

## The Battle of Little Bighorn Reading Passage

**"I could whip all the Indians on the Continent with the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry." - George Armstrong Custer, June 25, 1876**

**"It is a good day to fight! It is a good day to die! Strong hearts, brave hearts, to the front! Weak hearts and cowards to the rear!"**

**- Crazy Horse, June 25, 1876**

On June 25, 1876, along the Little Bighorn River in Montana Territory, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer led the U.S. Army's 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry into battle against the Lakota Sioux and several other bands of Plains Indians. Custer and his soldiers were outnumbered and overwhelmed causing his men to become surrounded in what became known as Custer's Last Stand.

As movement of settlers to the west increased, conflict continued to escalate with the Plains Indians that already occupied the area. The U.S. government began moving many band of Indians to reservations. The Lakota Sioux, led by Sitting Bull, refused to give up the Black Hills, an area sacred to the Indians. The government signed a series of treaties identifying the Black Hills as Sioux lands and promised to leave the area alone. In 1875, gold was discovered in the Black Hills and the U.S. Army broke their treaty agreements with the Sioux, allowing white settlers to enter the Black Hills. Betrayed, the Plains Indians began to resist settlement by whites and many Indians began leaving their reservations to join Sitting Bull in Montana in defiance of the U.S. government. It is believed 6,000, and possibly as many as 10,000, Plains Indians gathered in camp along the Little Bighorn River – which they called the Greasy Grass – at risk of being attacked by the U.S. Army. Custer and his men entered the Little Bighorn Valley with orders to force the Indians onto reservations, by whatever means necessary.

While approaching the Indian camp, Custer sent his favorite scout, Bloody Knife, to determine the number of Indians they faced. When Bloody Knife saw the camp he gasped in astonishment. He reported to Custer that there were more Indians ahead than the soldiers had bullets, and if they attacked he and all of Custer's men would be killed. Custer brushed the warning aside. Custer and 600 men of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry marched towards the Little Bighorn, where Sitting Bull and 3,000 warriors were waiting.

Custer divided his already outnumbered men into three smaller groups. Captain Frederick Benteen was sent to prevent the Indians from escaping through the upper valley of the river. Major Marcus Reno with around 200 men, was to cross the river, and charge the Indian camp, while Custer, in a coordinated effort, charged the opposite end of the camp. Custer believed the Indians would retreat once Reno attacked, but Custer and his 215 soldiers would cut off the retreat, trapping the Indians, attacking from two sides. As Reno's men charged the camp they quickly realized they were outnumbered. Reno ordered his men to retreat back across the river and up a bluff that provided vegetation for cover. The retreat turned into a rout. Several soldiers were killed or wounded during the retreat. When Reno's group finally reached the protection of the bluff, they were joined by Benteen and his men, who helped to hold off the attacking Indians. Custer, unaware of Reno's retreat, led his men charging into the opposite side of camp. Custer was met by nearly 1,500 warriors. He realized he was no longer on the offensive, but in a fight for survival. He ordered a retreat up the nearest hill. If his men could reach the top of the hill they could set up a defensive perimeter and hold off the Indians until help arrived. The soldiers began a cycle of running several yards, then turning to fire at the nearest threat, and so on. As Custer and his men neared the top of the hill they became hopeful that they may live. As the soldiers closed in on the summit of the hill, the Indians closed in on them. When the soldiers were about twenty yards from the top of the hill they looked up to see Sioux leader Crazy Horse and 1,000 warriors awaiting them atop the hill. In a brilliant move, Crazy Horse had circled to the back of the hill and beat Custer to the top, trapping the soldiers, the very thing Custer was attempting to do to the Indians. Crazy Horse and his warriors came sweeping down the hill, crushing everything in their path. White Bull, an Indian warrior, recalled, "I charged in. A tall, well-built soldier saw me coming when I rushed him, he threw his rifle at me without shooting. We grabbed each other and wrestled there in the dust and smoke. He hit me with his fists on the jaw and shoulders, then grabbed my long braids with both hands, pulled my face close and tried to bite my nose off. I yelled as loud as I could to scare my enemy, but he would not let go. Finally, I broke free. He drew his pistol. I wrenched it out of his hand and struck him with it three or four times on the head, and shot him."

