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## Rallies, Repulses, and “Villainous Falsehoods”

“The battle was a surprise, and the one thing which the whole history of Indian warfare proves is that it is the supreme duty of a commander to guard against a surprise. . . . General Crook had no idea of fighting a battle until the enemy were unexpectedly upon him in full force.”—Editorial, “Details of General Crook’s Battle with the Sioux,” *New York Herald*, July 6, 1876

“There is little rear or front in the usual Indian fight. In fact it is all front, for they circulate on all sides, and shoot from every point which offers a place of concealment. When the Sioux attacked General Crook in the valley of the Rosebud . . . the firing opened in rear, front, and flanks within five minutes of the time the first shots were heard. There are no non-combatants in such affairs as this. One place is as safe, or unsafe, as another, and every man who has a gun goes in to use it, if he wishes to save his scalp.”—Cuthbert Mills, In Camp at Fort Fetterman, July 23, 1876, *New York Times*, August 3, 1876

“Crook was met by the entire force [of Indians] on the Rosebud, but by his great foresight and good fortune, escaped a trap which Custer fell into a week later.”—Joe Wasson, In Camp at Junction of Yellowstone and Powder Rivers, August 18, 1876, *Daily Alta California*, September 26, 1876

“[The battle of the Rosebud] was a surprise to all as no one anticipated the fact of Indians meeting a large command half way, but then there is no telling what they will not do, and the theory that one white man is as good as half a dozen Indians in vogue on the frontier, in the past, is now exploded, for armed as the savages are with the Winchester repeating rifle, and Sharps (90 grain), they are not an insignificant foe.”—Charles St. George Stanley, *Colorado Miner*, June 29, 1878

Following the battle of the Rosebud, it seemed that everyone but George Crook could give an estimate of the number of Indians engaged. Writing to Sheridan on June 19, Crook stated: “They displayed a strong force at all points, occupying so many and such covered places that it is impossible to correctly estimate their numbers. The attack, however, showed that they anticipated that they were strong enough to thoroughly defeat the command.”<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, most other participants and eyewitnesses had no trouble giving estimates:

Correspondent	Newspaper	Estimate of Indians
Unknown	<i>Cheyenne Daily Leader</i> , June 24, 1876	1,500
Davenport	<i>New York Herald</i> , June 24, 1876	2,500
Strahorn	<i>Weekly Rocky Mountain News</i> , June 28, 1876	1,200–1,500
Wasson	<i>New York Tribune</i> , July 6, 1876	1,000
Lieutenant Foster	<i>New York Daily Graphic</i> , July 13, 1876	500–700 <sup>2</sup>
Strahorn	<i>New York Times</i> , July 13, 1876	1,400–1,500

Strahorn probably summed up the number of Indians best when he wrote in the *New York Times*:

The number of Sioux engaged is estimated at all the way from twelve hundred to two thousand. Allowing amply for exaggerated ideas, the number can safely be placed at fourteen or fifteen hundred, which would be quite a respectable increase over our own force of a little above one thousand fighting men.<sup>3</sup>

A little later in the same dispatch he added a detail learned in a recent conversation with Crook: “Gen. Crook is now satisfied that he has opposed to him no less than 3,000 well-armed, superbly mounted warriors.”

The story in the *Times* carried a dateline of June 27, and Crook’s letter to Sheridan was dated June 19, so at some point between the two reports, he finally decided on a number. When he did, his assessment was considerably higher than that of anyone else.

