

# The Indian Wars Staff Ride

by Lieutenant Colonel Edwin L. Kennedy, Jr.



The name “Custer” usually brings to mind a variety of images, ranging from the brave commander surrounded on a hill in southern Montana, fighting off hordes of Indians, to an egotistical martinet leading his troops to disaster. Many people view Custer on the basis of Hollywood impressions. Unfortunately, this narrow perspective of the entire Indian Wars experience, and that of the U.S. Army in the West, is based upon the Little Bighorn battle fought on 25 June 1876.

There is much more to the Plains Indians Wars than the short battle that took place over the span of a couple of hours on the Little Bighorn at Last Stand Hill. Numerous parallels exist in the small, regular Army of the Indian Wars period to the “downsized” Army of today as it searches for new roles in a post-Cold War environment. This makes the staff ride not only interesting, but applicable in a number of respects to situations currently facing the Army.

The Combat Studies Institute of the U.S. Army’s Command and General Staff College frequently conducts staff rides to Wyoming and Montana to put Custer and tactical actions at the Little Bighorn into their proper context. Originally developed by Dr. Glenn Robertson and the Staff Ride Committee, the Indian Wars staff ride covers several significant events leading to the Little Bighorn battle. Additionally, Dr. Jerold Brown of the Combat Studies Institute teaches the elective, “Irregular Warfare” which uses the Indian Wars staff ride as the basis of study. Dr. Brown has conducted about 20 Indian Wars staff rides.

In terms of complexity, the Indian Wars staff ride has been one of the most difficult to develop, due to the time-distance factors and the coordina-



Students ride horses during parts of the three-day staff ride.

tion necessary with numerous agencies and individuals to gain access to the lands over which the school conducts the staff ride. Unlike some of its Civil War counterpart rides, the Indian Wars staff ride covers an area encompassing a couple of hundred square miles. Whereas the Civil War staff rides are normally conducted on one major national or state park and adjoining land accessible to the public, the Indian Wars staff ride covers locations that include private and corporate lands, as well as state and national parks. The amount of coordination involved requires good relations between the landowners and the staff ride committee in order to maintain access.

The purpose of the staff ride is not to conduct battlefield tours, but to link “...a historical event, systematic preliminary study, and actual terrain to produce battle analysis in three dimensions.”<sup>1</sup> In this regard, staff ride participants are prepared for the exercise by self study, classes, and briefings.

