

Volume 14

Number 049

LFM Custer's Last Stand II

Lead: For 400 years service men and women have fought to carve out and defend freedom and the civilization we know as America. This series on *A Moment in Time* is devoted to the memory of those warriors, whose devotion gave, in the words of Lincoln at Gettysburg, *the last full measure*.

Intro: A Moment In Time with Dan Roberts.

Content: George Armstrong Custer, leading the Seventh United States Cavalry Regiment, was

participating in a three-army campaign. They were sent by General Philip Sheridan to discipline several warlike Indian tribes who, by the spring of 1876, had drifted off their reservations into the valley of the Little Bighorn River in southern Montana. Custer's regiment was part of the army led by General Alfred Terry that had left Fort Abraham Lincoln on the Missouri River in June. The object of the three armies was to converge, find the wandering Indians, punish them and drag them chastened back to the reservation.

On June 22nd Terry split his command, sending Custer south

along Rosebud Creek with orders to find the Indians and wait while the general brought the balance of the army up so as to squeeze the tribes between them, but Custer would not wait. On the morning of June 26th he looked down into the valley and did not see the enormous gathering of warriors and their families because of the haze and the distance. Even if he had he would not have hesitated to attack. George Custer was a vain and ambitious man whose record of so-called victories stretched unblemished, but undistinguished, back to First Bull Run in the Civil War. He finished last in his class at West Point, but through artful political gamesmanship and sheer luck made

his way to the temporary rank of brigadier general at the age of twenty-three.

Custer's decision to move against the huge encampment with a hopelessly outnumbered regiment has confounded students of the battle since it happened. It may be that his ambitions overcame his judgment. He wanted more than anything to be President of the United States and the Democratic Convention was just about to begin in St. Louis. News that Custer had scattered or defeated the largest encampment of Indians ever gathered on the continent might have secured the nomination for him. Whatever his motives, Custer

entered the Valley that day without hesitation.

During the afternoon of June 25, 1876 Lt. Colonel George Armstrong Custer led elements of the Seventh United States Cavalry to their deaths. Operating on the supreme confidence that had nearly always attended his military service, George Custer, in a race with time and driven by political ambition, descended into the valley of the Little Bighorn in southern Montana. He was in pursuit of a group of Indian clans, the most prominent of which was the Sioux, who, led by their Chief Sitting Bull, had slipped off their reservation in what is now western South Dakota.

Custer's greatest problem? He was significantly outnumbered. The Seventh Cavalry, with fewer than seven hundred troops, faced perhaps the largest concentration of hostile American Indians ever to assemble in one place.

Instead of following his orders, which were to find the Indians and then await the rest of the army, Custer lit into them on his own. He foolishly divided his already small unit into four parts, sending the Indians scouts in one direction and his two subordinates elsewhere, thus exposing himself to grave danger. Custer had never been accused of a lack of daring and Little Bighorn was no exception.

He attempted to do something with his regiment that would have been hardly possible for the entire army: defeat thousands of Sioux, Cheyenne and their allies defending their homes and children. It was not unlike a man who without protection disturbs a giant hornets' nest. The Indians rose up and smashed him. Not a man survived in his personal command.

The demise of George Armstrong Custer was the high water mark of resistance by American Indians to the onslaught of white civilization. Sitting Bull outlived his tormentor, occasionally on the run, sometimes in jail, and nervously watched by a United States government that

feared his power and influence. He and his young son Crow Foot were killed while being arrested by Indian police on December 15, 1890.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Ambrose, Stephen E. *Crazy Horse and Custer: The Parallel Lives of Two American Warriors*. New York: Meridian Publishing, 1986.

Connell, Evan S. *Son of the Morning Star*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984.

Graham, William Alexander. *The Custer Myth: A Source Book of Custeriana*. New York: Bonanza Books, 1953.

Rosenberg, Bruce A. *Custer and the Epic of Defeat*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1974.

Utle, Robert Marshall. Cavalier in Buckskin: George
Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier.
Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988.

Copyright by Dan Roberts Enterprises, Inc.