

Indian Wars: The Battle of Washita, 1868

Introduction

The Battle of Washita on November 27, 1868, pitted US Army troops commanded by General George Custer against the Southern Cheyenne. An excerpt from Custer's report on a return to the battlefield ten days later is presented here. The Cheyenne at Black Kettle's village were slaughtered, and the casualties on both sides were gruesome—men stabbed through with shotgun barrels, Cheyenne women and children clubbed to death. Custer described the “stark, stiff, naked and horribly mutilated bodies of our dead Comrades,” and claimed that “Squaws and Children . . . had been slain in the excitement and confusion of the first charge.” The Indian Wars on the plains would continue until the 1890s.

Excerpt

I proceeded to the battle field, early on the morning of the 11th. Indians had evidently paid a hurried visit to the scene of the late Conflict. The bodies of nearly all the warriors killed in the [struck: late] fight had been concealed or removed while those of the Squaws and Children, who had been slain in the excitement and confusion of the first charge as well as in self defense were wrapped in Blankets and bound with [lariats] preparatory to removal and burial. Many of the Indian dogs were still found in the vicinity lately occupied by the lodges of their owners; they probably [3] subsisting on the bodies of the ponies that had been killed and then covered several acres of ground near by. As ten days had then elapsed since the battle and scores of Indian bodies still remained unburied or unconcealed some idea may be had of the precipitate haste - with which the Indians abandoned that section of country. A thorough examination of the immediate battle ground failed to discover any thing worthy of special report, except that Indian bodies were found which had [inserted: not] previously been reported in my first dispatch, and which went to prove, what we are all aware of now, that the enemy's loss in killed warriors far exceeded the numbers (103) one hundred and three) first reported by me.

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript, view the images, and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow. (This discussion is recommended for AP/IB/Honors level classes.)

1. Why were detailed battlefield reports sent by commanders in the field to their headquarters?
2. The description of the Battle of Washita sent by General Custer includes atrocities

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(scalping, mutilations, murders of innocents) committed by both cavalry soldiers and Indian warriors. How can we explain the horrors that go beyond expected battlefield injuries and casualties?

3. General Custer's full report indicates total distrust of the Indian tribes. How would these feelings influence his actions?
4. When supposedly offered the choice of surrendering and relocating near a fort, some tribes tried to escape and then faced annihilation. Why did some make this decision?

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Image

Headquarters Troops operating South of the Rio
 In the Field Indian Territory
 December 22nd 1868,

Brigadier General J. S. Canby
 Adj. Genl. Dept. Missouri
 Department of the Missouri
 Colonel

I have the honor to submit
 the following report of the operations of my command
 from the 7th inst up to the present date. Acting
 under the instructions of the Major Genl. Commanding
 the Department, who, though not exercising command
 of the troops, accompanied the expedition, I moved
 from the Supply Depot on Bear Creek, on the morning
 of the 7th inst. The expedition was composed of eleven
 companies of the 7th Regt. Cavalry, ten companies of the
 19th Kansas Volunteer Cavalry Col. E. J. Carriford
 Comdr, a detachment of Scouts under Capt. DeLeon
 10th Co., and between twenty and thirty white
 Osage and Karr Indians as guides and trailmen.
 I aimed by a new route to strike the Washita
 River and reach to the scene of the late battle
 between the 7th Cavalry and the combined bands
 of the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Comanches, Sioux

George Custer, [Report on the Battle of Washita], December 22, 1868 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC04606)

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Transcript

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Headquarters Troops operating South of the Arks

