

It was Custer's fondest hope that he could recoup his waning military glory by heading the expedition, but he was relegated to leadership of just one unit. It became quite evident that he planned to make that unit the key element of the campaign, no matter what might happen.

Custer, was ordered by General Terry to pick up the Yellowstone at its confluence with the Powder River and probe up the valleys down which flowed the Powder and other tributaries of the Yellowstone. The fateful Little Big Horn was one of the elements in that maze of tributary streams.

On May 17, 1876, the Dakota column moved out of their garrison at Bismarck, Dakota territory, with the regimental band of the Seventh bravely playing "Garryowen" its battle song, and the nostalgic strains of "The Girl I left Behind Me." A month later, after a grueling march that averaged fifteen miles a day, they had found no signs of the mammoth concentration of Indians as they closed on the junction of the Powder and the Yellowstone. Then, as they pressed on, Custer's timorous Crow scouts began reporting Indian signs. They urged Custer to slow down. Even to go back.

His reaction was in the true tradition of his career. It was his assignment to attack and kill. By moving fast, he knew he could overtake the growing body of Indians before they could escape into Canada. He took out in hot pursuit.

By the nightfall of June 24th, the advance scouting party had made contact. It was Custer's plan that the next day, while the troops refreshed their weary mounts and prepared for battle, the scouts would reconnoiter further and a battle plan would be worked out.

It was next morning that Custer, Mitch Bouyer and the Crow scouts gathered on the rimrock and looked out across the valley. Even as they rejoined the five troops in the brush, a lieutenant reported that a box of bread had been lost from a supply wagon, and when the soldiers rode back to look for it, an Indian was bearing it off. It was evident that the presence of the Seventh had been revealed.

The advantage of surprise was gone. Custer decided to attack at once, without waiting for the other advancing columns.

Throwing caution to the winds, he ordered his bugler to blast out the call for the officers to assemble. It was a strangely terrifying leader around whom they gathered. Throughout the expedition there had been a peculiar cast of his character that none had ever seen before. He was detached, dark, and somber. In almost tearful tones he had virtually pleaded with the officers of his command--- those who on that final day were to be with Reno and Benteen and survive among them---to stay with him, no matter what, and for each to give his utmost. It was a strange, almost pathetic request coming from a man who had always commanded loyalty from his men because that was the least he expected from them.

Custer, there can be no doubt, was driven by forces and desires that were simply beyond his control, that final