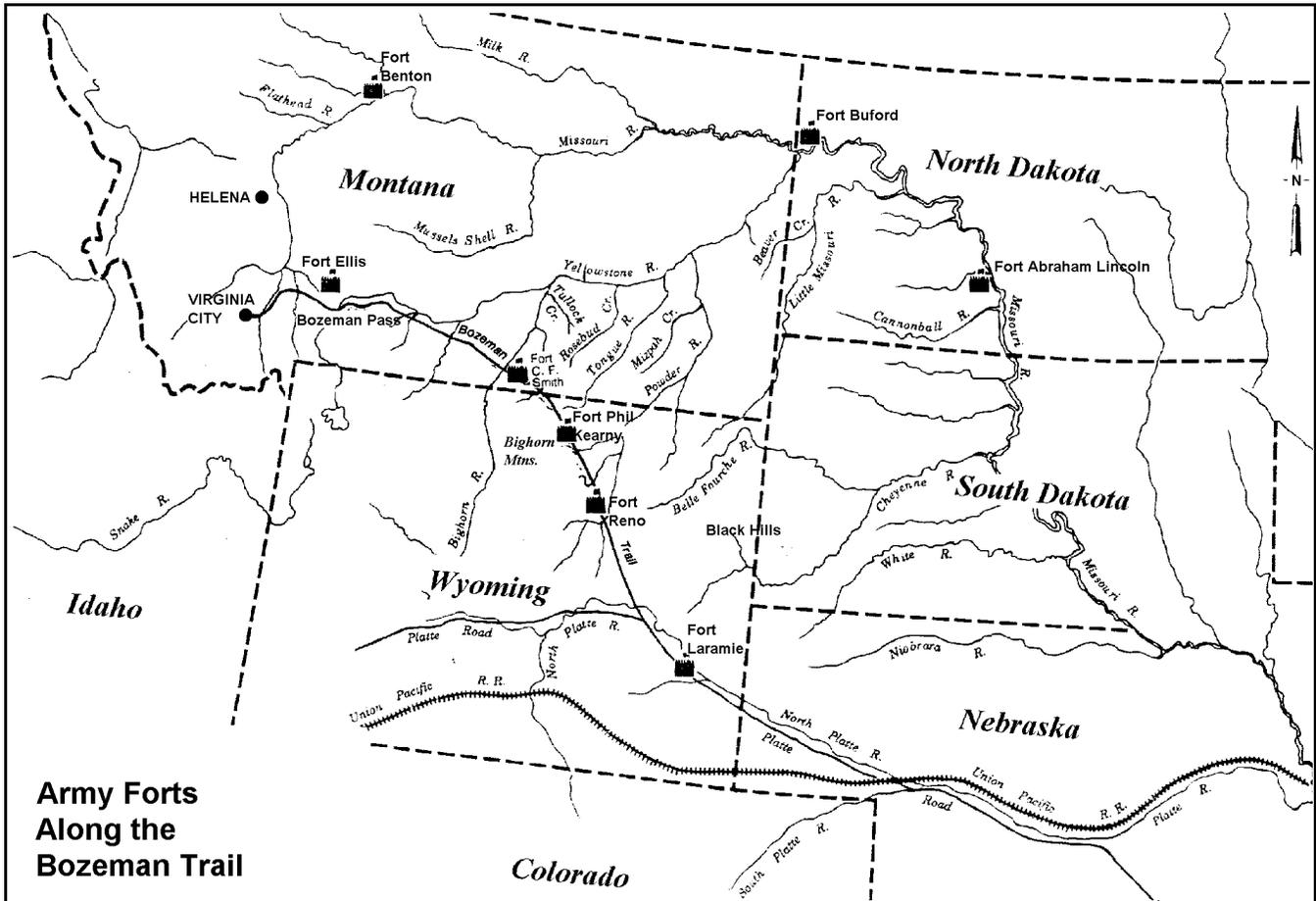
The overall importance of the exercise is the integration of the lessons learned to current doctrine and operations. Significantly, there are many lessons involving the human dimensions of war and the dynamics of battle which are timeless and can relate to conflicts today. In today’s strategic situation, reduced force structure and non-conventional missions pose issues that are analogous to those the U.S. Army faced on the western frontier from

1866-1890. These are just a few of the reasons for conducting the staff ride.

The Indians Wars staff ride is normally conducted over a three-day period. It begins in Wyoming, along the old Bozeman Trail which runs from Wyoming into Montana. The Bozeman Trail was developed during the Civil War, and by 1865, there were enough settlers and miners using the trail to warrant Army protection, even though the trail cut through designated Indian hunting lands confirmed by treaty. Fort Phil Kearny was one of three forts built along the Bozeman Trail to protect settlers and miners attempting to shortcut the route to the western Montana gold fields.

During the immediate post-Civil War period, the large number of settlers moving westward increasingly clashed with the Indians. The U.S. Army was caught in a dilemma of enforcing treaty land provisions granted to the Indians and protecting the settlers who often violated the treaty provisions.

Complicating the situation was the issue of the Indians, who also violated the treaty land provisions to hunt or raid outside artificial geographic boundaries they did not always recognize. Additionally, the Indians were not a monolithic entity with a centralized government. Even different clans within tribes did not feel compelled to obey treaties signed by fellow chiefs. This fact continuously caused consternation and confusion with Army com-



manders, who were used to fighting a conventional enemy with defined lines of authority and chains of command.

This was the situation brevet Major General and regular Army Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer and his newly formed 7th Cavalry found themselves in. Over a period of ten years, from 1866-76, the 7th Cavalry was spread across the United States and Indian territories trying to perform a variety of missions, to include occupation duty in the South, as well as garrison duties in the West. Within a short three-day period, the staff ride draws together the issues facing the Army in its conflict with the Plains Indians, showing how it adapted from conventional warfare to fighting irregular warfare with varying results.