In the Field Indian Territory

December 22^d 1868,

[Brevet] first Col Lieu Schuyler Crosby

[Actg] – Asst. Adjt General

Department of the Missouri

Colonel

I have the honor to submit the following report of the operations of my command from the 7th inst up to the present date. Acting under the instructions of the Maj Gen Commanding the Department, who though not exercising command of the troops, accompanied the expedition, I moved from the Supply Depot on Beaver Creek, on the morning of the 7th inst. The expedition was composed of eleven companies of the 7th [illegible] Cavalry, ten Companies of the 19th Kansas Volunteer Cavalry Col. B.J. Crawford Comd'g, a detachment of Scouts under Lieut. Pepoon, 10th Cav, and between twenty and thirty whites, Osage and Kaw Indians as guides and trailers. I arrived by a new route to strike the Washita below and near to the scene of the late battle between the 7th Cavalry and the combined bands of the Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Kiowas, Sioux, [2] Apaches and Comanches. On the evening of the 10th my Command reached camp on the Washita, six miles below the battle ground. A halt of one day was made at this point to rest and graze the animals and to afford an opportunity of visiting the battle field, to learn if possible

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the exact fate of Major Joel H Elliott and his party of seventeen (17) men who on the opening of the attack on Black Kettles village had pursued a party of fleeing Indians beyond our lines, and had never returned. So confident was I of their fate – however, that in my official report of the battle I numbered them in my list of killed. With one hundred men of the 7th Cavalry under Command of Cap. Yates I proceeded to the battle field, early on the morning of the 11th. Indians had evidently paid a hurried visit to the scene of the late Conflict. The bodies of nearly all the warriors killed in the [*struck: late*] fight had been concealed or removed while those of the Squaws and Children, who had been slain in the excitement and confusion of the first charge as well as in self defense were wrapped in Blankets and bound with [*lariats*] preparatory to removal and burial. Many of the Indian dogs were still found in the vicinity lately occupied by the lodges of their owners; they probably [*3*] subsisting on the bodies of the ponies that had been killed and then covered several acres of ground near by. As ten days had then elapsed since the battle and scores of Indian bodies still remained unburied or unconcealed some idea may be had of the precipitate haste – with which the Indians abandoned that section of country. A thorough examination of the immediate battle ground failed to discover any thing worthy of special report, except that Indian bodies were found which had [*inserted: not*] previously been reported in my first dispatch, and which went to prove, what we are all aware of now, that the enemy's loss in killed warriors far exceeded the numbers (103) one hundred and three) first reported by me. In setting out upon our return to camp Capt Yates was directed to deploy his men in search of the bodies of Maj Elliott and his party. After marching a distance of two miles in the direction in which Maj Elliott and his little party were last seen we suddenly, came upon the stark, stiff, naked and horribly mutilated bodies of our dead Comrades. No words were needed to tell how desperate the struggle which ensued before they were finally overpowered. [*4*] At a short distance here and there from the spot where the bodies lay could be seen the carcasses of some of the horses of the party – which had been probably killed early in the fight. Seeing the hopelessness of breaking through the lines which surrounded them and which undoubtedly numbered more than one hundred to one Elliott dismounted his men tied their horses together and prepared to set their lines as clearly as possible. It may not be improper to add that in describing as far as possible the details of Elliott's fight I rely not only upon a critical and personal examination of the ground and attendant circumstances, but are sustained by the

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statements of Indian Chiefs and warriors who witnessed and participated in the fight and who had since been forced to enter our lines and surrender themselves up under circumstances which will be made to appear in other portions of this report. The bodies of Elliott and [*inserted*: his] little band with but a single exception were all found lying within a circle not exceeding twenty yards in diameter. We found them exactly as they fell except [5] that their barbarous foes had stripped and mutilated the bodies in the most savage manner. All the bodies were carried to Camp, [*struck*: which] [*inserted*: the latter] was reached after dark. It being the intention to assume the march before daylight the following day, a grave was hastily prepared on a little knoll near our Camp and with the exception of that of Major Elliott whose remains were carried with us for interment at Fort Ch[*illegible*]kle, the bodies of the entire party, under the dire light of a few torches held in the hands of remaining comrades were consigned to one Common resting place. No funeral note sounded to measure their passage to the grave, no volley was fired to tell us a comrade was receiving the last sad rites of burial yet not one of the living but felt that the fresh earth had closed over some of their truest, and most daring soldiers.