One of the interesting sidelights that developed after the battle of the Rosebud concerned Reuben Davenport, the correspondent for the *New York Herald*, which had described him as having “a quick eye, a clear head and steady nerves.”<sup>4</sup> Davenport submitted three articles to the *Herald* detailing the action at the

Rosebud, and some of his comments were critical of Crook’s generalship. For instance, his June 19 dispatch from Goose Creek stated that Royall “manipulated his men under the difficult and conflicting orders from his superior with consummate skill, although he could not prevent unnecessary sacrifice of life without risking the penalty of disobedience.”<sup>5</sup>

And his June 20 dispatch added insult to injury: “Colonel Royall was circumscribed by orders [from Crook] in every one of his movements, and the disaster attending the retreat would have been much greater had it not been so skillfully directed by him.”<sup>6</sup>

But it was not until his June 22 dispatch that the reason for his censure and indignation became fully evident. Here we learn that Royall's battalion, which was fighting on the left of the line and with whom Davenport had thrown in, was in the most "dangerous portion of the field" during the battle:

[They] bore the brunt of the boldest and most destructive sallies of the Sioux, without the support from the main portion of the command, [who were] most of the time unengaged, which they sorely needed, until too late to prevent the sacrifice of nine soldiers who were killed and nineteen who were wounded. All of the losses were sustained on the left excepting the disabling of three infantrymen by chance balls on the high bluff in the middle of the field.<sup>7</sup>

And Davenport was in the thick of the action, dismounting several times to take his place on the skirmish line with the troops. He may have been a reporter, but this distinction was irrelevant to the Sioux. His perilous escape from the left of the line was printed in the *New York Herald* on July 6, 1876.<sup>8</sup> Naturally, Crook was less than pleased at being disparaged in the pages of a major newspaper. In a letter to Sheridan on July 23, Crook wrote: "The *New York Herald* has published [the] most villainous falsehoods from the correspondent with this command in regard to the Rosebud fight . . . which are intended to do the command and myself great injustice."<sup>9</sup>

In Crook's defense, Royall must take some of the blame for separating himself too far from the rest of the

command to receive prompt support, chasing the Indians from ridge to ridge. From Royall's official report:

I now found myself upon the extreme left with Captain Andrews' company and Captain Henry's battalion of the Third Cavalry (consisting of companies D, B, L and F commanded respectively by Captains Henry, and Meinhold and Lieutenants Vroom and Reynolds of that regiment), the Indians occupying the series of ridges in our immediate front. They were steadily charged and retreated from one crest to another, my instructions at this time being to slowly advance.<sup>10</sup>

His instructions may have been to advance slowly, but he still ended up a mile or more from the rest of the command.<sup>11</sup>

Getting back to Davenport, Lieutenant John Bourke, Crook's aide, referred to him as a "whipped cur" skulking about the camp because of his lack of popularity stemming from his dispatches that found their way back to the bivouac. But Bourke also pointed out that, despite Crook's anger, the scorned reporter was still permitted to remain with the command, receiving all the "same privileges as the other correspondents."<sup>12</sup>

On August 3, the *New York Herald* published another of Davenport's dispatches, this one dated July 23, in which the reporter again voiced his displeasure with the commanding general:

Since June 19 General Crook's force has been idle. But little scouting has been done except in the most desultory manner, and it has been supplemented by no

active movement of the main body looking to the terminating of the campaign. All the plans of the commander have apparently hung upon the prospective accession of reinforcements. Opportunities for definitely ascertaining the position and movements of the enemy have not been improved.<sup>13</sup>

And this criticism was followed soon after by another in the same report:

Ever since its departure from Fort Fetterman [May 29] the conduct of this expedition has been remarkable for the contempt shown by the general commanding for many of the fundamental principles of military policy. One might have inferred that the enemy against whom we were moving was impotent and harmless. The march was unguarded; the camps have not been compact enough for the most advantageous defense; the scouting has been without system; the troops, although many of them were the rawest recruits, have scarcely been drilled, notwithstanding that they have been languishing in indolence for nearly two months,<sup>14</sup> and the proximity of Indians has not been taken advantage of to strike them a blow.

At this point the *Cheyenne Daily Leader* entered the fray. In an editorial on August 9, Davenport was referred to as “asinine” and his statements as “severely” abusive. But wishing to be helpful, the paper also offered the following suggestion:

[Davenport] should be sent home at once, but as it is not probable that this will be done, we suggest that Gen. Sherman promote Field Marshal Davenport, the correspondent, to the command of the Department of the Platte.<sup>15</sup> It may be urged that Davenport

is too young to command, but as he is not too young to criticize, this objection would not hold water.

