Sioux Vengeance: The True Story of the Custer Massacre: The Record of Great Heroism: The Savages Were Overwhelming in Numbers, and Mishap and Miscommunication Did the Rest

Sitting Bull’s tragic death closed another bloody act in the terrible drama of revenge that had its scene in the Yellowstone region for a quarter of a century. The bloodiest period in that drama marks the slaughter of Custer and his devoted band, and in this Sitting Bull took part, either in person or through followers whom he inspired.

The most important leader of the hostile Sioux at the time was Crazy Horse, who, like Sitting Bull, was simply head man of a band and not a tribal chief. The warriors led by these head men numbered about 250. In the early spring of 1876 repeated hostilities on the part of these roving bands toward white settlers and friendly Indians in Montana and Dakota stirred the government to some action to bring them under subjection. It was proposed to surround them and offer the usual terms.

The Indians were on the Yellowstone or its tributaries, and a column of troops under Gen. Terry and another under Gen. Crook started from opposite directions with the purpose of hemming them in. Terry was on the north along Yellowstone, and had with him two bodies of infantry and cavalry, one led by himself and the other by Col. John Gibbon. Custer was with Terry, and commanded the Seventh cavalry. While the column was halted near the mouth of Rosebud river a scouting expedition struck a fresh lodge pole trail leading toward Big Horn river, a stream parallel with the Rosebud and thirty to fifty miles west of it. Terry divided his forces into two columns, one led by Gibbon, comprising all the infantry and four troops of cavalry, to move along the Yellowstone to the Big Horn and then southward along that stream, closing in on the redskins from the north, and the other, consisting of the Seventh cavalry, led by Custer, to move southward along the Rosebud until he struck the Indian trail.

Terry accompanied Gibbon’s column, and gave Custer discretionary powers as to his action after striking the trail. He stated to Custer that he believed the trail would lead toward Little Big Horn, a tributary of Big Horn draining a hilly region between that river and the Rosebud, and expressed the opinion that Custer had best not follow it in that case, but continue southward a specified distance, and then swing in westward toward Little Big Horn, to prevent the escape of Indians south or southeast should they flee before Gibbon’s column. Custer started from the mouth of the Rosebud June 22, and on the morning of June 25 crossed the “divide” between Rosebud and Little Big Horn, following the trail into a little valley leading to the latter stream.

Custer left no explanation of his reason for following the trail instead of continuing southward, as Terry suggested. He consulted with his officers and scouts about crossing the divide in the presence of Indians who had been seen, and after crossing it and reaching the sheltering valley separated his regiment into four bodies and gave orders to sweep down on a wide circuit to the river. Custer, with Companies C, E, F, I and L, kept straight ahead. Maj. Reno, with three companies, marched on the opposite side of the valley stream, and Capt. was left with the pack train. Reno and Custer moved within sight of each other during the forenoon, and about 11 o’clock Custer signaled Reno to rejoin him and an hour later instructed him to move forward and charge. The recall of Reno from the center made a wide interval between the right and left wings under Custer and Benteen and as Reno went ahead in direct advance of Custer the gap remained unclosed. Benteen went on, as ordered, an hour and a half, and not finding Indians closed in to the right, recrossed the little valley and regained the main trail in rear of Custer.

The column was thus moving in four bodies on the same route in the following order: Reno, Custer, Benteen, McDougal. Reno dashed ahead, reached Little Big Horn and crossed, hearing nothing further from Custer. Benteen, after recrossing little valley to the main route, met a man of Custer’s column returning with an order to McDougal to hurry forward the pack train. Later a messenger from headquarters was met returning with an order to Benteen to come on quick there was a big village ahead. These two communications were the last that passed between any soul of Custer’s party and any known survivor, excepting one, from the time Reno parted company with them.

The exception was an Indian scout, who served Custer as such, and during the fight disguised himself as a Sioux and escaped. His story is corroborated in part by the testimony of Kill Eagle, who was one of the hostiles, and by the position of the bodies of Custer and his followers, as found. It appears that Custer followed Reno to the point where the latter crossed Little Big Horn, and kept down the east bank of the stream four miles, thinking that Reno’s attack would fall upon one end of the village and that he would attack the other. The high bluff on the river prevented his attacking where he wished, and when finally he reached a ford the Indians met him and drove him back down from the stream. Custer then dismounted his men and gradually retired in the face of superior numbers, seizing the most defensible positions he could find. For several hours these were defended, the officers and the men falling in the order in which they stood in the ranks. The Indians charged again and again, and Custer went about among his men animating them until he fell very near the last.

The scout stated that when the fight seemed hopeless he went to Custer and offered to help him escape; that the gallant soldier thought a moment, with characteristic poise of the head, then, seeing the Indians pouring down for a fresh attack, waved the tempter away and joined a knot of men to fight his last. The story told by Kill Eagle is to the effect that an attack was made on the southern end of the Indian camp by troops from across the river (Reno), but was soon repulsed, the troops recrossing to a bluff, where they were joined by other troops (Benteen and McDougal). The hostiles returned to the village after repulsing this attack on the south, and were immediately summoned to meet troops coming across the river to the east (Custer). The warriors all deserted the village and crossed the stream to fight. After several hours, they returned, stating that the soldiers had all been killed. Then they crossed the stream again to the hill and attacked the troops there (Reno, Benteen and McDougal).

**Source:** The Salt Lake Herald, March 10, 1891, page 6