Before interment I caused a complete examination of each body to be made by Dr Sippincutt Chief Medical Officer of the expedition, with directions to report on the character and number of wounds, received by each, as well as to mutilations to which they had been subjected. The following extracts are taken from Dr. Sippincotts report. [6] Major Genl. H. Elliott, two bullet holes in head, one in left cheek, right hand cut off, left foot almost cut off xxxxx deep gash in right groin, deep gashes in calves of both legs, [*struck*: and] little finger of left hand cut off and throat cut. Sergeant Major Walter Kennedy, bullet hole in right temple head partly cut off seventeen bullet holes in back and two in legs.

Corporal Harry Mercer, [*inserted*: Troop "E"] bullet hole in right axilla one in region of heart, three in back, eight arrow wounds in back, right ear cut off, head scalped and skull fractured, deep gashes in both legs, and throat cut.

Private Thomas Christie Troop "E" bullet hole in head, right foot cut off, bullet hole in abdomen, and throat cut.

Corporal William Carrick Troop "C" bullet hole in right parietal bone both feet cut off,

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throat cut, left arm broken x x x x x

Private Eugene Clover Troop "C," head cut off, arrow wound in right side, both legs terribly mutilated

Private William Milligan Troop "C" bullet hole in left side of head, deep gashes in right leg x x x x left arm deeply gashed, head scalped and throat cut.

Corporal James F Williams Troop "I" bullet hole in back, head and both arms cut off, many and deep cuts in back x x x x x

Private Thomas Dooney Trip "I" arrow hole in region of stomach, thorax cut open, head cut off and right shoulder cut by a tomahawk.

[7] [Tarrice] Thomas Fitzpatrick Troop "M" scalped, two arrows and several bullet holes in back, throat cut.

Private Ferdinand Fineback Troop "M" bullet hole in left parietal bone head scalped, one arm broken x x x x x x throat cut.

John Myers Pvt Troop "M" several bullet holes in head scalped, skull extensively fractured several arrow and bullet holes in back, deep gashes in face throat cut.

Pvt Carson DJ Myers Troop "M" several bullet holes in head, scalped, nineteen bullet holes in body xxxxxx throat cut.

Private Carl Sharpe Troop "M" two bullet holes in right side throat cut, one bullet hole in left side of head, one arrow hole in left side xxxxx left arm broken.

Unknown Head cut off, body partially destroyed by wolves.

Unknown head and right hand cut off xxxxx three bullet and nine arrow holes in back
Unknown scalped, skull fractured, six bullet and thirteen arrow holes in back, three bullet holes in chest.

In addition to the wounds and barbarities reported by Dr Sippincott I saw a portion of the

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stock of a "Lancaster rifle" protruding from the side [8] of one of the men, the stock had been broken off near the barrel and the butt of it probably twelve inches in length had been driven into the mans side a distance of eight inches. The forest along the banks of the Washita from the battle ground down a distance of twelve miles was found to have been one continuous Indian village. Black Kettle's band of Cheyennes being [illegible] [these some] other hostile tribes camped in the following order, Arrapahoes under Little Ram, [Keirras] under Blante and Lone Wolf. The remaining bands of Cheyennes Comanches and Apaches. Nothing could excuse the disorder and haste with which these tribes had fled from their camping grounds. They had abandoned thousand of lodge poles, some of which were still standing as when last used, immense numbers of camp kettles, cooking utensils, coffee mills, axes and several hundred buffalo robes were found in the abandoned camps, adjacent to that of Black Kettles village, but which had not been visited before by our troops. By actual examination and estimate it was computed that over six hundred lodges had been standing along the Washita, during [9] the battle and within five miles of the battle ground and it was from these villages and others still lower down the stream, that the [illegible] number of warriors [came], who after my rout and destruction of Black Kettle and his band surrounded my command and fought until defeated by the 7th Cavalry about 3 p.M. on the 27th Ult It is safe to say that the warriors from these tribes that attempted the relief of Black Kettle and his band outnumbered my force at [inserted: least] three to one. On returning from the battle ground to the Camp of my Command, and where in the deserted Camp which according to the statement of some of my Cheyenne prisoners, who were brought with me was lately occupied by [Gatauta] with the Keirras, my men discovered the bodies of a young white woman and child the former apparently about twenty–three years old the latter probably eighteen months old. They were evidently mother and child, and had not long been in captivity as the woman still retained several articles of her wardrobe about her person, among others a pair of Sable gaiters but little worn, everything indicating that she had been but recently captured. And upon our attacking and routing Black Kettles Camp, her captors fearing she might be recaptured by us [10] and her testimony used against them had deliberately murdered her and her child in cold blood. The woman had received a shot in the forehead, her entire scalp was removed and her skull horribly crushed. The child also bore numerous marks of violence. At daylight on the following morning the entire command started on the trail of the