In fact, when it came to the battle of the Rosebud, Davenport’s criticisms were not entirely incorrect. His error was in not showing the proper tact when expressing them. Reporter John Finerty also acknowledged that mistakes were made, but he exhibited greater diplomacy in expressing it, and avoided finger pointing and calling out the general by name: “Some mistakes, perhaps, were committed, but in a fight which was next door to a surprise, these were inevitable.”<sup>16</sup>

And Strahorn weighed in on the matter, too, deflecting some of the criticism from Crook and placing it on his subordinates instead: “Unimportant delays and misunderstandings occurred during the day, as they always will occur in an engagement covering so much ground and requiring so much discretion at the hands of subalterns.”<sup>17</sup>

As for the battle of the Rosebud, General Crook would probably be the first to admit that it was a difficult battle to manage, made even more so by the fact that, as Finerty noted, he *was* caught by surprise. This detail is made clear in several accounts, all of which make a point of stating that the cavalry was saddened when the bullets started flying.<sup>18</sup> One anonymous story out of Helena, Montana, was particularly damning:

[Crook’s] camp was surprised in the early morning after the pickets had been called in by about 1,000 Sioux . . . under Crazy Horse. . . . The cavalry were watering their horses and some of the men

were having their breakfast when the attack was made. . . . It was a complete surprise. About a hundred horses belonging to the Third Cavalry were stampeded and fell into the hands of the Indians, including their equipments. . . . The troops . . . fought under a sense of disadvantage all the time . . . and the principal fighting was done by the Snakes.<sup>19</sup>

And it wasn't just the suddenness of the attack that made matters difficult. According to more than one account, the battle stretched in a semicircle for some three to four miles.<sup>20</sup>

The overall style of fighting was best summed up by Strahorn, who described it as a series of "rallies and repulses."<sup>21</sup> The Sioux and Cheyennes would stand united one moment, then "fly to pieces" the next.<sup>22</sup> They "would flee before a steady assault" but "turn with lightning-like rapidity and plunge into death's very jaws in endeavors to cut off detached parties of troops or [Indian] allies."<sup>23</sup>

Strahorn also recorded some examples of Indian prowess during the fight:

In one case a soldier was scalped before his comrades, a few yards distant, could rush to his rescue, and in another the Indians had killed a cavalryman in a hand-to-hand fight, plundered his body of watch, gun, clothing, &c., and were just about to scalp him as neighboring skirmishers reached the spot. In charging from or back to cover, down terrific stretches of descent, these matchless riders would swing low on one side of their ponies, quickly change position at an opportunity to fire, and again squirm almost out of sight, with evidently no

### Fighting from Horseback

*New York Times*,  
September 16, 1876

On the Yellowstone River Near Glendive Creek, September 6, 1876. To any man, unless really an old cavalry soldier, the management of our high-bred American horses under fire and amid the excitement of the battlefield requires almost undivided attention, and the delivery of an effective fire, or indeed any fire approaching to accuracy, from the back of his horse, is a clear impossibility. In several Indian affairs I have observed that the Indians, as a general rule, dismount before firing, or if they do not, their ponies will so quietly stand that the rider may aim and deliver his fire without deranging his piece. The rapid firing from the back of his pony as he gallops around or past an adversary, now erect and in an instant half-concealed as he turns himself on his pony's flank, is of little account and only so much ammunition wasted, except from the usual damage from all wild shooting or chance shots.

