

# The Battle of the Little Bighorn



**ABOUT THE READING** In June of 1876, the U.S. Army sent three military units to confront Sioux and Cheyenne Indians who refused to surrender their hunting grounds in the Black Hills to white settlers. One of the units ordered to force the Indians onto reservations was a cavalry regiment led by Lieutenant Colonel George Custer. His scouts came upon a Sioux camp near the Little Bighorn River in Montana, and were spotted by the Indians. When they reported the news to Custer, he decided to act without regard for his orders. Instead of waiting for reinforcements, Custer divided his force into three groups to attack the camp from three sides. Overwhelmingly outnumbered by the Indians, Custer's group was destroyed. One of the principal Sioux leaders, Chief Gall spoke about the battle to a newspaper reporter at Custer Battlefield ten years after the general's monumental defeat.

## VOCABULARY

**orderly** assistant



*As you read compare the way the two sides in the battle fought.*

[Journalist] Did the red men shoot guns or arrows?

[Chief Gall] Both. We soon shot all our cartridges, and then shot arrows and used our war clubs.

[J] Did the soldiers have plenty of ammunition?

[CG] No. They shot away all they had. The horses ran away, carrying in the saddle pockets a heap more. The soldiers threw their guns aside and fought with little guns [pistols] . . .

[J] Did the Indians fight standing up?

Source: St. Paul (Minn.) *Pioneer Press*, July 18, 1886.

**The Battle of the Little Bighorn, *continued***

Primary Source

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[CG] No. The soldiers did, but the braves fired from behind their horses. A lot of Indians fell over and died.

[J] When the soldiers had no more cartridges left what did the Indians do?

[CG] The braves ran up to the soldiers and killed them with hatchets . . .

[J] Who fought first, Custer or Reno?

[CG] Reno was whipped first and then all with Custer were killed . . .

[J] How soon after Reno charged did Custer come down the valley?

[CG] We saw all at one time before they separated. When Reno charged, the women and children were moved down stream: and when the Sioux bucks drove Reno on top of the bluffs, everybody came down and fought Custer. All the Indians were mixed up then . . .

[J] Did Custer get near the river?

[CG] No. . .

[J] Did the soldiers fight on horseback or on foot?

[CG] They fought on foot. One man held the horses while the others shot the guns. We tried to kill the holders, and then by waving blankets and shouting we scared the horses down that coulee, where the Cheyenne women caught them.

[J] Did you kill any soldiers?

**Major Marcus Reno commanded one of the three groups that Custer sent to attack the camp. Reno's men struck first, charging across the Little Bighorn River into the Indian camp.**

**Reno's soldiers were driven back across the river to higher ground.**

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[CG] Yes, I killed a great many. I killed them all with the hatchet; I did not use a gun. . .

[J] Did you take any prisoners, and if so what did you do with them . . .

[CG] No, we took no prisoners. Our hearts were bad, and we cut and shot them all to pieces.

[J] Do you remember seeing Custer, the big chief, after the fight?

[CG] I saw the big chief riding with the **orderly** before we attacked. He had glasses to his face (field glasses). During the fight there were so many soldiers scattered all around for me to see him.

**Custer was using binoculars to try to see where the Indians were.**

[J] Did any of the soldiers get away?

[CG] No, all were killed. About fourteen . . . started toward the Wolf Mountains, but the young braves got on their trail and all were killed . . .

[J] What did you do after all Custer's soldiers were killed?

[CG] We went back to fight the soldiers on the hill who were digging holes in the ground. We staid there until big dust was seen down the river, when we all moved up Lodge Pole Creek toward the White Rain Mountains.

**Major Reno's men were digging as fast as they could before the Indians could return to attack them again.**

**Dust was raised by the boots of infantry soldiers marching toward the field to support Custer.**

**WHAT DID YOU LEARN?**

1. What was one reason that the soldiers ran out of ammunition?

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**The Battle of the Little Bighorn, *continued***

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**2.** What did the Indians do to the soldier's horses? Why?

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**3.** Why do you think Custer decided to disobey the order to wait for the infantry to arrive?

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