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Indian villages nearly all of which had moved down the Washita towards Fort Cobb where they had reason to believe they would receive protection. The Arrapahoes and remaining band of Cheyennes left the Washita valley and moved across in the direction of Red River. After following the trail of the Kiowas and other hostile Indians for seven days over an almost impassable country where it was necessary to keep two or three hundred men almost constantly at work with picks, axes and spades, before being able to advance with our trail. My Osage scouts on the morning of the 17th reported a party of Indians in our front bearing a flag of truce. At the same time a scout came from same direction stating that he was from Fort Cobb and delivered to me a dispatch which read as follows.

Hd Qtrs Southern Ind District

Fort Cobb 9 P.M. December 16th, 1868.

To the Comdg. Officer

Troop In the Field

[11] Indians have just brought in word that our troops today reached the Washita some twenty miles above here. I send this to say that all the camps this side of the point reported to have been reached, are friendly, and have not been on the war path this season.

If this reaches you it would be well to communicate at once with Salauta or Black Eagle Chiefs of the Kiowas near where you now are, who will readily inform you of the position of the Cheyennes and Arapahoes, also of my camp.

Respectfully

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Signed W.B. Hazen

Prt. Maj. Genl

The scout at the same time informed me that a large party of Kiowa warriors under Lone Wolf Salauta and of the leading Chiefs were within less than a mile of my advance, and notwithstanding the above certificate regarding their friendly character they had seized a scout who accompanied the bearer of the dispatch, disarmed him and held him a prisoner of war. Taking a small party with me I proceed beyond our lines to meet the flag of truce. I was met by several of the leading Chiefs of the Kiowas including those above named. Large parties of their warriors could be seen posted in the neighboring [*illegible*] and upon the surrounding hill tops. All were painted and plumed for war [12] and nearly all were armed with one rifle two revolvers, bow and arrow and lance, their bows were strung. Some twenty of the principal Chiefs of the Kiowas, Apaches and Comanches there approached and proposed to accompany us to Fort Cobb. The Kiowa assuring me that their village was already near that point and moving in to the port. Yet at the time these Chiefs were giving me their assurances their entire village, with the exception of the war party which accompanied them was hastening away towards the Wichita mountains with no intention of proceeding to Fort Cobb. And the proposition of the Chiefs to accompany my column was intended as a mere ruse to cover the escape of the village. On reaching Camp I gave rations to the entire party of Chiefs and warriors who accompanied my column intending to do no act that might be construed as unfriendly. They all promised to proceed to Fort Cobb with us the following day, except two or three who were to rejoin the village and conduct it to the Fort; but, upon resuming the march the next morning, it was found that but three Kiowas and two Apache Chiefs remained, the rest had taken their departure. Before proceeding far the few who remained [13] intimated their intention and desire to proceed to their village and change their horses as well as to give directions about [*strikeout*] movement [*inserted: of the former*] to Fort Cobb. This they repeated several times along the line of march I finally permitted the Kiowa Chief lowest in rank to set out for his village, with the distinct understanding that it was for the purpose of hastening the march of his people to Fort Cobb. They were then represented as being within less than ten miles of the post. I then placed Lone Wolf and Salauta the head Chiefs of

