

day. His entire future, the total meaning of his life and his purpose in living, were staked on a brilliant and shattering victory over the enemy. Custer had to attack. If he had to die, it could be no worse than living the numbing life of the half-dead.

Apologist for Custer sense the weakness of his attacking in the first place. Why did he not dig in and establish contact with the other columns and launch a combined attack?

One weak answer is that no one is able to retreat from Indians. They pursue and overrun you. But that is a weak response when it was known that Custer's chief fear that the Indians WOULD RUN at the sight of soldiers.

A more probable answer is that Custer's secondary fear was that the battalions of Gibbon and Crook might come swinging around the river bend too soon. He wanted this for himself. He had to have it. He was going to get it.

So George Armstrong Custer rode down into the valley of the Greasy Grass at the head of 224 men of the Seventh Cavalry. And into one of the most devastating military debacles in history.

There were just too many Indians. Custer had not believed his scouts, or had chosen to ignore them. The first to open fire on the cavalry detachment were four Cheyenne braves, hidden in the undergrowth beside the river.

According to accounts related years later by warriors who participated in the fight, it is probable that Custer's first knowledge that the Cheyennes had allied with the Sioux for a last-ditch stand against the whites came then. It is possible that he faltered when that recognition hit him, with its implications that his Cheyenne wife and his son very likely were in the Indian camp and might be killed.

At any rate, the four Cheyenne warriors who opened fire were wholly unaware that it was Custer who was attacking. It was recalled many years afterward by the Indians that the four Cheyenne warriors who touched off the fight cut down the first cavalymen emerging from the river. Though they had no idea who the leader was, he was among the first to fall, according to Indian witnesses who moments after the first clash had joined the fray.

So it was then, it now appears quite certain, that Custer died.

The version of Custer having been the last to go down fighting arose from the wild yarns later told by Curly, one of the Crow scouts. But Curly was in too poor a condition to know much about the end of the fight. He wasn't there. He fled the field wrapped in a blanket snatched from a fallen Sioux. It was Curly who was first to reach the forces of Gibbon and Terry with word of the defeat.

It has always appeared strange in later years to the Indians that Curly was hustled off to Washington by the military, instead of being allowed to return to his tribe. In Washington, he was feted and publicized as the sole