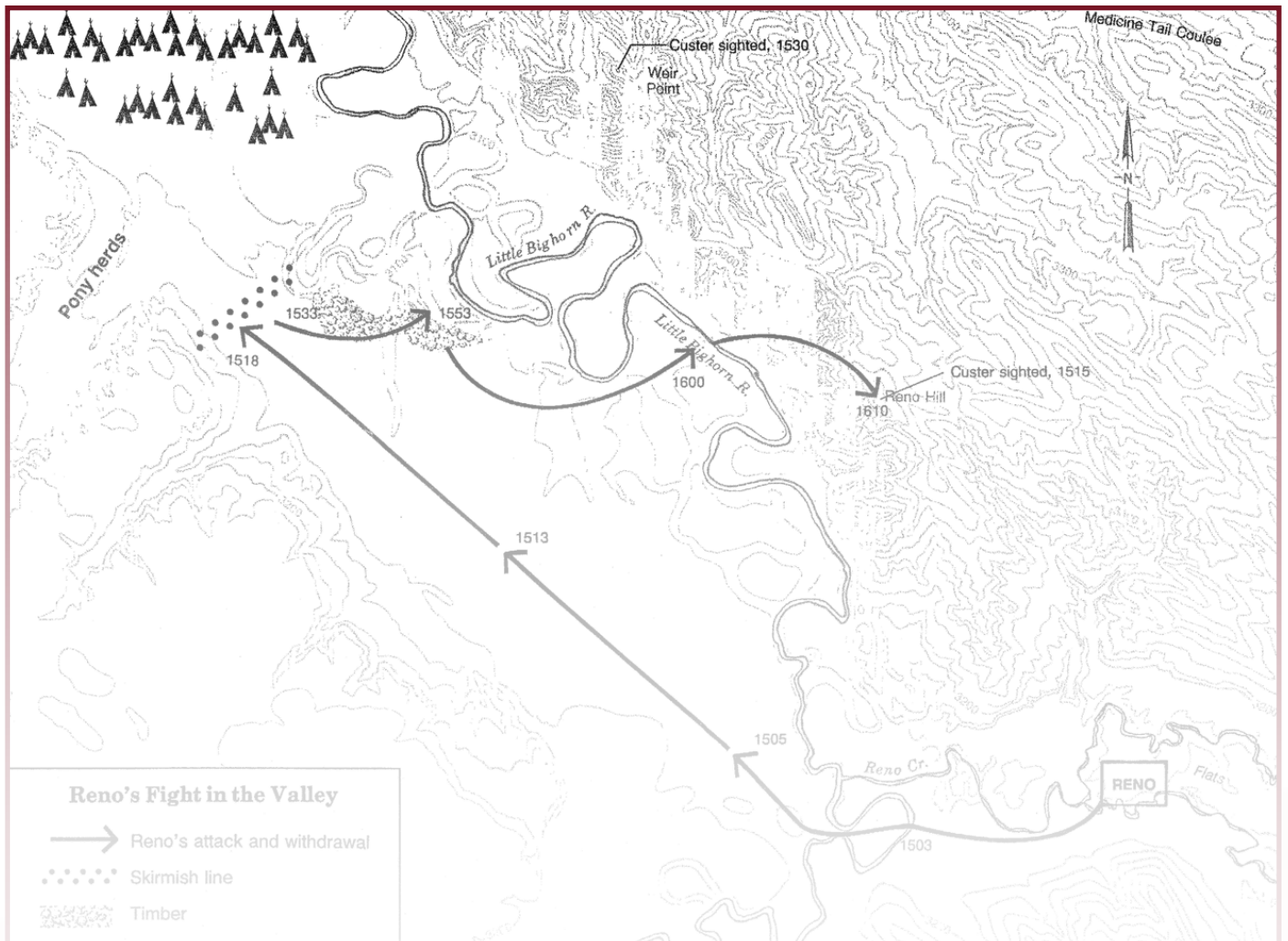
After Custer had reached the top of a nearby promontory and had probably seen

for the first time the immensity of the Indian village, he rode back to his command. His adjutant scrawled his follow-up order to Benteen and sent a lone courier on horseback to deliver it: "Benteen. Come on. Big Village. Be quick. Bring Packs. P.S. Bring Packs."³

Benteen and his three companies had not encountered any Indians to the south, but with the sound of gunfire downstream, he was already trying to locate Custer. He reached the bluffs along the Little Bighorn in time to see Reno's soldiers fleeing in disorder. On a hill about a mile and a half from Reno, Capt. Thomas Weir and elements of Company D (from Benteen's force) observed large numbers of Indians approaching. After meeting Reno, who pleaded for assistance, Benteen rode to Weir's advanced position and then ordered a retirement to consolidate as much as possible with Reno. Benteen and Reno then formed a horseshoe perimeter and desperately defended their ground.

As the battle raged, both Reno and Benteen were surrounded by Indians. The Indians killed 175 of the 210 troopers in Custer's command. The Indians then moved on to the supply train.