Beginning with the post-Civil War Army of 1866, the staff ride concentrates on the background and events which eventually led to the destruction of five companies of the Seventh Cavalry under Custer's command ten years later. Critical to the analysis of what happened to Custer is the historical context of the campaign of 1876. Understanding the cause and effect relationships is key to proper critical analysis of the conduct of the Indian Wars

by the U.S. Army, especially battles such as the Little Bighorn. Most important is an understanding of the individual battles taken in respect to the entire conflict in an operational and strategic context, not in isolation.

### Staff Ride Day 1

*21 December 1866/2 August 1867*

The first stop on the staff ride is Fort Phil Kearny, now a state park. In 1866, Colonel Henry Carrington and the 18th Infantry Regiment were ordered to garrison posts along the Bozeman Trail, running northwest from central Wyoming along the base of the Bighorn Mountains into Montana. During the summer of 1866, Carrington moved his regiment into Indian territory and built three posts running in a string north from Fort Laramie to a point west of present day Billings, Montana.

Fort Reno (no relation to Major Marcus Reno, 7th Cavalry) was garrisoned with companies of the 18th Infantry, while the balance of the regiment moved on to establish Fort Phil Kearny just south of present day Sheridan, Wyoming. Carrington chose Fort Phil Kearny for his regimental headquarters and sent another couple of companies

further north to establish Fort C.F. Smith.

The importance of Fort Phil Kearny is evident in the events that occurred along the Bozeman Trail in 1866 and 1867. The staff ride uses these events to put into context further study of the Plains Indian conflicts for the next ten years, leading to the battle at the Little Bighorn. The significant actions which took place in conjunction with Fort Phil Kearny include the Fetterman "Massacre" on 21 December 1866 and the Wagon Box Fight which took place on 2 August 1867. The first was a disaster for the Army and the second a victory.<sup>2</sup>

After studying the establishment of the fort and its activities during the latter part of 1866, the staff ride participants move to a point along the Bozeman Trail about three miles north of the fort. It was here that Captain James Fetterman and his 80-man command, consisting primarily of elements of Companies A, C, and H, 18th Infantry, and Company C, 2nd Cavalry, were annihilated by a force of about 1,200 Cheyenne and Sioux Indians gathered by Chief Red Cloud.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the issues examined include troop training, leadership, the effects of



The Fetterman Monument, near Fort Phil Kearny, Wyoming.

technology, the effects of terrain, the Indians and their tactics, and the problems with the tactical deployment of the force under Fetterman. Understanding these factors helps understand why Fetterman's force was wiped out. The staff riders then transition to the survivors of the disaster and their actions seven months later.

The staff riders move to the location of the "Pinery," where trees were harvested for use at the fort. Only a couple of miles west of the Fetterman engagement site, and situated on the lower slopes of the Bighorn Mountains, the Pinery was the site of an engagement immortalized on one of the "Army in Action" series prints commonly seen in many barracks. In this action, Captain James Powell, with many of the same soldiers remaining at Fort Phil Kearny after the Fetterman engagement, defeated a greatly superior force of Indians.

During the interim between the Fetterman engagement and the Wagon Box Fight, the 18th Infantry units at Fort Phil Kearny were reflagged and rearmed.<sup>3</sup> Now the 27th Infantry, Powell commanded a company armed with newly issued Allin conversion, breech-loading rifles. Unlike Fetterman's infantrymen, who were fighting with muzzleloading Civil War leftovers, Powell's soldiers were armed with rifles converted to fire metallic cartridges.

The contrast between the two engagements is an outstanding lesson in how technology, organization, and the tactical situation can radically alter battlefield outcomes in a very short period of time. Both units were severely outnumbered. The Fetterman fight was characterized, however, by an ad hoc unit caught in the open with out-of-date weapons, and destroyed in detail. Powell's fight was characterized by a relatively cohesive unit, armed with breech-loading weapons and fighting from a protected defensive position.