—Unknown

thought of being unhorsed. If the ground was extremely rough or ordinarily smooth, the Indian used it to advantage all the same.<sup>24</sup>

One eyewitness was impressed with the swiftness and agility of the warriors when taking the scalp of a fallen foe:

During the progress of the battle I had for the first time in my life occasion to witness how Indians scalp their fallen foe, and it is quite impossible to relate

how quick it is done. A warrior, struck by the deadly bullet, drops from his horse. The victor in rapid course runs toward his victim. The docile warhorse stops; dismounting and remounting are performed in no time; the victor warrior touching the ground with one foot only, the other leg resting still on the saddle. A grip for the scalp, a flash of the knife or tomahawk, and a jerk. The warrior is remounted, an unearthly cry is uttered, and a bloody scalp of long jet black hair fastened to the lance and raised high above the victor's head tells that one more redskin has gone to the happy hunting ground.<sup>25</sup>

Contrasting the equestrian skills of the soldiers and their Indian foes, it was Wasson's opinion that: “The average soldier on horseback is a most helpless mortal alongside of the most insignificant savage. The latter will manage his horse without bits, and shoot from the animal with effect, while, were the soldier to attempt it, he would shoot off his horse head-over-heels.”<sup>26</sup>

Who won the battle of the Rosebud? Strahorn, after pointing out that the Indians had better arms, not to mention hardy ponies that could “scale heights and descend depths” with ease, thought the soldiers won. After all, the “troops swept everything before them” and drove the Sioux and Cheyennes from the battlefield, pursuing them for several miles. Continuing, he commented: “It will not be difficult to realize what terror this blow carries to the heart of the braves who have never before known absolute defeat.”<sup>27</sup>

However, he followed this up a little later with: “If their village was

near, of which we have little proof, their desperate struggle, even if it was not crowned with victory, was to answer the purpose of covering its removal.”<sup>28</sup>

That is, even though the Indians gave up the fight and left Crook in possession of the field, practically speaking, they accomplished their goal—they stopped Crook. Of course at the time, neither Crook nor the Indians had any idea that it would be for more than six weeks.

Despite Davenport's criticisms mentioned above, he, too, declared that the troops were the victors: “The Sioux were certainly repulsed in their bold and confident onset, and lost many of their bravest warriors.”<sup>29</sup>

Wasson took a different angle. He didn't know who won; he wasn't even sure it was a battle. He wrote:

The battle had lasted over three hours, resulting in nine soldiers killed and twenty wounded; one Snake Indian killed, three wounded, and four Crows wounded. It can hardly be called a battle, although there was ammunition enough expended on our side to have killed the entire Sioux race, and the circle of fire was at one time at least three miles in length.<sup>30</sup>

The final word on this topic goes to Crook himself. In an interview with Finerty on October 26, he said that, notwithstanding that his command was outnumbered: “[T]he troops under my command, about one-thousand in actual strength<sup>31</sup> . . . thrashed these Indians on a field of their own choosing and completely routed them from it.”<sup>32</sup>

Crook's report to Sheridan stated nine soldiers were killed and twenty-one wounded.<sup>33</sup> Bourke wrote that ten men were killed, forty-seven wounded, four of them mortally.<sup>34</sup> That would bring the number of killed up to fourteen. Accounts generally agree that the Sioux and Cheyennes lost at least one hundred in killed and wounded.<sup>35</sup> Considering that Strahorn estimated the troops fired more than ten thousand rounds,<sup>36</sup> that's a fairly low hit rate; even lower if you use Finerty's estimate of twenty-five thousand shots fired.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, the Indians didn't exactly win any awards for accuracy either. Strahorn credited them with firing thirteen thousand to fifteen thousand rounds and was surprised that "so much ammunition could be expended" by their opponents yet so few soldiers killed.<sup>38</sup> It is not known how many scalps the Sioux and Cheyennes proudly waved that day, but at battle's end, the Indian scouts had collected thirteen, eight of which, according to Davenport, were taken by the Shoshones.<sup>39</sup>

The Crows, fearing that the Sioux may have attacked their village in their absence, left Crook the day after the fight,<sup>40</sup> but not before venting their grief from past confrontations on a wounded combatant they found on the battlefield. Davenport described the scene that ensued:

