

## "You and I are going home today, by a road we do not know"

Written by Andy Owen



Much has been written about George Armstrong Custer and the Battle Of The Little Bighorn.

Not a lot of it in the early days was true. It's only in recent times that a more truthful and detailed overview of the man and the famous battle that saw him as one of the key central figures - has emerged.

However, much is still shrouded in mist and conjecture. I suspect this will always be. Anyway, after much research, this is my take on what happened on that fateful day.

Firstly, let's look at Custer himself - and correct a few things.

He was not a General as his legend states. He was a Lieutenant Colonel, who at West Point military school was a real duffer. He had finished bottom of his class.

He had, however, served with distinction in the American Civil War during the 1860's, but after that, his rise had stalled.

His reputation was on the slide and he was in need of a boost to re-establish his reputation and restore his finances, which were in a poor state.



*George Armstrong Custer*

His army - the 7th Cavalry - were a pretty scraggy bunch - ill disciplined, badly trained and overly fond of the bottle. This was not a top fighting unit.

Far from it, in fact.

Nearly half of them were immigrants from England, Ireland, Germany and Italy. And the American plains - now South Dakota, Wyoming and Montana - would have felt completely alien to them.

Custer was 37 years old at the time of the battle.

The events leading up to the Bighorn battle were typical of the blinkered and confusing policy of the U.S. Government towards the Native American population.

In 1868, a Treaty was finalised, which guaranteed the Lakota and Dakota Sioux and the Arapaho, exclusive possession of all territory west of the Missouri River.

But, the discovery of gold in the Black Hills changed all that.

White miners started appearing in large numbers in search of gold - and they were settling in these lands - *sacred lands* - especially to the Lakota.

By 1876, there were 4,000 miners in the Black Hills - and young Sioux warriors, already furious with these white men in their sacred lands, were becoming incensed...

The US Government refused to remove the settlers, going against the previous Treaty.

They tried to persuade the Lakota to sell the territory, but they refused, because of the importance of these lands to their people.

Disgracefully, the U.S. government issued an order to the Indian agencies that all Indians must return to the designated reservations by January 31st, 1876, or they would be deemed hostile.



*Sitting Bull*

Confrontation was inevitable.

The Indians knew what was coming and had started their preparations.

Bands of Lakota and Northern Cheyenne Indians, plus a smaller number of Arapaho, started to come together under the leadership of a charismatic Lakota called Sitting Bull

In the spring of 1876, the hunting season was starting - and this saw many more Indians leaving their reservations to join the growing band.

They were camped on the Little Bighorn River in Southern Montana.

Earlier in the spring, the Indians celebrated the annual Sun Dance ceremony, during which Sitting Bull experienced a vision.



*Sun Dance*

He saw soldiers toppling upside down in his camp, which he interpreted as a prophesy of a great victory for his people.

Sitting Bull was 45 years old. He was determined that his people would never give up their revered lands without a bitter fight.

By the late spring, Sitting Bull's force has grown to close on 3,000 strong.

He also had at his side, the brave and inspirational Crazy Horse.



*Crazy Horse*

The U.S. government ordered three army columns to converge on the Sioux from the east, west, and south - and Brigadier General Alfred Terry's Dakota Column left Fort Abraham Lincoln on May 17th 1876.

On June 22nd, Custer and the 7th Cavalry - which represented the largest part of the Dakota Column - left the fort and were instructed to follow Sitting Bull's trail, which led them into the Little Bighorn Valley.

Terry's plan was, on paper, a simple one.

The plan was for Custer's cavalry and Brigadier General Alfred Terry's infantry to rendezvous with troops under the command of Colonel John Gibbon and Brigadier General George Crook.

They'd then find the Indians, surround them and force their surrender.

Crook was delayed, but Terry, Custer and Gibbon met-up in mid-June and after a scouting party found an Indian trail headed toward Little Big Horn Valley, they decided Custer should move in, attack and surround the Indians and await reinforcements.

By the morning of June 25th, Custer's scouts had discovered the location of Sitting Bull's village.

Custer had intended to move the 7th Cavalry into a position that would allow his force to attack the village at dawn the next day.

While his preparations were underway, a group of stray Indian warriors sighted a few 7th Cavalrymen. They were spotted, but not confronted.

Assuming his presence had been exposed, Custer decided to attack the village without further delay.

Custer's scouts warned him about the size of the village, with trusted scout *Mitch Bouyer* reportedly saying, "*General, I have been with these Indians for 30 years, and this is the largest village I have ever seen.*"

Custer's overriding concern was that the Native American group would break up and scatter. The command began its approach to the village at noon and prepared to attack in full daylight.

With an impending sense of doom, the Crow scout *Half Yellow Face* prophetically warned Custer, as he told him:

*"You and I are going home today by a road we do not know".*

Custer chose to ignore the warnings.

He split his regiment into three battalions. He sent three companies under the command of Major Marcus Reno to charge straight into the village.

He sent three companies under Captain Frederick Benteen further south to cut off the flight of any Indians in that direction.

He then took the five companies under his personal command, to the north of the village to attack the village from there. That tactic proved to be disastrous. In fragmenting his regiment, Custer had left its three main components unable to provide support to each other.

Added to that, was misinformation.

Army intelligence had estimated Sitting Bull's force at 800 fighting men.

But, over 3,000 Sioux and Cheyenne warriors were in the village. And, they were very angry.

It was the biggest alliance of Plains Indians hostile to the government that had ever gathered in one place

Reno's group attacked first, but swiftly became outnumbered and they had to quickly retreat. The Indians had been ready, as word had quickly spread of the impending attack.