The visit to the Wagon Box Fight site concludes the field portion of the first day of the staff ride. During dinner, the staff riders normally conduct preparations for the next day. This includes briefings and discussions to transition the group to the 1876 campaign. The briefings cover the intervening years between 1866 and 1876 and the concept of the campaign plan envisioned by General Philip H. Sheridan.

The second day of the staff ride is conducted in Montana, at the Rosebud battlefield. This battle, which took place a week prior to the Little Bighorn, is put into its proper perspective by describing the forces involved, the command and control structure, and the concept of the operations from General George Crook's view. Because the Rosebud battlefield is fairly compact and relatively accessible, units conducting the staff ride may elect to be mounted on horseback. Local cavalry reenactors lease horses equipped with McClellan saddles, which give an added air of authenticity to what was largely a cavalry and mounted infantry battle.

Units under the command of General Crook, the renowned Indian fighter, moved as one of three columns ordered by Sheridan to converge on the Indians in the Unceded Territories in order to force them back onto the reservations in accordance with treaty provisions. Crook's column was the southernmost, originating from Fort Fetterman in the spring of 1876. Two other columns, one under Colonel John Gibbon in the northwest, and one under General Alfred H. Terry, in the east, were to operate in cooperation with each other in order to corner and subdue the hostile tribes.

Custer and the 7th Cavalry were the major subordinate combat component of General Terry's column, and therefore only one portion of a number of units participating in the campaign. Under Sheridan's proposed concept, the

three major columns would converge somewhere in the area between their garrisons in the Unceded Territories to cause the Indians to face one of the largest Army forces fielded on the western plains to that date. The desired result would be the defeat of the hostile tribes and their return to the reservations. The overwhelming Army forces would assure compliance.

The Rosebud battle offers excellent lessons on synchronization, command and control, reconnaissance, intelligence, and security. The battlefield ride covers about 5.5 to 6 miles of the terrain and begins and ends near General Crook's first CP. Crook's column con-



Retired Major Rod Cooley, dressed as a 1876-era bugler, adds authenticity to the Rosebud Battlefield visit. He is a member of the U.S. Horse Cavalry Association.

sisted of companies of the 2nd and 3rd Cavalry and 4th and 9th Infantry Regiments.<sup>4</sup> In terms of the number of participants, this battle was not very significant. For those veterans of the Civil War, the battle would have been classified as a minor engagement. To put it into perspective, the battlefield covers approximately the same area as the battle of Chickamauga. But at Chickamauga, each side fielded more than 60,000 men each. At the battle at the Rosebud, each side numbered only about 1,000 men and lasted only about six hours, as opposed to several days.

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The battle, which took place on June 17, 1876, progressed in a northerly direction uphill from the Rosebud valley where Crook's command had halted for a rest. Surprised in a position which could best be described as an administrative halt, Crook had to deploy quickly and attempt to regain the initiative. The infantry began to fight dismounted under their commander, Major Alexander Chambers, having been mounted on mules the day before in order to increase their mobility. The cavalry was ordered to resaddle, form, and take the high ground.

Terrain played an important role in the disposition of forces, and as Crook's elements advanced, they followed the natural lines of the ridges and hills leading out of the valley. By mid-morning, subordinate elements of the command had become separated. Lieutenant Colonel William Royall, Crook's second-in-command, was separated from the main body by a large valley for a distance of about a mile as he pursued warriors to the northwest. In danger of being defeated in detail, Crook attempted to consolidate his forces.

Misreading the Indian's intentions, suffering from a lack of tactical information, and focusing on an Indian village thought to be in proximity to the battlefield, Crook sent part of the cavalry to threaten the lodges. Continued hostile pressure forced the dispatched column to be recalled. Crook hoped that he could envelop the Indians facing him at the Rosebud. After several hours of tough skirmishing, Crook's force held the field, the Indians left, and the village was not found by Crook's column.

Riding over the battlefield on horseback allows the staff riders to get a sense of the time-distance factors, the difficulties in controlling mounted units, and, for non-riders, a feel of how the mounted infantry must have felt after riding mules for the first time over 35 miles to get to the battlefield the day prior to the battle. An appreciation for the terrain and the effects of cross-compartmentalized country on intervisibility is gained by traveling the width and breadth of the battlefield.