On the morning following the fight, as the column was moving from the place of bivouac, there suddenly arose among the red allies a singular excitement. One of them had ridden up to a dark object

lying beside the stream and sat and gazed at it, and after others had joined him, they all chattered wildly together as the South American monkeys when they discover the propinquity of a snake. After gestures and yells they dismounted and brandished knives. Approaching them, I beheld lying on the fresh, dewy grass, under the gentle shadow of a stooping willow, the most horrible object that could meet the eye. A dusky human form, nude and blood-besmeared, was writhing under the knives of the merciless victors. The object was a Sioux who, in the latter part of the fight, had been wounded by a Snake, scalped and left for dead. In tearing the tuft of raven hair from his head a portion of the bone, fractured with a stroke of the tomahawk, had clung to the flesh, and the brain was laid bare. And yet, in the morning the savage was still alive, and hearing the tramp of horses and believing his tribe had beaten the whites, he had crawled out of the gully in which he lay and called, "Minne!" (water) to a Crow who had passed and who he undoubtedly thought was a Sioux. The Crow turned, and his face kindled with a fearful joy. Six shots were fired into the prostrate figure. The head and limbs were severed from the body and the flesh hacked and the bones hewn until there was nothing about it recognizable as human. Infamies too shameful and disgusting for record completed the ghastly climax of horror. It was an illustration of the fiendish ferocity of all the Plains Indians toward their foes. The Sioux practice even more refined barbarities, torturing their victims in the most exquisite manner and making them more dreadful by deferring, by every art in their power, the welcome relief of death.<sup>41</sup>

Undoubtedly, the sight was more than a little repulsive to the observing

whites. An unknown onlooker reporting for the *New York Times* recorded:

I observed lying on the field of battle the trunk of a Herculean Sioux, who when alive must have stood between six and seven feet high. His head was missing, his legs were cut off at the knees, his arms at the elbows. But mutilated as it was this gigantic corpse still seemed to ridicule the slender-built pale-face looking down on him. Indian war is terrible.<sup>42</sup>

Another spectator was Charles St. George Stanley, the self-proclaimed “Bohemian of Frank Leslie’s staff.” Stanley wrote that the scene “begged description for bloodthirsty cruelty and savage joy,” then added: “To witness the scene was horrifying enough, but to watch the diabolical expression of delight with which they dissected the body of the Sioux and heaped upon it every indignity, was terrible in the extreme, and to say the least one can but deplore such passions in the higher animal—man.”<sup>43</sup>

After this incident Lieutenant Bourke recorded in his journal (June 18): “The sooner the manifest destiny of the [white] race shall be accomplished and the Indian as an Indian cease to exist, the better. After contact with civilization of nearly 300 years, the American tribes have never voluntarily learned anything but its vices.”<sup>44</sup>

Private Richard Bennett, Company L, Third Cavalry, fared no better than this unnamed Sioux warrior. During the battle his “body was disemboweled by the savages and the hands and feet cut off.”<sup>45</sup> Another soldier was

“hacked into small pieces” while another was “found with a bowie knife buried into his skull up to the hilt.”<sup>46</sup>

No doubt the unidentified *New York Times* correspondent spoke for many of the whites when he wrote, “Indian war is terrible.”

On June 21, three days after the Crows departed for home, all but five of the Shoshones followed suit.<sup>47</sup> St. George Stanley recorded: “Their destination was the valley of the Great Popoagie, and their professed reason for going, a fear that in their absence stray bands of Sioux might have played havoc in their villages.”<sup>48</sup>

Even though there was talk of them returning at some future date, the fact was that, after just one battle, Crook had lost practically every Indian scout. Writing from Camp Cloud Peak on June 27, Strahorn explained why this was a serious setback to the campaign: “The greatest of all needs is an adequate corps of competent scouts; to move in the dim sight of our present knowledge of the actual whereabouts and numbers of the foe would only be time worse than wasted.”<sup>49</sup>

Without Indian scouts, Frank Grouard became even more important to the success of the expedition. Grouard had lived with the Sioux for about six years, originally as a prisoner, and possessed valuable knowledge of the lay of the land and probable camping places.

