

Powder River: Disastrous Opening Of The Great Sioux War

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Review

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Hedren, Paul L. *Powder River: Disastrous Opening of the Great Sioux War.* University of Oklahoma, \$34.95 ISBN 9780806153834

A Timeless Disaster Carefully Revisted

In this first book length treatment of the March 1876 Powder River fight since J.W. Vaughn's *The Reynolds Campaign on Powder River* (1961), retired National Park Superintendent Paul Hedren builds on his earlier treatment of the Sioux War's causes and effects, most notably in *Ho! For the Black Hills: Captain Jack Crawford Reports the Black Hills Gold Rush and the Great Sioux War* (2012) and *After Custer: Loss and Transformation in Sioux Country* (2011). His contribution is a judicious use of sources not available to Vaughn, including a detailed after action report by army surgeon Curtis Munn, various Sioux and Northern Cheyenne accounts unknown to Vaughn in pre-internet times, and a file of Adjutant General's Office administrative records relating to the three consequent courts martial. But while *Powder River* sheds light on the Sioux War's first and least appreciated chapter, it does so without refuting the generally accepted view: For the United States, this particular battle was an unexpectedly bad start to an inevitable confrontation.

Thanks to Vaughn, the general outlines have been well enough known, and Hedren avoids re-telling what has already been told well enough: Acting on the orders of Philip Sheridan, commanding general of the Military Department of the Missouri, George Crook, commanding the Military Department of the Platte, ordered elements of the Second and Third Cavalry Regiments to force recalcitrant Sioux and Northern Cheyenne bands onto reservations where Red Cloud and others had already relocated. Launching a winter campaign under harsh conditions, Crook led ten companies north from Fort Fetterman on 1 March in search of non-treaty Sioux, believed to be encamped somewhere on the Powder River, location unknown. After only twenty-nine miles, Indians drove off the accompanying cattle herd, putting the entire expedition on short rations.

Two weeks later as those rations were running low, Crook's scouts located Old Bear's Northern Cheyenne band in a village on the Powder River (mistakenly identified at the time as Crazy Horse's village). Keeping 300 troops and the field trains with himself, Crook directed Colonel Joseph Reynolds of the Third Cavalry to take the remainder, destroy the village, confiscate supplies, and capture as many ponies as possible. Reynolds' background bore significantly on his appointment by Crook, not so much because this was the same Reynolds who had commanded one of Thomas's divisions during Longstreet's breakthrough at Chickamauga, but because Ranald McKenzie of the Fourth Cavalry had more recently accused him of fraud in the handling of government contracts. Drawing on Bourke's *On the Border with Crook* (1891), Hedren maintains the conventionally accepted view that Crook's choice of Reynolds was intended to repair the latter's reputation and that Reynolds, despite his fifty-three years and an inguinal hernia that made him unfit for the campaign, embraced the opportunity.

The result on St. Patrick's Day morning 1876 was a poorly coordinated assault that allowed all but four hostiles to escape. The village finally secured, Colonel Reynolds then ordered his own starving and frostbitten troopers to destroy the massive quantities of meat and buffalo robes they so desperately needed, against Crook's orders. They also captured 700 war ponies, but Reynolds failed to secure the herd and all but fifty were back in Indian hands after two days. Worst of all, Reynolds ordered several dead and one wounded soldier left behind.

Postponed until the conclusion of the 1876 campaigns and thus conducted after Custer's defeat at the Little Bighorn, the trials of Reynolds and two of his battalion commanders drew mixed reactions from their contemporaries: surprise that the accused's connections in Washington did not save them, but satisfaction that a general court martial had addressed some glaring examples of failed leadership. While allowing that the verdicts may have been tainted by persons more interested in restoring the Army's damaged reputation than justice for the defendants, Hedren scrupulously avoids guessing as to the degree. He is more definite in his assertions that one of the trials, that of Captain Henry Noyes (3rd Battalion) was unnecessary and, more notably, that prejudicial pretrial publicity attended the Reynolds case. Accounts leaked to the *New York Tribune* by the expedition's paymaster brought the paymaster a reprimand even though the court found Reynolds guilty of three charges. Hedren also allows that the release of Frederick Whittaker's hagiographical *A Complete Life of Gen. George A. Custer*

several months earlier, and a review of it in the December 1876 *Army and Navy Journal* that blamed Custer's subordinates, may have influenced officers at the Reynolds court martial.