Reno's retreat was very disorganised and, by the time they had regrouped, at least 30 troops were dead. Benteen's troops came to Reno's aid and the combined battalions joined forces, on what is now known as Reno Hill.

This hill was four miles from Custer and his men.

Back in the village, Sitting Bull had rallied the warriors and saw first to the safety of the women and children, while Crazy Horse set off with a large force to meet Custer's five divisions, head on.

Hunkpapa Lakota warriors were the main thrust of the attack, led by Chief Gall.

Crazy Horse and other Indian leaders were in close support.

Many historians believe that Crazy Horse showed great tactical awareness in the heat of the battle, by leading a flanking assault - ensuring the death of Custer and his men. But this has never been confirmed.

What is clear, is that Crazy Horse was a key individual in this battle.

Several eyewitness Indian accounts underlined this. *Water Man*, one of only five Arapaho warriors who fought, said *Crazy Horse "was the bravest man I ever saw. He rode closest to the soldiers, yelling to his warriors. All the soldiers were shooting at him, but he was never hit"*.

The Indians were in control of the battle virtually from the first skirmishes.

Custer must have realised the mistake he had made - and sent messages to Reno and Benteen for help. But, they had their hands full trying to survive the vicious assaults on their position. So, Custer was on his own.

He desperately tried to regroup his men, but they were quickly overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers - and, somewhat surprisingly, superior firepower.

Most of Custer's men were armed with Springfield single-shot carbine rifles - and Colt .45 revolvers. The Indians had Winchester and Henry & Spencer repeating rifles, as well as bows and arrows.

It was a no contest.



Under the sheer pressure of the Indian onslaught, Custer's line and command structure quickly collapsed - and soon it was every man for himself.

They were quickly pushed back to a hill overlooking the village - and the Indian warriors closed in to engage Custer's soldiers in hand-to-hand fighting.



Many of the troopers were so confounded by the ferocity of the warriors, that they simply gave up, throwing their guns away and pleading for mercy.

One warrior, *Standing Bear*, later told his son, "*Many of them lay on the ground, with their blue eyes open, waiting to be killed*".

It was sheer carnage...

Death was delivered with bullets and arrows. Some were battered to death with stone clubs.

Custer's brother, Tom, is thought to have been the last to die - killed by the Cheyenne *Yellow Nose* who, having lost his rifle, was fighting with an old sabre.

When Tom Custer's body was found two days later, his skull had been pounded to the thickness of a man's hand.

A hundred yards to the West, lay the bodies of a third Custer brother, Boston, together with the brothers' nephew, Autie Reed.

After close to an hour of sickening violence, Custer's Last Stand was over and all those who had followed Custer - 210 men - were all dead.

In Reno and Benteen's battalions, another 55 were dead and severely wounded (six died later from their wounds), including four Crow Indian scouts and at least two Arikara Indian scouts.

Over two days of the battle, the Indians lost 50 warriors.

The reinforcements from Fort Lincoln who eventually reached the battleground, later called 'Last Stand Hill', found several hundred bodies, hacked to pieces and bristling with arrows, putrefying in the summer sun.

Amid this scene of "sickening, ghastly horror" they found Custer, lying face-up across two of his men, with a smile on his face.

Custer's body had two bullet wounds - one just below the heart and one to the left temple.

It is felt that the latter wound was possibly evidence of a final act of mercy, carried out by his brother Tom, to stop a wounded Custer falling into Indian hands.

His smile in death has not been explained, but there are many theories.

Some feel it could have been manufactured post-mortem by the Indians who, despite scalping, stripping and mutilating most of the bodies, let Custer's body off relatively lightly.

They drove an awl - a spiked weapon - into his ear, bursting his eardrums as a sign that he refused to listen to the Indians.

They also fired an arrow into his genitals.

Perhaps his smile was a final smile of reassurance to a brother about to commit the most harrowing act of mercy.

Or maybe it was the last rueful smile of a man who finally realised that his luck had well and truly run out.

The Battle of the Little Big Horn didn't end with the massacre of Custer and his men.

The Indians quickly regrouped and turned their attention to Reno's and Benteen's battalions.

But, 400 soldiers and scouts held off a prolonged and vicious assault until the next evening, when the Indians finally broke off their attack and departed, before General Terry's reinforcements finally arrived.

Now it was the Indians who were outnumbered, so they packed up camp and fled, bringing the largest defeat of the U.S. Army during the Plains Indian Wars to an end.



Understandably, the Indians revelled in their victory for a time, but their celebration was short-lived, as was their freedom.

When word of Custer's death reached the American people, proudly celebrating their nation's centennial on July 4th, there was great anger - and the people demanded retribution.



Many white Americans were outraged.

And this massacre only confirmed their image of the Indians as wild and bloodthirsty savages.

The U.S. Government increased its efforts to subdue the tribes - and, within five years, almost all of the Sioux and Cheyenne would be confined to reservations.

In May 1877, Crazy Horse surrendered at Fort Robinson, Nebraska, where he was later bayoneted and killed, after an altercation with an army officer.

After fleeing to Canada, Sitting Bull eventually surrendered in 1881 and lived on Standing Rock Reservation until he was also killed in 1890 by a policeman during a minor conflict at his house.

Libbie Custer, Custer's widow, worked feverishly to polish and promote her husband's memory - and during the following decades, her husband and his troops came to be considered iconic, even heroic, figures in American history.

For some, they still are.

For the vast majority, very different opinions are now held.



*"Sunrise on Custer Battlefield" photo by Richard Throssel,  
Courtesy Western History/Genealogy Department, Denver Public Library*