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the Kiowas and two head Chiefs of the Apaches under guard determined to hold them as hostages for the faithful fulfillment of the promise which they and their people had been under for several months and which was one of the stipulations of the last treaty made with them. At the same time I knew it was the intention of the Department Commander to assemble all the hostile tribes in the vicinity of Fort Cobb, by force if necessary in order that they might leave the decision of the Government regarding past offences and the treatment they might expect in future. The communication received through scouts from Bvt Maj Gen. Hazen [*illegible*] Superintendent of the southern Indian Agency in which it was stated that "all the camps this side of the point reported to have been reached are friendly and have not been on the war path this [14] season," Occasioned no little surprise upon the part of those who knew the hostile character of the Indians referred to, we had followed day by day the trail of the Kiowas and other tribes leading us directly from the dead bodies of our comrades, slain by them within the past few days, until we overtook them about forty miles from Fort Cobb. This of itself was conclusive evidence of the character of the tribes we were dealing with; but aside from these incontrovertible facts had we needed additional evidence of the openly hostile conduct of the Kiowas and Comanches and of their active participation in the late battle of the Washita we have only to rely on the collected testimony of Black Eagle and the other leading Chiefs. This testimony is now written and in the hands of the Agents of the Indian Bureau it was given voluntarily by the Indian Chiefs referred to, and was taken down at the time by the Indian Agents not for the Army or with a view of furnishing it to Officers of the Army, but simply for the benefit and information of the Indian Bureau. This testimony even making due allowances for the concealment of much that would be prejudicial to the interest of the Indians, plainly states that the Kiowas and Comanches took part in the battle of the Washita, that the [*inserted: former*] constituted a portion of the war party whose trail I followed and which led my command into Black Kettles village and that some of the Kiowas remained in Black Kettles [15] village until the morning of the battle. This evidence is all contained in a report made to one Thomas Murphy "Superintendent of Indian Affairs by Philip M^cCuskey U.S. Interpreter – for Kiowas and Comanches. This report is dated Fort Cobb December 3rd while the communication from Gen Hazen [vouching] for the peaceable character of the Kiowas and other tribes is dated at same place thirteen days later. It cannot be explained by supposing Gen. Hazen ignorant of the information contained in the report as I obtained a copy

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of the report from him. It only proves what the Indian Bureau regards as "friendly" Indians. In addition to all the above evidence and facts a personal conversation with Lone Wolf, Salauta, Black Eagle and other prominent chiefs convinces me even had we no other information to rely upon: that a large number of the Kiowas led by Kicking Bird and other Kiowa Chiefs voluntarily participated in the battle of the Washita, and that they formed a considerable portion of the hundreds who surrounded and killed Maj Elliott and his party. The horse ridden by one of my men who was killed in that battle has since been recognized in the hands of a Kiowa. All this testimony is more than confirmed by the statements of a very intelligent Cheyenne Squaw sister of Black Kettle who is among my prisoners [16] and who on account of her intelligence and character I dispatched a few days ago as bearer of a message to the hostile Cheyennes. She pointed out to me when in the vicinity of the late-battle ground the location of Salauta's village at the time [*inserted: of the*] battle. [*inserted: She*] as well [*inserted: as*] other of my prisoners are confident as well as positive that Salauta and his tribe were there and that they participated in the engagement. It was from her too that I learned that it was in Salauta's village that the bodies of the white woman and child were found. I have not intimated to Lone Wolf or Salauta that all this evidence is in our possession, nor do I propose doing so until the last Kiowa has come in. Soon after reaching this point it became evident that these Chiefs were attempting their usual game of duplicity and falsehood. Under the pretense that their village was coming to this post to renew friendly relations with the Government, they visited my Headquarters and professed the most peaceable intentions. It was only after receiving information that their village was attempting to escape to the mountains, it was deemed necessary to resort to summary measures to compel these refractory Chiefs to fulfill their promise. They were placed under a strong guard the moment we reached this point, even this failure to produce the desired effect. All evidence went to show that their village [17] was still moving farther away. There it was that I announced to Lone Wolf and Salauta the decision which had been arrived at regarding them. I gave them until sunrise the following morning to cause their people to come in or to give satisfactory evidence that they were hastening to come in: If no such evidence appeared both these Chiefs were to be hung [*inserted: at sunrise*] to the nearest tree At the same time I afforded them every facility to send runners and communicate their desires to their tribe. This produced the desired effect, by sunset several of the leading Kiowas came to my camp and reported the entire village on the move,