Finally, students absorb the human dimension of battle by traveling along the steep slopes of the ridgelines, negotiating the hills, and viewing the same areas which the soldiers and Indians would have seen. Unlike many eastern battlefields of the Civil War, the Rosebud is in much the same state it was in 1876. Very few trees obscure vision,

and the fields of fire are as they were at the time the battle occurred. Even so, it is almost incomprehensible that the soldiers in Crook's column expended about 25,000 rounds and killed only about 36 warriors.<sup>5</sup> Naturally, these numbers indicate that marksmanship, or lack thereof, was a consideration which still impacts soldiers' training today.

The second day's staff ride is concluded with a brief integration period. Riding or walking all day in a warm sun helps the staff riders appreciate how the weather and physical exertion may have affected the participants of the battle, who were clothed in wool uniforms. Most riders are glad to get back to the vehicles for a cold drink and the drive back to Sheridan to prepare for the third day of the ride.

### **Staff Ride Day 3**

*24/25 June 1876*

Day three of the ride begins along the route Custer followed the evening before he rode to the Little Bighorn, near current day Busby, Montana. Using four-wheel drive vehicles, the staff ride follows the approximate route that the 7th Cavalry covered during its move to the Little Bighorn. The most significant part of the entire staff ride takes place this last day for a number of reasons, to include the synthesis of the background materials presented on the first two days.

Important to the understanding of the events at the battle are the backgrounds of the commanders making the decisions and the "doctrine" (if it can be called that) under which the Army operated at the time. The analysis of the final events in the battle are driven by a number of decision points along the line of march from the camp of the 7th Cavalry on 24 June 1876 to the Little Bighorn. Several times along the route, the group halts where the 7th Cavalry did, and the situation to that point is reviewed. Each stop is important due to the presentation of new information made available to Custer as he progressed toward the Little Bighorn. Staff riders are reminded not to make judgments or assessments, despite their knowing the final outcome of the battle.

The first halt is used to orient the staff riders to the ground and present the written order given to Custer by General Terry on 21 June. The order, much debated during the years follow-

