



Powder River: Disastrous Opening of the Great Sioux War by Paul L. Hedren.

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The Great Sioux War of 1876–77 was a miserable showing by the US Army. While the Army eventually defeated the loose confederation of Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapahoe nations, it did so through its greater numbers and superior logistics, not better leadership, strategy, tactics, or fighting skills. Its abysmal performance was most obvious on the Northern Plains, where Brig. Gen. George Crook launched a winter expedition from Fort Fetterman, Wyoming Territory, across the North Platte River and up the Bozeman Trail into the Powder River country. In the book under review, noted historian and former National Park Service superintendent Paul Hedren¹ has written a most welcome, comprehensive study of this largely neglected phase of the Great Sioux War.²

Chapter 1 describes how General Crook and Col. Joseph Reynolds found themselves spending a wintry Wyoming March in the Powder River country, attempting to locate the elusive Sioux hostiles who had chosen not to live on the confining and constraining established Indian reservations. Hedren sets the stage by providing background on the forbidding Northern Plains environment, the legacy of the Sioux and Northern Cheyenne who inhabited the area, the US Army's failure to secure the Bozeman Trail in 1866–68, several treaties signed in 1868, and the panicked reaction of President Ulysses S. Grant's administration to the 1873 financial crash.

Chapter 2 concerns the fateful (and sparsely documented) White House meeting of 3 November 1875 that initiated the Great Sioux War. Its participants—President Grant, his secretaries of War and Interior, and generals Crook and Philip Sheridan—arbitrarily set a date (31 Jan. 1876) by which all Indians were to return to their assigned reservations or be designated “hostile.” The brutal winter conditions in the Northern Plains and the great distances west of the 100th meridian made this deadline an absurdity and a de facto declaration of war against the Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapahoe peoples.

Chapter 3 discusses Crook's efforts to organize what promised to be a grueling winter campaign into the Powder River Country from Fort Fetterman on the south bank of the North Platte River. Hedren makes clear in detail Crook's qualifications as the Army's premier Indian fighter at that time and why he seemed to be the right officer to deal with the Indians. The reasons for Crook's failure, not once but three times, in 1876 are the central subject of the book. They include his odd selection of Col. Joseph Reynolds of the 3rd Cavalry to be expedition commander. Unfortunately, Hedren devotes a mere page

1. His many other books include *We Trailed the Sioux* (Mechanicsville, PA: Stackpole, 2003), *After Custer: Loss and Transformation in Sioux Country* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2011), and *Great Sioux War Orders of Battle: How the United States Army Waged War on the Northern Plains* (2011; rpt. Norman: U Okla Pr, 2012).

2. The solitary book-length study of the subject is amateur historian J.W. Vaughn's *The Reynolds Campaign on Powder River* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 1961; rpt. 2000). Although considered an excellent study when it appeared, the book is now fifty-six years old and badly dated. More recently, Maj. Michael L. Hedegaard's master's thesis, “Saint Patrick's Day Celebration on Powder River: Battle of Powder River” (US Army Command and General Staff College, 2001), is a strong study which provides an invaluable military officer's perspective on the action, but, at eighty-five pages in length, it is distinctly limited.

and a half to a biography of Reynolds, the central character in the March 1876 expedition (60–62), and a mere paragraph to Crook's selection of Reynolds (59–60).

The expedition begins in chapter 4. On 1 March 1876, Crook led his column across the North Platte and into hostile territory. Inauspiciously, his beef cattle herd was stolen by Indians on the first night (102–3). A consequent shortage of meat rations plagued the expedition for the next month and betrayed a distinct lack of effective security and alertness by Crook and Reynolds, as well as their subordinates.³ This chapter also introduces the convoluted command structure in which Crook took precedence over Reynolds, the titular expedition commander (103–5). Such a toxic system of command and control degraded the authority of and respect for subordinate officers. Not surprisingly, Crook's leadership style adversely affected the expedition. Regrettably, the author's analysis of this topic is superficial.

In chapter 5, Hedren writes that, on the morning of 6 March, two of Crook's scouts discovered Indians and a large Indian camp on the Powder River. Crook dispatched Colonel Reynolds and six companies of cavalry to deliver a forceful blow to the Indians. Both here and later in the book, the author discusses the controversial orders that Crook gave Reynolds (122–23). However, Hedren fails to evaluate how Reynolds was to fulfill Crook's orders, not surprisingly, as Reynolds failed to do the same, with catastrophic results on the battlefield. He does, however, vividly convey the rigors of a night march in a Wyoming winter blizzard over a tortuous path in unfamiliar terrain. The troops struggled through in pitch darkness, without rations, in a supreme attempt to retain the element of surprise.