Early on June 21, the same day the Shoshones said their good-byes, the supply train, under Captain John V. Furey, a quartermaster, set out for



Fort Fetterman, transporting the wounded from the late battle.<sup>50</sup> It was expected back in about three weeks with fresh supplies, ammunition, and five companies of infantry that Crook had requested.<sup>51</sup> About the infantry, Wasson explained: "Gen. Crook believes in having plenty of infantry for hunting the savages out of the rough places. A foot soldier can crawl where an Indian can, and is not bothered in battle with a clumsy American horse."<sup>52</sup>

In a follow-up dispatch written several weeks later, Wasson further detailed Crook's high opinion of infantry: "Gen. Crook values a soldier of infantry, armed with the long Springfield needle-gun, rightly maneuvered, as equal to six mounted Sioux; hence his desire for more infantry before again marching into the enemy's strongholds."<sup>53</sup>

Writing from Camp Cloud Peak on June 28, Robert Strahorn aptly wrapped up the current situation of General Crook's Big Horn and Yellowstone Expedition:

We have settled down to quiet, though really not to contented waiting, for more force, more scouts, more powder and lead, and more "grub." We have felt the strength of Sitting Bull sufficiently to know that this campaign is a far more serious matter than we had even imagined at the start. Three thousand desperate, well armed, superbly mounted warriors, in their own country, are odds our little force of eleven hundred strong might struggle against if necessary, but more troops now best at hand may well be used at such a critical hour.<sup>54</sup>

*More troops now best at hand . . . at such a critical hour.* A certain flamboyant hero of the Civil War was soon to share those thoughts exactly.



#### INTERLUDE

"Poor fellows, I'm really  
sorry for them"

Two days after the battle of the Rosebud, General Crook sent a dispatch to department headquarters in Omaha requesting additional troops, particularly infantry. His message was relayed from Fort Fetterman on June 22, and action was swift, as illustrated below. The following letter was originally printed in the *New York Tribune* on July 7, 1876.

#### A PROPHETIC LETTER

The following communication from a young New York gentleman in business in Salt Lake City to his sister in this city seems, in view of occurrences since it was written, to be almost prophetic:

Banking-House of Walker Brothers,  
Salt Lake City, June 23, 1876.

My Dear Jennie: This is rather a stirring day among the soldiers and officers here at Camp Douglas, and a sad day for the wives of those who are unfortunate enough to be married, for this morning orders came from Gen. Sheridan to Gen. Smith to start three companies of the 14th for the Black Hills at once. They leave on the 7 o'clock train, and officers and men have been rushing around town today vainly endeavoring to remember everything they need for their outfit. Poor fellows, I'm real sorry for them, for

it is more than probable that many of them will lose their scalps before this miserable war is over.

It is reported that Gen. Crook is having a big fight with the Sioux, and that his troops have been very severely handled. I am afraid it is true, too, for the miserable economy of our Government only gave Crook 1,500 men to fight 5,000 Sioux, the fiercest warriors on the continent. They are beginning to see the folly of sending such a handful into that wild country, and troops are being ordered there from all directions. If anybody but Crook had the command, every scalp would be raised before the reinforcements arrived; fortunately, however, he is the best Indian fighter in the army, and will probably hold his own until more troops arrive.

Those miserable Eastern papers who have been yelling "Reduce, reduce the army" will have to change their tune now, for there are hardly men enough in the whole army to whip these Sioux. I suppose that you folks in the East don't pay much attention to the Indian war, but when one sees men leaving their families and starting out to fight these red devils, and knows that the chances are even whether they ever come back or not, it is almost impossible to keep from worrying about them as much as if they were kin. Then you see the Black Hills are only about 500 miles east of this place, and as many Salt Lakers are up there mining, we are always hearing from them, and consequently feel interested, and I have taken it for granted that you are too; but I must not bore you too much, especially as Gen. Crook's fate will be decided long before this reaches you.