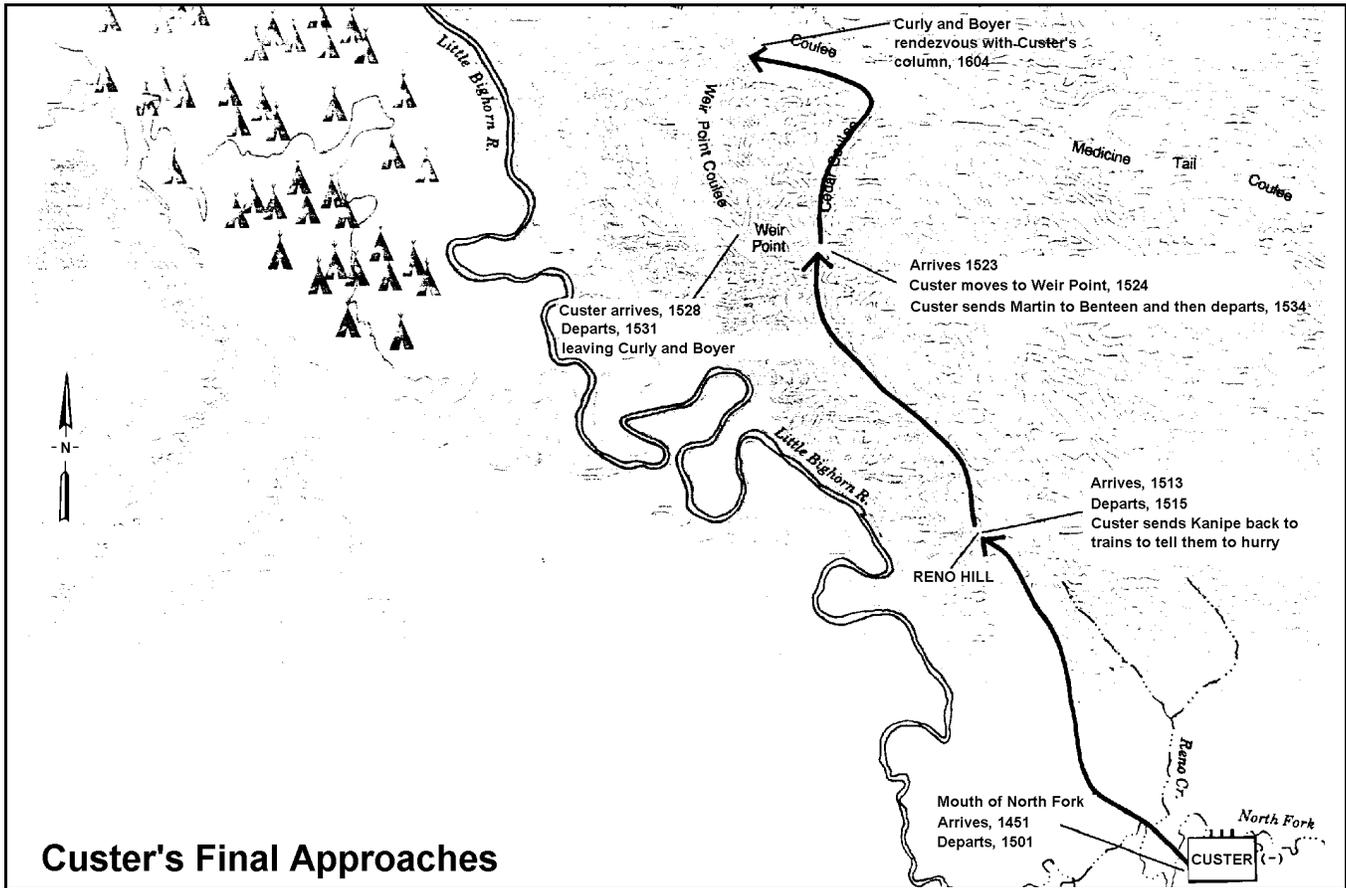
ing the battle, is a relevant point of departure for all following discussions. Ironically, the ride on the third day follows the timeline of the 7th Cavalry fairly closely as the routes converge on Davis Creek, thereby allowing for consideration of visibility due to sunlight.

The ride participants then follow the route parallel to Davis Creek to the west out of the Rosebud valley, moving towards the "Divide." The second halt occurs at the early morning rest stop astride Davis Creek, where Custer then rode to the observation point on top of a high hill known as the "Crow's Nest." Custer's initial plan, his past experiences combating the Indians, and his orders from General Terry are topics normally debated.

The third halt is atop the Crow's Nest. This is where the scouts, under Lieutenant Charles Varnum, first claimed to have seen the signs of the camp on the Little Bighorn 15 miles in the distance. Staff ride participants must dismount and walk up the hill due to the steep slope. Custer ascended the hill but did not see the Indians' camp. Returning to the regimental march column, Custer received new information regarding the Indians, which seemed to irrevocably change his concept for attacking the village. Key to the changes in the initial decision — to wait overnight, rest the regiment, and attack in the morning — was the perception that the 7th Cavalry had been discovered. Based on the soldiers' previous experiences, and the actions of the Indians when their camps were discovered, Custer's decisions are analyzed within the context of the specific situation which faced him.

Custer felt pressured to move quickly in order to maintain operational security and establish contact with the Indian village. The regiment was ordered to attack, rather than rest, and wait for further reconnaissance of the objective. Custer's dilemma was whether to allow the Indians to follow the pattern normally established when they felt their camps were threatened; that is, disperse and run. Failing to hit the Indians in their camp would have been tantamount to failure since tracking the small bands would have been very difficult and resource-intensive.

The fourth halt is conducted on the "Divide," the geographic division between the drainage to the Rosebud in the east and the Little Bighorn in the west. It is here that Custer task-organized the regiment into four separate elements. Custer's experience at the



## Custer's Final Approaches

Washita battle in December 1868 provides an excellent background to understand why he formed a strong guard to accompany the trains and split the regiment into two wings to envelop the Indian camp.