Two Moons, a Cheyenne leader, recalled following Crazy Horse after topping the hill, "The shooting was quick. Some of the soldiers were down on their knees, some standing. Everywhere the Sioux went the dust rose like smoke. We circled all around them – swirling like water round a stone. We shoot, we ride fast, we shoot again. Soldiers drop and soldiers drop." An Arapaho warrior said he witnessed Custer's last moments, "He was dressed in buckskin, and was on his hands and knees. He had been shot through the side, and there was blood coming from his mouth. He seemed to be watching the Indians moving around him. Four soldiers were sitting up around him, but they were all badly wounded. All the other soldiers were down. Then the Indians closed in around him and I did not see any more."

Accounts of Custer's death vary, but in less than twenty minutes Custer and his 215 men were dead. The next day the Indian camp dispersed, allowing Reno and Benteen to escape to the safety of a nearby fort. The Battle of Little Bighorn was the most decisive Indian victory of the Plains Indian War. The slaying of Custer and his men outraged many Americans and reinforced the image of the Indians as wild and bloodthirsty. In direct response to the battle, the U.S. government increased its efforts to subdue the Indian nation. Within five years, nearly all the Sioux were forced onto reservations.

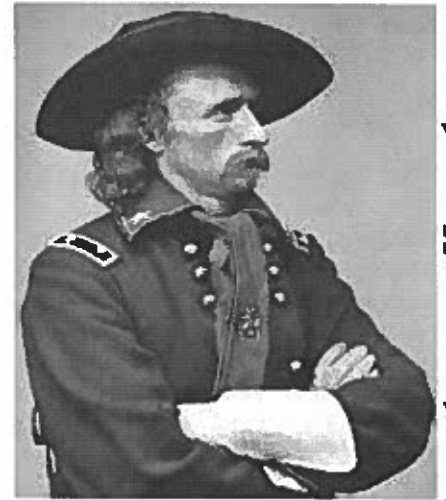
Source: Ambrose, Stephen. *Crazy Horse and Custer*. New York: Pocket Books, 2003. Print.

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# The Battle of Little Bighorn Reading Passage Worksheet

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Which ratio best identifies Indian warriors to 7<sup>th</sup> Calvary soldiers during the battle?
- A. 600 : 3,000
  - B. 3,000 : 600
  - C. 6,000 : 3,000
  - D. 3,000 : 6,000



George Armstrong Custer

2. What caused the U.S. Army to break their treaty regarding the Black Hills?
- A. The Indians began attacking settlers.
  - B. Sitting Bull refused to live on a reservation.
  - C. Gold was discovered in the area.
  - D. The Army wanted to build a fort in the area.

3. Why did Custer divide his men into small groups?
- A. He wanted to attack from multiple directions, trapping the Indians.
  - B. He wanted his men to be able to move swiftly.
  - C. He wanted to leave less tracks for the Indian scouts to see.
  - D. To fool the Indians into thinking he had fewer soldiers.

4. Why did Custer attempt to reach the top of the hill while retreating?

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5. Why did Custer and his men not reach the top of the hill while retreating?

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6. In your opinion, what mistakes were made by Custer that led to the death of him and his men?

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7. What happened to the soldiers under the command of Reno and Benteen following the death of Custer?

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8. Although the battle was a decisive victory, what negative effect did it have on the Plains Indians?

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# The Massacre at Wounded Knee

By the fall of 1890, the once proud Sioux found their way of life destroyed. Most of the lands where they had once roamed freely had been taken by the U.S. government. Their sacred buffalo were gone, nearly driven to extinction by white settlers. The majority of the Sioux were confined to reservations, relying on reservation agents for their existence.

In a desperate attempt to return to the days of their glory, many Sioux began to follow the preaching of the medicine man Wovoka. Wovoka prophesied that in the spring, when the grass greened, the white men would disappear and all dead Indian friends and relatives would return. Wovoka told his followers that to accelerate the event the Indians must dance the Ghost Dance. The Ghost Dance spread throughout Sioux villages and reservations, alarming whites. Reservation officers believed the dance was the beginning of an uprising against them, so the army ordered the arrest of Sioux Chief Sitting Bull. During the attempted arrest Sitting Bull was killed.