Chapters 6 and 7 offer a thorough assessment of the actual battle for the Indian village and its spoils. The graphic and stirring narrative of the action in and around Old Bear's Village is graced by superb battlefield maps.⁴ Hedren touches on the excessive expenditure of ammunition by Reynold's cavalymen—"an issue that plagued troops throughout the Great Sioux War" (168). Why Crook, himself a skilled marksman and hunter, did not insist upon adequate marksmanship training for his soldiers during the three months available between the White House meeting and the crossing of the North Platte remains a mystery. Hedren's discussion here is flawed by his apparent unfamiliarity with Douglas C. McChristian's standard study of the subject.⁵ Still, these chapters are among the best in the book.

Service members and veterans will find chapter 8 to be the most depressing and chilling in the volume. It focuses on Colonel Reynolds and his company commanders' abandonment of several dead and wounded soldiers on the battlefield. In one especially horrible case, Pvt. Lorenzo Ayers was permitted to fall into the hands of Northern Cheyenne warriors. Hedren excoriates Reynolds, in particular, for his dismal leadership in this crisis.

Chapters 9–11 detail Reynold's poorly planned and executed retreat from the battlefield, his decision to violate Crook's orders to secure the food and ponies from the Indian village, Crook's failure to appear on Lodge Pole Creek as promised, and the command's exhaustion after the withdrawal from the village. Noteworthy here is the very sympathetic account of the Indians' leadership and actions. Finally, Hedren describes how Reynolds and his command lost most of the captured pony herd, which was then reclaimed by the redoubtable Cheyenne warriors (226–28).

The remainder of the volume recounts the courts-martial of three officers, including Colonel Reynolds. The resulting acrimony among officers lasted for years and damaged the morale and effi-

3. An otherwise excellent campaign map (104) does not indicate where the herd was lost.

4. These might have been improved by the inclusion of relevant names of commanders and their companies.

5. *An Army of Marksmen: The Development of United States Army Marksmanship in the 19th Century* (Fort Collins, CO: Old Army Pr, 1981).

ciency of the 3rd Cavalry during the rest of the 1876 campaign. Chapter 12 concerns the last dismal days of the expedition's return to Fort Fetterman as it splintered into feuding camps, with officers blaming each other for the abject failure of the ill-conceived campaign. The expedition was officially dissolved on the morning of 27 March and the commands and officers dispersed. There followed three courts-martial and a flurry of venomous correspondence in two Cheyenne (Wyoming Territory) newspapers, the *Denver Rocky Mountain News*, and, most importantly, the *New York Tribune*.

Hedren is to be commended for his painstaking analysis (chapters 13–14) of the courts-martial. One was initiated by Reynolds against a well regarded veteran cavalryman, Capt. Henry Noyes, who had commanded Company I, 2nd Cavalry, in a futile attempt to divert attention from his own numerous shortcomings. Noyes was convicted of unsaddling his horses during the engagement, but received an inconsequential reprimand from General Crook. (He went on to participate with distinction in Crook's subsequent campaigns.) "In this lamentable case, with the clarity of hindsight, the charges brought against Noyes should never have been preferred. This court-martial should never have occurred" (294).

The two other cases were brought against Colonel Reynolds and Capt. Alexander Moore, Company F, 3rd Cavalry. Moore had previously performed poorly under Crook in the Apache campaigns. Both men were found guilty after lengthy trials. Moore was suspended for a year and never returned to active service. President Grant remitted Reynolds's sentence, but he was for all practical purposes forcefully retired, a humiliated man whose military career lay in shambles.

The final chapter evaluates how badly the debacle of General Crook's Powder River expedition hurt the Army's efforts to suppress hostile Indians. To start, it left the Northern Cheyenne firmly united with the independent Sioux in their hostility to reservation life and the Federal government. In a very practical sense, it also ruined the command's cavalry horses, which would need either replacement or considerable time to recover. Desertion became rampant in the two cavalry regiments, as soldiers refused to serve under officers who might abandon them on the battlefield. It was late May before Crook could resume the offensive. His next stop was Rosebud Creek.

Paul Hedren's benchmark study of Crook and Reynold's Powder River expedition will remain the standard book on the subject for many years to come. Rich footnote documentation, adequate historic maps, and photographs of nearly all the principal officers involved are valuable enhancements of the narrative.⁶ In short, *Powder River* belongs in the libraries of all institutions and individuals with a serious interest in the US Frontier Army and the Indian and Sioux wars.

6. The pictures of the Reynolds court-martial in Cheyenne are rarely reproduced.