A discussion of personalities, and the part they played in the organization of the force, makes for interesting speculation. It is just past the "Divide" that Captain Frederick Benteen was sent with one of the ad hoc battalions to sweep the adjoining ridgelines on the left flank and prevent the escape of the Indians to the south, thus saving him from the fate awaiting the main body. By now the staff riders have begun to form their opinions of whether or not Custer was acting within the parameters of his orders, and whether or not his decisions were logical given the circumstances.

The ride then follows what is now known as Reno Creek. This creek flowed westerly from the "Divide" to the Little Bighorn and provided a natural feature on which to orient the column. The fifth stop is made at a place known as the "morass," a place where the packs and Benteen's battalion stop enroute to water their horses. Time-distance and movement rate considerations are normally discussed, along with human and animal fitness dimensions. Of significance is the distance

traveled by both the animals and men during the previous four days, the lack of water, and the time since eating their last full meal. These factors may have impacted on the unit's performance as it neared the objective. Sleep deprivation is also considered in relation to the leaders' performance.

The sixth stop is made at the site known as the "Lone Teepee." The teepee held the body of a warrior slain the week before during the fight with Crook's column. Unbeknownst to Custer, the Indians he attacked were largely the very same ones that fought Crook to a standstill on the Rosebud. At this point in the ride, Custer begins to appear to be more harried. He has now been awake for over 30 hours and riding hard. This point provides an excellent discussion of a problem which faces the Army today when considering "continuous operations." Staff ride participants are asked to analyze Custer's actions and determine whether or not they are logical, given the circumstances.

The final stop before reaching the battlefield sites is at the Reno Creek fork, where Custer orders Reno's battalion into the attack. Using the post-battle inquiry results, the discussion focuses on whether or not Benteen's battalion could have joined the main body.

Many of the discussion points are taken from Gray's book, *Custer's Last Campaign*, which presents an excellent timeline analysis of the actions during the 25th of June. Reno's orders always bring up interesting arguments as to the meaning and intent Custer wished to convey.

Crossing the Little Bighorn begins the final phase of the staff ride. From an observation point on the western side of the valley, the staff riders are oriented to the advance by Reno's battalion towards the Indian camp. Reno's deployment into line, his charge, and subsequent skirmish lines are from a vantage point which allows the observer to determine how the action progressed. Reno's fighting withdrawal, back over the river and up the bluffs to his final defensive positions, can be easily viewed.

The final move to the battlefield is made by driving the length of the former Indian camp, now dissected by Interstate Highway 90 and a frontage road. Because the actions of the separate battalions were occurring concurrently, this portion of the staff ride sometimes becomes more difficult to comprehend for those unfamiliar with the details of the actions. The staff ride moves to the Reno-Benteen defense site on the far end of the ridgeline to

begin discussions about actions on the objective. Reno was joined in his defense by Benteen's battalion and the packs in the middle of the afternoon. By this time, Reno's battalion had suffered a significant setback, being chased back up the bluffs by overwhelming Indian forces. A walk along the perimeter of the defensive site provides an excellent understanding of the problems facing the surrounded survivors in the seven remaining companies of the 7th Cavalry. Much like the Wagon Box Fight, the discussion focuses on the ability of the Army units to defend from prepared positions, as opposed to being caught in the open, moving.

Concentrating on the actions of the battalion led by Custer, the staff riders move parallel to Custer's route north approximately four miles. Poignantly located along the route of march are markers indicating where troopers were cut down individually, or in small groups. A short stop is made at Weir Point, enroute to Last Stand Hill for an excellent view of the hill, about three miles in the distance. Four major events are discussed at Weir Point, the dispatch of Trumpeter Martini to Benteen, Custer's view of the entire Indian camp, Custer's further division of his five companies into two battalions, and the move by Captain Weir out of the Reno-Benteen defense to join Custer.

The staff ride progresses to the next-to-last site, Calhoun Hill, to discuss the possible scenario confronting the companies of James Calhoun's and George Yates' battalions. Enroute to Calhoun Hill, the staff riders pass through the confluence of Medicine Tail Coulee and Deep Coulee. Also located there is Miniconjou Ford, the site at which Yates' provisional battalion was repulsed and forced back up the ridgeline.