Fortunately, detailed coverage of the trials does not obscure the Powder River action's more far-reaching effects. By emboldening the Sioux and involving the Northern Cheyenne, it not only led to the Seventh Cavalry's destruction in June, but exhausted elements of the Second and Third, whose troopers then deserted at unprecedented rates because of Reynolds' proven disregard for their welfare. That said, the trials and subsequent recriminations are this campaign's distinctive feature and occupy a full third of the text. And while one might consider prejudicial a reference on p. xiii to Reynolds' "constant bickering ever after," the author supports any negative assessments of Reynolds and his subordinates thoroughly. He rehabilitates no one and demonstrates that Reynolds indeed lost control of the operation, lied about ordering a wounded man left behind, and took not the least precaution to secure the captured ponies. That he treats such inexcusable mistakes without making the fog of war seem any less real is perhaps the book's greatest strength. Rule number one, then and now, is that things will go wrong in combat no matter who is in charge.

Readers might also notice that Reynolds' biggest tactical mistake -- trusting his least reliable battalion commander with the greatest degree of independence -- violated no article of war. Captain Alexander Moore, the other battalion commander to be court martialed, had served with Crook in a recent campaign against the Apaches, during which Crook had suspected him of cowardice and then oddly refrained from pressing charges. Hedren's account of the Powder River action five years later hints that perhaps he should have; that Moore's appointment to battalion command, like Crook's appointment of Reynolds, had been an unwarranted favor given not because of, but despite a reputation. On 17 March 1876, Moore's 5th Battalion was to close a likely escape route at the far end of Old Bear's village, but was at least 800 yards out of position when the action commenced. Having failed to spring the trap, Moore then ordered his troops to open fire on the village from too great a range, endangering friendly forces without inflicting any casualties on the enemy. Like Reynolds and Noyes, he received a light sentence, but a permanent stain on his record.

Because of the Powder River disaster's timing and Commanding General William T. Sherman's aversion to negative publicity, Crook never faced a court martial of his own, and therein lies this story's loosest loose end. Self-serving

though it was, Reynolds's fifty-six page statement to the court raises legitimate questions -- the same questions that will likely have crossed the reader's mind well before Hedren raises them. Why did Crook keep two fifths of his combat strength with him instead of committing more to the assault? Why did Crook keep the trains with himself if the capture of provisions was so important? And, having decided to split his command, why did Crook keep his four companies far enough from Reynolds that mutual support was impossible? All of this Crook ordered, even though he knew that Reynolds was new to Indian fighting. That Crook was apparently betting the lives of his men so that Reynolds and Moore could restore their reputations seems neither professional nor well timed. In the end, however, Reynolds' flawed conduct of the battle not only made him more expendable to his contemporaries, but has disqualified him as a witness to his superior's mistakes ever since.

Hedren includes enough of Sherman's endorsement and Crook's testimony to frame this unsolved problem. While confirming Reynolds' conviction and eschewing any proceedings against Crook, Sherman nevertheless noted that Crook should not have divided his command. Nor does Crook's own testimony, quoted on p. 291, make him look any less culpable: "[I]f I had not preferred charges against [Reynolds], "said Crook, "I would be held responsible and I did not propose to take the responsibility. " As a military professional, General Crook must have known that he could only delegate authority -- not responsibility -- and that he was ultimately responsible for anything that those under his command, including Reynolds, did or failed to do.

As the expedition's ranking officer, Crook was also responsible for its logistics, which would have been problematic even if Reynolds' command had taken some food and robes from Old Bear's village. As Reynolds noted, Crook had kept the field trains with himself on the day of the battle. The early loss of the beef supply and consequent short rations also would have kept the campaign's logistical tether near the breaking point regardless of what happened once the shooting started. A properly supported campaign in Wyoming and Montana Territories required a supply point considerably closer to the action than that which Crook used, but impatience in Washington would have made sufficient preparation impossible in any case. Indeed, it is the false assumptions and missteps of superiors -- all noted by the author -- that allow the reader to place Reynolds' failures in their proper perspective. If, as noted on p. 343, Reynolds "weaseled" when lying under oath, Crook's equally disingenuous escape from what should have been an equally tight spot deserves an equally

loaded verb.

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