Map 3: Reno's Engagement and Retreat



Company F probably tried to take a stand along the open ground in front of the hillside where the last drama of the fight played out. The bulk of Company I was caught on the eastern edge of the river and caught in the narrow gulch between it and the hillside. The men were shot and killed, and the survivors were taken prisoner.

was ridden down and killed – shot, stabbed, or clubbed – by incensed warriors.

Meanwhile, Reno and Benning continued to hold their ground. They were surrounded by the enemy, but they fought bravely. Reno was wounded, but he kept fighting until he was killed. Benning was also wounded, but he survived the battle.



Strategic/Operational:

1) Strategy – Although Terry’s overall campaign strategy was sound —moving three mutually supporting columns of force to converge on the rebellious tribes and their village — it failed in its execution. Terry’s plan relied on two questionable assumptions: one being a smaller total number of Indians; the other that he was facing a less-determined foe. To complicate the situation, Terry never had the advantage of Crook’s assessment of the enemy after his tough fight at Rosebud Creek on the 17th, so no adjustments were made. Then, of course, there was Custer. Custer’s attack, without support from the larger force, deprived Terry of any chance at victory. If Custer and his 7th Cavalry had waited until Gibbon’s supporting column was in place, it is likely Terry’s campaign strategy would have succeeded.

2) Mass – Operationally, Terry’s biggest failure was his inability to synchronize his three columns to effectively mass his forces against the enemy. His subordinate commander (Custer) forced a battle that allowed the Indians to mass their superior numbers against a smaller portion of his force. The judgment of history has placed much of this blame on Custer, but senior commanders succeed by maneuvering their forces in such a way to allow them to apply strength against enemy weakness. In the final assessment, Terry failed to do this.

3) Intelligence Failure – The Army relied heavily on its Indian scouts leading up to Little Bighorn. These Crow, Arikara, and Pawnee – with their knowledge of the terrain, the habits and tendencies of the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho – were critical to the development of strategy in the field. Official Army estimates placed Indian numbers around 800. This seems to be the number that both Terry and Custer had in mind. But the official estimates failed to account for over 1,000 men who had come off the reservation to join this renegade group for the summer buffalo hunt. Failing to account for this large increase in enemy force size was a significant oversight that undoubtedly affected the outcome. To compound the problem, no information reached Terry about Brig. Gen. Crook’s battle with an unexpectedly strong force of Indians just 30 miles southeast of Little Bighorn on the 17th. Either of these important pieces of information might have altered the plan.

Tactical:

1) Custer’s Tactical Plan – In Terry’s written order, Custer was given wide discretion to conduct tactical actions. Custer’s plan to divide his forces, with Reno’s force as the “hammer” and his as the “anvil,” may have been appropriate against a smaller foe, but against the overwhelming force of determined Indians it was completely inadequate. Even if Custer worried about losing the initiative, or feared the Indians might escape, it was still ill-advised to rush headlong into an enemy that outnumbered him by over 2 to 1. Additionally, once the fighting started Custer failed to adjust his plan, consolidate his forces, or retreat to a more favorable position. In the end, Custer’s tactical plan was fatally flawed. Attacking a determined, numerically superior force – while his own forces were divided – was a recipe for disaster.

2) Mission Command – Terry failed to orchestrate his forces in accordance with his intent. From his written order to Custer, it is clear that he intended for Custer’s force to operate with support from Gibbon’s force. Yet, his order gave Custer the leeway to act independently if he saw the need – which Custer did. As noted above, he also continued the campaign without any word from Crook. Obtaining an assessment from Crook on the size and disposition of the enemy, or waiting for his three columns to join up, might have made all the difference.

Custer, too, failed in this regard, unable to effectively adjust or synchronize his outnumbered forces after the battle had begun. When Reno’s attack broke down, Custer completely lost his ability to maneuver his forces. Dividing his forces into three separate maneuver groups only made things worse. As his subordinates made adjustments, his plan continued to deteriorate. Reno’s decision to suspend his charge, along with Benteen’s failure to execute Custer’s order to come to the commander’s aid, both illustrate the mission command challenges Custer faced. But Custer bears the responsibility for putting his forces into positions where they were forced to react to an enemy who behaved differently than he expected.

3) Overreliance on Surprise – Custer believed that the element of surprise was critical. However, focusing on one advantage can blind commanders to others. Because Custer incorrectly believed that surprise had been compromised, he felt compelled to launch the attack early – without waiting for Terry’s and Gibbon’s forces to strengthen the blow. Ironically, surprise ended up working against Custer. The surprised Indians were unable to quickly evacuate their village. And with their substantial number of well-armed warriors, it was possible to fend off Reno’s initial attack and wrest the initiative from the 7th Cavalry. In the end, Custer’s fixation on gaining surprise blinded him to other important tactical considerations.

4) Overconfidence – Custer’s overconfidence may have been his most fatal flaw. Leading up to Little Bighorn, he had never lost a battle by using tactics he felt were proven. But he failed to fully account for, and respect, the difference in the new enemy he was facing, nor did he confirm for himself their large numbers before his assault. Furthermore, Custer declined the offer of the Gatling gun and even the addition of extra troops, asserting that both would slow him down. Either of these additions may have changed the outcome. In his haste to bring on the battle, and in his more personal glory for himself and his 7th Cavalry, he led many brave men to their deaths.

