

Reynolds' Attack on Crazy Horse's Village on Powder River, March 17, 1876

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A BRIEF though unsatisfactory Indian campaign was that of March 1876 in Northeastern Wyoming and Southeastern Montana in which U. S. troops under General George Crook, commanding the Department of the Platte, and Colonel J. J. Reynolds, 3rd Cavalry (the latter a West Point classmate of President Grant) endeavored to find and attack camps of Sitting Bull, Little Big Man and Crazy Horse, believed to be located somewhere near the headwaters of the Powder, Tongue and Rosebud rivers with relatively small bands, which were sure to be augmented later by Indians from various agencies as soon as warm weather should come, and grazing be afforded for their war ponies.

General Crook left Fort Fetterman March 1st with Companies A, B, E, I and K, 2nd Cavalry and Companies A, D, E, F, and M, 3rd Cavalry and two companies of the 4th Infantry with guides, teamsters, a wagon train, three or four ambulances, a pack train and packers, a total of 883 men. To this should be added a herd of 45 beef cattle. The Chief of Scouts was Frank Grouard, having some 15 scouts under him. Major T. H. Stanton, Paymaster U. S. A., accompanied the command, at Whitelaw Reid's request, and with the approval of General Crook acted as correspondent of the New York Tribune. Another correspondent was Robert E. Strahorn of the Denver News.

Crook followed old Bozeman Trail. From his camp on Crazy Woman creek on the 7th he sent his wagon train back to old Fort Reno under the infantry escort.

Crook proceeded down Tongue river to the mouth of Red Clay creek as indicated on the official map, though Grouard says they went 12 miles further to the mouth of Otter creek.

The command halted here until the country along the Rosebud and north to the Yellowstone could be scouted. No very recent sign was found there, but Grouard on his return discovered two Indians whose trail indicated that they might be from a village on Powder river, and the command turned southeast.

At the head of Otter Creek March 16th, Crook divided the command and sent Colonel Reynolds with Companies E, I and K, 2nd Cavalry, and Companies E, F and M, 3rd Cavalry, about 800 men with rations for one day, following the trail of the two Indians to the southeast toward Powder river. Crook retained four companies, the pack train and other impedimenta.

Reynolds, who was directed to join Crook at the mouth of Lodge Pole creek (later called Clear creek) on the evening of March 17th, moved out at 5:00 p. m., the 16th for a night march.

The weather at times was so cold that the mercurial thermometer failed to register the temperature, and as a consequence nearly everyone had some part of his person frozen—feet, fingers, face, toes, etc. (Bourke reports 60 men frost bitten). At their halt about 4:00 p. m. the 17th officers had to shake their men to keep them awake and from freezing.

About daylight March 17th Grouard located a large Indian village on the west bank of Powder river about a mile below the mouth of Thompson creek in Montana and about seven miles north of the Wyoming line on what is now the ranch of State Senator Frank T. Kelsey. It proved to be that of Crazy Horse with 105 lodges with a population of some 600, about 225 of whom were warriors, and as General Crook subsequently reported, these probably constituted about half of those off the reservation. They were Northern Cheyennes and Minneconjous.

The village having been located was found to be difficult of access; snow was on the ground, the terrain cut up by ravines, and a previous thaw and subsequent freezing had left an icy condition difficult for the horses to get down from the high plateau to the level of the village, some 600 to 1000 feet below. In herds about the village were some 800 to 1500 ponies, most of which were captured, but through negligence on the part of the troops, and enterprise on the part of Crazy Horse's warriors, most of these were recaptured early on the 18th. There was no guard on the herd during the night, the excuse being that men were so exhausted as to be unfit for guard. The first contact was made by Cap-

tain Egan's Gray Horse Troop (K, 2nd Cavalry, 47 men) with a pistol charge alongside the village from the upper side. General Crook in a subsequent report alleges that the first attack was not properly supported. Certain it is that the Indians with their families, 400 more or less being women and children, escaped, occupied the bluffs to the north, and the warriors retaliated with a galling fire.

The village proved to be a perfect magazine of ammunition, war material and store house of Indian plunder with large quantities of food such as tins upon tins of dried and fresh (frozen) meat, coffee, flour, robes, blankets, 150 saddles, about 50 travois, etc.

By 9:00 a. m. the troops were in possession and while at first Colonel Reynolds decided to hold the village he subsequently gave orders to destroy it and withdraw to the mouth of Lodge Pole Creek where he was to rejoin General Crook. To destroy the village was easier said than done, for the meat and robes burned slowly while the presence of exploding ammunition necessitated caution. There was much confusion and the hostiles were aggressive. Four men were killed: Pvt. Schneider, Co. K, 2nd Cav.; Pvt. Lorenzo Ayers, Co. M, 3rd Cav.; Pvt. Peter Dowdy, Co. E, 3rd Cav., and Pvt. Michael J. McCannon, Co. F, 3rd Cav. Privates Schneider and Dowdy were killed and Ayers was wounded while in the village, and the comrades of the latter were so hard pressed that Ayers was abandoned to his fate and later found scalped. One officer (Lt. Rawolle) and five men were wounded. In the midst of the turmoil Noyes (I, 2nd Cav.) had most of his troop unsaddled—a proceeding which rendered him for the time being unable to respond promptly to orders which might any moment be expected. This resulted in his subsequent general court martial, with a finding of "guilty" and a sentence to be reprimanded in General Orders.