From Calhoun Hill to Last Stand Hill, the fight is pure speculation based on Trumpeter Martini's account, Indian scout Curley's account, and extensive archeological findings. Martini was the last surviving soldier to have contact with Custer, and Curley was the last surviving Indian scout to speak to Custer. Marker stones along the ridgeline from Calhoun Hill to Last Stand Hill indicate that the fight was probably disjointed and conducted in a highly mobile fashion. A number of theories have been posited, but no one will ever be sure, nor is it central to the understanding of the staff ride how the fight actually went. What is fact is that every

soldier accompanying Custer from Companies C, E, F, I, and L were lost to a man.

The final stop is on Last Stand Hill at the 7th Cavalry monument. The battle is normally summarized and everyone is allowed to leave with their own mental picture of the final minutes of the fight as the soldiers were overwhelmed in hand-to-hand combat. Gibbon's column's actions are reviewed and the post-battle affairs on the battlefield are discussed. Prior to leaving the National Park, the most important phase of the staff ride is conducted, the integration phase.

The integration phase results in the synthesis of all the materials studied and observed during the entire three days.<sup>6</sup> It provides the unit commander a chance to tie all the issues covered into lessons that he desires subordinates to take away from the ride. Most notably, the human dimension factors and dynamics of battle offer many examples of timeless lessons which are useful for study on the modern battlefield. In the era of "military operations other than war" (MOOTW), many applicable lessons can be applied from the frontier Army's conflict with the tribes of the plains. Important lessons are derived in the Army's dealings with the many different Indian tribes in a low-intensity warfare setting. While a direct analogy to the current situation the Army now faces would be stretching the comparisons, there are too many similarities to be overlooked.

Leaders who conduct the Indian Wars staff ride usually come away with a different appreciation for how the frontier Army was able to deal with situations which were not prescribed in any formal doctrine. Whether a Custer fan or not, most participants change their perceptions of what happened on that hot afternoon of 25 June 1876 at the Little Bighorn. If they do change their perceptions, then the staff ride has accomplished part of its purpose of making them think critically about how the 7th Cavalry got to the Little Bighorn and why five of the twelve companies were destroyed. At the end of the three-day staff ride, most participants agree that the real Custer probably lies somewhere between the hero and the villain.

**NOTE: Indian Wars staff rides may be arranged by contacting the Combat Studies Institute, USACGSC, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Telephone DSN 552-3904, commercial (913) 684-3904.**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Dr. William G. Robertson, "The Staff Ride," Center of Military History, United States Army Washington, D.C., 1987, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup>"Massacre" is the description that is normally associated to the fight conducted by Fetterman's command by historians. The word "massacre" however, generally connotes the lack of resistance. A number of Indians were killed by Fetterman's soldiers, indicating that there was an attempt to resist. The number of Indians killed by the members of Fetterman's organization, which included civilians armed with modern Henry rifles, will never be known exactly. However, the pools of blood surrounding the soldier's position, and Indian accounts combine to indicate that about thirty warriors were probably killed and a number wounded.

<sup>3</sup>John K. Mahon and Romana Danysh, *Infantry, Part I: Regular Army*, Center of Military History, United States Army, Washington, D.C., 1972, p. 31. The increase in the size of the Regular Army in 1866 included reorganization of the 19 established regiments. The second battalions of the 11th through the 19th Infantry formed the basis for the new 20th through 28th Infantry Regiments. As part of this planned reorganization, the 2nd Battalion, 18th Infantry, located at Fort Phil Kearny, was redesignated as the new 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry.

<sup>4</sup>Dr. William G. Robertson, Dr. Jerold E. Brown, Major William M. Campsey, and Major Scott R. McMeen, ed., *Atlas of the Sioux Wars*, Combat Studies Institute, USACGSC, Fort Leavenworth, Kan., 1993, Maps 4-5.

<sup>5</sup>Douglas C. McChristian, *An Army of Marksmen*, The Old Army Press, Ft. Collins, Colo., 1981, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup>Robertson, pp. 17-18.

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