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hastening to place themselves under our control. At this date I have the satisfaction to report that all the Apaches, nearly all of the Comanches and the principal Chiefs and bands of the Kiowas have come in and placed themselves under our control, not to make a treaty and propose terms of settlement, but begging us to pronounce the terms upon which they can be allowed to resume peaceful relations with the Government. Of the five tribes which were hostile at the opening of this campaign there are already in our power, being virtually prisoners of war, the remaining two the Cheyennes and Arapahoes were the principal sufferers in the battle of Washita, and are no doubt the most anxious of all to abandon the war path. They are supposed to be concealed in the mountains forty or fifty miles from this point awaiting the result of present negotiations with the three tribes now assembled here, [18] On the 20th inst I sent one of my prisoners a Cheyenne Squaw, sister of Black Kettle, and a leading Apache Chief as bearers of a message to the Cheyennes and Arapahoes. As in the case of other tribes now here no promise or inducement has been held out. I have made no pretense [*inserted & strikeout*] to be [friendly] disposed, [*strikeout*] [*inserted: whatever*] I have asked the tribes to do or accords to have been in the form of a demand, they have from the Commencement of this campaign been treated not as independent nations but as refractory subjects of a common government. I have every reason to believe that neither a few days, or weeks at farthest, the two remaining hostile tribes, [*inserted: the Cheyennes & Arrapahoes*], smarting under these heavy losses in the battle of the Washita will unconditionally come in and place themselves under [*strikeout*] [*inserted: the*] control of this Command, willing to accede to any terms that may be proposed to them. The tribes now here have discarded the [*illegible*] ideas, in the indulgence of which the frequent treaties recently entered into have encouraged them. They now seem to realize that the Government, and not a few thieving treacherous chiefs of predatory bands of savages backed up and encouraged by unprincipled and designing Indian Agents, is the source of all authority. The Chiefs now here have repeatedly informed me that they no longer claim the right to propose terms regarding the future course of the Government towards them, but are not only ready but anxious to accede to any rule marked down for their control and guidance. The above I believe contains a brief statement of the operations of this Command and the [19] results thereof up to this date. Everything indicates a speedy, satisfactory and permanent solution of the Indian difficulties so far as the tribes referred to are concerned. It is not proposed that they be permitted to resume

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peaceful relations with the Government until proper atonement be made for least offenses and sufficient guaranty for future good conduct be given. I take pleasure in adding that although I am in command of the forces comprising this expedition, the Major General Commanding the Department has accompanied it in person, and all negotiations and official action on my part regarding the Indian question has been in accordance with his previously expressed desire or [*inserted*: has received] his subsequent approval. In relation to the battle of the Washita – I find by taking the admissions of the Indians who are now here and who participated in the battle that the enemy's loss far exceeded that reported by me in my first dispatch concerning the fight. I reported (103) one hundred and three warriors left dead in our possession: the Indians admit a loss of (140) one hundred and forty killed besides a heavy loss in wounded. This with the prisoners we have in our possession makes the entire loss of the Indians in killed wounded and missing not far from three hundred (300). The report of the Indians regarding their heavy losses is confirmed by the fact that on the march and where revisiting the battle ground, we found dead Indians six miles from the scene of the battle, where they had probably crawled and died, after receiving their wounds. These of course were not reported in my first dispatch. The head Chiefs now here admit that the Indians have never suffered so overwhelming a defeat with such terrible losses.

Respectfully Submitted,

Bt Maj Genl U.S.A.

Comdg Expedition