Colonel Reynolds made efforts to expedite the destruction of the village as he had determined to march for the rendezvous at the mouth of Lodge Pole or Clear Creek (20 miles south) rather than camp, as some thought he should have done, on the site of the village. Certain it is that at the village his men would have had ample food and robes as protection from cold, though the grazing was rather poor and there is no question but what they would be subjected to constant attacks by the Indians.

About 2:30 p. m., therefore, the command, though in a greatly exhausted condition, withdrew, reaching the mouth of Lodge Pole, arriving about 9:00 p. m., and as one witness states—an utterly exhausted and played out command. They failed to meet General Crook there, as he that night had camped about two miles west of Powder river and about ten miles to the northeast of the mouth of Lodge Pole creek. It was not until noon of the 18th that the two commands met and General Crook assumed command and brought the command back to Fort Fetterman March 26th.

In a sub-report of May 7th General Crook states that up to the moment the troops entered the large camp on Powder river, March 17th, the campaign was a perfect success; the Indians were surprised and the troops captured their camp and about 800 ponies, adding: "Of the mismanagement if not worse that characterized actions of portions of the command during the skirmishes and movements for the 24 hours following it is unnecessary to repeat." General Crook states that the failures may be summed up thus:

1. A failure on part of portions of command to properly support first attack.
2. A failure to make a vigorous and persistent attack with the whole command.
3. A failure to secure the provisions that were captured for use of troops instead of destroying them.
4. And most disastrous of all, a failure to take care of the horses and ponies captured, nearly all of which again fell into the hands of the Indians the following morning.

The success may be summed up thus:

1. A complete surprise of the Indians.
2. The entire destruction of their village, with their camp equipage, and large quantities of ammunition.

Crook remained with train guard that there might not be any division of command on the field.

If recorded history is to have any value the gloomier pages must be written as well as the bright, and this seems the appropriate place to state that Colonel Reynolds was in January 1877 tried by a General court martial at Cheyenne, found guilty and sentenced to suspension from rank and command for one year. President Grant, however, in view of Reynolds long, distinguished and faithful service, remitted the sentence. Colonel and Bvt. Major General Reynolds was retired for disability June 25, 1877.

About 1919 that indefatigable investigator and student of Indian campaigns, Mr. W. M. Camp, whose records have been used in the compiling of this account, became apprised of the fact that while the bodies of the four troopers killed in the action of March 17th had been left in the field, no headstones had been erected.

Naturally they could not be placed over their graves for conditions had prevented burial, but they could be placed on the battle site. With the co-operation of Major H. R. Lemly and General Anson Mills, the latter a battalion commander in this engagement, and who subsequently distinguished himself as inventor of the widely known Mills cartridge belt, stones were prepared by the Quartermaster Corps and shipped to Arvada, Wyo.

They were evidently prepared and shipped with view to carrying out as far as practicable the provisions of the law for the erection of headstones over soldiers' graves, and no one will deny that soldiers killed under the circumstances here described are entitled to have their names, organizations and date of death placed on modest headstones and erected on the site where they fell.

In an address by Mr. Camp before the Order of Indian Wars in Washington in January 1920, Mr. Camp, referring to the headstones, remarked that they "will be placed on the battlefield next summer." Why this failed of accomplishment, and why the headstones have remained in storage for nearly fifteen years is unnecessary and unprofitable to investigate now.

Mr. Camp's address, reprinted in October last in "Winners of the West", came to the attention of Mr. D. C. Wilhelm of Gillette, Wyo., who informed the writer that the stones were still in storage.

Appropriate steps were then taken to remedy this and through the generous co-operation of the American Legion, Messrs. Wilhelm, Kelsey and others it is expected on next Memorial Day to place these headstones on the battle site where these men fell on that cold March day in 1876.

In compiling the foregoing, the writer has used material from the various official records of the War Department; the account of Captain J. S. Bourke, A. D. C. to General Crook; the W. M. Camp records which include over 100 pages of testimony taken in the trials of both Colonel Reynolds and Captain Noyes; R. E. Strahorn's correspondence in the Denver News, and matter from other sources.

A feature which stands out prominently in all this is the outstanding service rendered by Scout Frank Grouard and his assistants. It was Grouard who located Crazy Horse's village and if during the subsequent 24 hours there was one single individual whose services were in urgent demand and utilized it was Grouard's.

Our laws provide pensions for enlisted men who participated in Indian campaigns even though such service was not under fire.

Surely those few surviving guides, scouts, interpreters, packers and other government employees who, like Grouard, served the government in the field under fire should in like manner be remembered. Probably there are less than 100 of these and almost all of them are over 80 years of age.

Since the above was written we have read Stanley Vestal's entertaining "Warpath", just out, which gives briefly the Indian version of this affair. The Indians it seems captured Crook's beef herd—something we do not find in the official report. Also we are told that the head chief at the village was Two Moon, Crazy Horse being absent.

The Indian version confirms the official report as to "bungling" in the attack on the village and subsequent withdrawal.

The Indian loss was one man killed and one woman wounded and several women and children frozen to death.

Explaining why many of these Indians were away from their agencies, Vestal points out that in January 1876 the agent at Red Cloud agency reported that his supply of beef and flour would be exhausted before March 1st, and Congress hastily passed an emergency appropriation in April, the supplies purchased from which did not reach the agency until midsummer. For these Indians, therefore it was a question of hunt or starve.—W. C. B.