

The Battle of the Little Big Horn, June 25-26, 1876

Summary

The Battle of the Little Bighorn, fought on June 25–26, 1876, stands as the most famous victory for Native American forces during the Great Sioux War. Known to the Lakota and other Plains Indians as the Battle of the Greasy Grass, it resulted in the total annihilation of five companies under the command of Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer.

The roots of the battle lay in the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie, which had guaranteed the Sioux ownership of the Black Hills. However, when gold was discovered there in 1874, white settlers and miners flooded the area. The U.S. government attempted to buy the land, but the Sioux refused. By late 1875, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs ordered all "hostile" bands to return to designated reservations by January 31, 1876. Many groups, led by influential figures like Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, ignored the ultimatum, viewing it as an illegal breach of their treaty rights.

In response, the U.S. Army launched a three-pronged "centripetal" campaign to trap the non-treaty bands in the Yellowstone River area. General Alfred Terry moved from the east, Colonel John Gibbon from the west, and General George Crook from the south. unbeknownst to the military, the Native American forces had gathered in unprecedented numbers. Inspired by a vision Sitting Bull had of "soldiers falling into his camp like grasshoppers," thousands of Lakota Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho converged in a massive village along the Little Bighorn River in present-day Montana. Estimates suggest the camp held between 7,000 and 10,000 people, including roughly 1,500 to 2,500 warriors.

On the morning of June 25, Custer's Crow and Arikara scouts located the village. Although his orders were to wait for Terry's slower-moving infantry and Gatling guns, Custer feared the village would scatter if he delayed. He also underestimated the size of the force awaiting him, believing there were only a few hundred warriors.

Custer divided his 7th Cavalry into three main battalions: Major Marcus Reno was ordered to charge the southern end of the village; Captain Frederick Benteen was sent south and west to prevent any escape; Custer took five companies (about 210

men) and moved along the bluffs to the north, likely seeking a spot to cross the river and strike the village from the flank.

The plan disintegrated almost immediately. Reno's charge was met not by fleeing families, but by a massive counter-attack. Outnumbered and overwhelmed, Reno's troops retreated into a timber grove and eventually made a panicked, disorganized "charge" back across the river to the high bluffs. This retreat cost him many men and left Benteen's arriving forces to dig in and defend a hilltop position (now known as Reno-Benteen Battlefield).

Meanwhile, Custer's five companies were moving north. As they attempted to descend toward the village, they were intercepted by warriors led by Crazy Horse, Gall, and Lamé White Man. The soldiers were forced onto a series of ridges. Unlike the popular "Custer's Last Stand" paintings depicting a heroic defense, archaeological evidence suggests the fight was chaotic. The soldiers were likely overwhelmed by superior numbers and a heavy barrage of arrows and repeating rifles.

Custer and his remaining men eventually clustered on what is now called Last Stand Hill. Within an hour of the main engagement starting, every man in Custer's immediate command was dead. After wiping out Custer, the warriors turned their attention back to Reno and Benteen, pinning them down for another day. On June 27, the approach of General Terry's main column forced the Native American village to break camp and scatter.

While a monumental victory, the battle was the beginning of the end for the Plains Indians' traditional way of life. The defeat of a "Civil War hero" like Custer outraged the American public during the nation's Centennial year. In response, the U.S. government poured massive resources into the region, eventually forcing the bands to surrender or flee to Canada.