The U.S. War Department issued an order for the arrest of Chief Big Foot, believing he was also responsible for the Indian disturbances caused by the Ghost Dance. Chief Big Foot began leading his people toward the Pine Ridge Reservation, in hope of protection. On December 28 the U.S. army caught Big Foot's band and forced them to set-up camp along Wounded Knee Creek. The following morning the Indians were carefully counted. There were 120 men and 230 women and children. The army surrounded the Indian camp, placing four Hotchkiss guns, small cannons that fired 3.2 inch shells, on hills overlooking the camp. U.S. Colonel James Forsyth sat to negotiate with Chief Big Foot. Big Foot was dying of pneumonia and as he spoke red drops of blood fell from his nose and froze in the bitter cold. The army collected guns and arms, stacking them in the middle of camp. As the soldiers continued searching for weapons they discovered a rifle that belonged to a young deaf man named Black Coyote. The soldiers grabbed the gun and tried pulling it away, but Black Coyote held it strong, refusing to surrender his rifle. During the struggle, the gun fired, erupting a chain reaction of chaos and carnage. Defenseless, having few or no weapons, most Indians attempted to flee. After seeing the brutality of the soldiers, some tried fighting the armed men with knives, axes, or simply their bare hands.

Phillip Wells, a mixed-blood Sioux, was serving as an interpreter for the Army during the negotiation with Big Foot. He recalls what occurred following the first shot, "I looked in the direction of the medicine man. He approached me with a long knife, raised to stab me. He stabbed me during the melee and nearly cut off my nose. I held him off until I could swing my rifle to hit him, which I did. I shot and killed him in self-defense. I started to pull off my nose, which hung by the skin, but Lieutenant Guy Preston shouted, 'My God Man! Don't do that! That can be saved.'"

American Horse, a Sioux Indian recalls what he witnessed that day, "The men were separated from the women, and they were surrounded by the soldiers. When the firing began, the people who were standing immediately around the young man who fired the first shot were killed, and then they turned their guns, Hotchkiss guns, etc., upon the women who were in the lodges standing there under a flag of truce, and as soon as they were fired upon they fled, the men fleeing in one direction and the women running in two different directions. Right near the flag of truce a mother was shot down with her infant. Little boys who were not wounded came out of their places of refuge, and as soon as they came in sight a number of soldiers surrounded them and butchered them there. We all feel very sad about this affair. Of course it would have been all right if only the men were killed; we would feel almost grateful for it. But the fact of the killing of the women, and more especially the killing of the young boys and girls who are to go to make up the future strength of the Indian people, is the saddest part of the whole affair."

Sioux warrior Weasel Bear recalled, "We tried to run, but they shot us like we were buffalo. I know there are some good white people, but the soldiers must be mean to shoot children and women. Indian soldiers would not do that to white children."

When the madness was over, Big Foot and nearly three hundred of his original 350 men, women and children were killed. Twenty-five soldiers were dead. With a blizzard approaching, soldiers gathered Indians that were still alive from the battlefield. The dead Indians were left lying where they had fallen. (A burial party returned after the blizzard to find the bodies, including Big Foot's, frozen in grotesque shapes.) With no barracks available, wagonloads of wounded Sioux were taken to a local church for shelter. The torn and bleeding bodies were placed on hay spread over the rough flooring. At the front of the church was strung a banner: PEACE ON EARTH, GOOD WILL TO MEN.

Source: Brown, Dee. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. New York: Henry Holt, 1971. Print.

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# The Massacre at Wounded Knee Response Questions

Name: \_\_\_\_\_



1. Which ratio identifies Indians killed to soldiers killed during the massacre?
- A. 100 : 350
  - B. 350 : 100
  - C. 25 : 300
  - D. 300 : 25

2. Which Indian refused to surrender his rifle?
- A. Bloody Knife
  - B. Black Coyote
  - C. Sitting Bull
  - D. Big Foot

3. What events had destroyed the Sioux way of life by the fall of 1890?  
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4. What was the Ghost Dance and why did it alarm the U.S. Army?  
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5. What events led to the outbreak of fighting at the Wounded Knee Massacre?  
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6. What atrocities did American Horse describe witnessing during the massacre?  
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7. Why does American Horse say he would have been almost grateful to watch his own men killed by soldiers?  
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8. What is the irony of the banner in the church?  
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