Little Bighorn, Battle of

(June 25, 1876) Victory of Sioux and Cheyenne Native Americans against the US cavalry led by Colonel George Custer. Sometimes known as 'Custer's Last Stand', it was the last major victory of Native Americans against the US Army. The cavalry regiment of 225 men was annihilated by the Sioux, led by Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, near the Little Bighorn River, Montana.

Engagement on a tributary of the Bighorn River in Montana, USA, on 25 June 1876, in which Lt-Col George Custer suffered a crushing defeat by Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho Indians, under chiefs Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and Gall. The battle was the greatest defeat inflicted on the US Army in the Plains Wars.

Custer had been sent with the US 7th Cavalry to quell a Sioux uprising that had broken out in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Following the discovery of gold in 1874, white miners had been allowed to encroach on this area, which was sacred to the Sioux and had been granted to them in perpetuity by the US government as a homeland in 1868. Custer attacked a Sioux camp, ignoring scouting reports of an overwhelming Plains Indian force, and led a detachment of the 7th Cavalry into a ravine where thousands of Indian warriors lay in wait. In the battle, which lasted for just one hour, Custer and everyone under his immediate command, an estimated 225 soldiers, were killed.

Build up to US–Sioux hostilities The US government had tried to buy the Black Hills area from the Sioux soon after the start of the South Dakota gold rush. The Sioux refused to sell their sacred grounds, so in December 1875 the government ordered all the Plains Indians back onto their reservations by 31 January 1876. The two main war leaders of the Sioux, Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, who had fought with Red Cloud between 1865 and 1868, refused to lay down their arms and give up the Black Hills and their Powder River hunting grounds in Montana. Under the Second Fort Laramie Treaty, the US government had allowed them to hunt on these traditional lands but reserved the right to ban them.

Sitting Bull led his Hunkpapa Sioux to the Powder River country and camped by Rosebud Creek. Chief Crazy Horse soon joined him with his Oglala Sioux. A large number of undefeated Cheyenne and Arapaho warriors and their families also joined the camp. By May 1876 there were over 7,000 American Indians on the Rosebud, including 2,000 warriors. The Plains Indians had gathered in what could be seen as one last effort to preserve their way of life against the encroaching Americans. Sitting Bull inspired confidence and the other Plains Indians felt safe with him. Once the 60 days was up, the US Army, led by General Philip Sheridan, moved in to crush the American Indians on the Rosebud.

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US plan of attack Sheridan decided on a three-pronged attack from the south, west, and east of the Indian camp. They would be surrounded and crushed by the combined force of 2,500 cavalry and infantry under generals George Crook and Alfred Terry, and Col John Gibbon. The heart of Terry's force was the 7th Cavalry under Custer. The generals had at least 330 km/200 miles to march to the Rosebud, and had little information on the strength of the Indians. Sheridan believed there to be just 800 warriors, whereas there were over 2,000.

Battle of the Rosebud, 1876 The first setback for the US Army was the defeat of General Crook's force in the Battle of the Rosebud on 17 June. Crook's men were attacked on the upper Rosebud by 1,500 warriors led by Crazy Horse and forced to retreat south towards Fort Fetterman and away from the fighting. By now the Indians had moved on to the Little Bighorn River.

Attack on the Little Bighorn On 21 June Gibbon and Terry combined their 1,450 men and prepared for a joint attack, not knowing that Crook's forces had been defeated. With no word from Crook, they decided to move quickly. The infantry under Gibbon and Terry would attack from the north, while the 7th Cavalry, led by Custer, would scout around the Wolf Mountains and attack from the south. Complete precision was crucial, the two groups had to arrive at the same time and synchronise their attacks to succeed.

Custer failed to follow orders. By going through rather than round the Wolf Mountains, he arrived a day early on 25 June. His early arrival and subsequent reckless attack led to the massacre of his cavalry. Custer had 600 men; he had been offered four companies of the 2nd Cavalry, an extra 180 men, but had refused them because of his arrogant belief that he could defeat any American Indian camp on the Plains single-handedly. He also refused the offer of a Gatling gun battery, a rapid fire gun, as it would slow his progress.

Custer attacked the Indian encampment on the afternoon of 25 June. He split his forces into three groups: Major Marcus Reno led about 125 men to attack from the south, Captain Frederick Benteen led a similar detachment to support Reno's attack, and Custer took an estimated 225 men to attack the camp from the north. The remaining cavalry were left in reserve, guarding supplies and ammunition on the baggage train. Custer had been warned by his Crow scout, Curly, not to attack the huge camp, but he ignored all advice. The 7th Cavalry were severely disadvantaged. They were clearly outnumbered by the 2,000 warriors and were tired from their forced march of the previous two days. In addition the 7th Cavalry had single-shot Springfield rifles, while the American Indians had the technologically superior repeating Winchester rifles which could fire much faster.

Custer ordered Major Reno to attack from the south while he wheeled around to attack the camp from the north. Reno's force was soon beaten back by the warriors and trapped on the bluffs overlooking the Little Bighorn. Benteen joined Reno and the two spent the next 36 hours fighting off the Indian attacks, completely unable to assist Custer. Custer was soon trapped on top of a hill and surrounded by the warriors led by Sioux chiefs Crazy Horse and Gall. By 4 p.m. Custer and his detachment were all dead. When General Terry arrived two days later on 27 June, the Indians had withdrawn and the bodies of Custer's soldiers lay scalped and mutilated on the hill above the camp. Sitting Bull had inflicted the greatest defeat on the US Army of the entire Plains Wars. The official death toll of the battle was 268 killed or mortally wounded, and 60 wounded. News of the defeat reached the East on 4 July 1876, the 100th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and acted as a shocking reminder of the dangers still faced by the USA in conquering the North American continent.

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