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**Killing Crazy Horse**

THE MERCILESS INDIAN WARS IN AMERICA

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# **Killing Crazy Horse**

**THE MERCILESS INDIAN WARS IN AMERICA**

**BILL O'REILLY**

**AND**

**MARTIN DUGARD**

**HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY  
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*This book is dedicated to Makeda Wubneh—  
my assistant for twenty-seven years.  
There is no finer human being around.*

## AUTHORS' NOTE

Writing a book of history about Native Americans is an arduous task. There were literally thousands of tribes throughout North America, more than five hundred of which still exist. In this book, we use the terms *Indians* and *Native Americans* interchangeably, as has been done historically. We realize each tribe is unique and has its own culture. We are respectful of that and have tried to deal with it accurately.

# Chapter Sixteen

NOVEMBER 27, 1868  
WASHITA RIVER, OKLAHOMA  
DAWN

**B**revet Major General George Armstrong Custer is apprehensive. The newly appointed commander of the U.S. Seventh Cavalry has slept just one hour on this frozen morning. His seven hundred troops have not been allowed to sleep at all. Instead, they spent the night in the saddle, dressed in boots and thick overcoats. Speaking in a voice above a whisper is forbidden. An Indian village has been located along the distant riverbank. Custer does not know the name of the tribe or whether they are peaceful. He does not care. This will be the young general's first engagement with an Indian force, and he aims to use the element of surprise to destroy them. Indeed, Custer has been so vigilant about maintaining silence that he has not allowed his men to pitch tents, light pipes, or even dismount and stamp their feet in search of warmth, believing the noise could alert the nearby tribe.

Custer rises from the buffalo robe laid atop the snow that briefly served as his bed. A thick beard covers his face, his blond hair covered with rime and icicles. The three years since the end of the Civil War have been a time of upheaval for the brevet general, who left the service for a time as he weighed a potential run for Congress and enjoyed the night life of Manhattan. Upon his return to the

military in 1866, the nation was confronted by the massacre at Fort Phil Kearny. Railroad companies and stage lines were demanding the army provide better protection for western travelers. Some newspapers even accused soldiers of cowardice for allowing Indians to control the prairie. "As might naturally be expected, a massacre like that at Fort Phil Kearny," Custer will write in his autobiography, "... excited discussion and comment throughout the land, and raised inquiry as to who was responsible for this lamentable affair."

The violent actions of the Sioux nation were directly responsible for Custer's posting in Oklahoma. The brilliant battlefield tactics of Crazy Horse and subsequent call to arms by white settlers will lead to his new posting in Kansas as commander of the Seventh.

But Custer's ascent did not come easily, despite his heroics at Gettysburg. He was actually court-martialed four years later, in July 1868. The offense was deserting his post at Fort Wallace in Kansas, to be with his wife, Libbie, a society debutante whom he married in 1864. His sentence was a one-year suspension from the army without pay.

The Custers' relationship is deeply amorous, and the two are fond of writing steamy letters to each other, fraught with innuendo and sexual double entendres. In response to Libbie's written admission that she likes to "ride tomboy," Custer responds: "I'm nearly starved for a ride. But I cannot without much expense and much danger enjoy the luxury of such a ride as that I refer to. I never did enjoy riding strange horses."

Even before their marriage, the correspondence between George Custer and Elizabeth "Libbie" Bacon was so randy that Custer requested she be more careful. Confederate soldiers had intercepted a batch of their letters during the war, and he was aghast at the thought of them being read by the enemy.

So it was little surprise that Custer would make the decision to risk his career for what Libbie would call "one perfect day." This should have been the end of the flamboyant Custer's military aspirations. However, General Phil Sheridan, the nation's leading Indian fighter, interceded. He personally requests that General of the Army U. S. Grant revoke the suspension after just two months, thus

allowing Custer to once again rejoin the Seventh Cavalry as commander. Sheridan did so in order that Custer could participate in a winter campaign against the tribes of the Southern Plains.

The main food source for Indians is buffalo, which are being hunted to extinction by roving bands of white sharpshooters. Literally hundreds of buffalo are gunned down each day, then stripped of their hides. In the next four years, some four million buffalo will be shot in this fashion. And despite the fact that these rogue hunters are disallowed by treaty from entering or hunting on Indian land, General Sheridan does nothing to stop the whites from violating the treaty and slaughtering the Indian's main sustenance.

In addition, though the transcontinental railroad is a year away from completion, its slow creep westward means the arrival of train stations at regular intervals, and with them the small towns that spring up to service the rail lines. The loss of the buffalo, coming of the railroad, and encroachment of white civilization onto lands once promised the Indians in perpetuity is pushing the plains tribes such as the Cheyenne, Sioux, Arapaho, and Comanche farther and farther into the fringes of the frontier as they seek to maintain their way of life.

It is Sheridan's ambition to find these tribes in their winter quarters and force them to relocate to government reservations. In the general's mind, even Indians that have agreed to terms of peace and presently live on reservations are acceptable targets of violence. "The only good Indian is a dead Indian," believes Sheridan.\*

"I will back you with my full authority," Sheridan's handwritten order to Custer makes clear. "I will say nothing and do nothing to restrain our troops from doing what they deem proper on the spot, and will allow no mere vague general charges of cruelty and inhumanity to tie their hands, but will use all the powers confided to me to the end that these Indians, the enemies of our race and of our civilization, shall not again be able to begin to carry out their barbarous warfare on any kind of pretext they may choose to allege."

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\* Sheridan would forever deny making this statement. Eyewitnesses attested that the general made the claim in 1869, although some say his actual utterance was, "The only good Indians I ever saw were dead."



*Elizabeth Clift Custer, American author, public speaker,  
and wife of General George Armstrong Custer*

Now, as the sun casts its first rays upon the ice-cold waters of the Washita River, Custer prepares to carry out those brutal orders. During a snowstorm four days ago, he and his men marched away from their base camp on the North Canadian River. Custer brings two of his dogs along for company—and warmth, planning on having

them sleep alongside him each night. A buffalo robe draped over his shoulders, Custer navigates through the blizzard by compass, ordering his soldiers to ride in tight formation to prevent anyone from getting lost. The path takes the Seventh through Texas and Oklahoma in their search for an Indian camp. Buffalo are hunted along the way so that the men might have meat.

Yesterday afternoon, three days into the search, Custer's scouts located what appears to be a path followed by Indians returning from a hunting expedition. "Early in the night, with my scouts, I struck a hostile trail leading southeast," chief scout Ben Clark will tell the *New York Sun*. "Two of these scouts discovered a campfire. Crawling cautiously toward it, they learned that the Indians had gone toward the river, having joined the war party. Several miles down the river the tinkle of pony bells was faintly heard, and from the summit of a hill the ponies were seen in the valley below, their bodies standing out dark against the snow."

Custer is immediately alerted and rides forth. The night is clear. Stars shine brightly. Tribal dogs bark in the distance. The brevet general lies down atop the snow so his silhouette does not give him away. The scouts point out a series of lodges hidden within the forest.

"When the camp was discovered," Sergeant John Ryan of the Seventh Cavalry's M Company will write, "Custer thought the dogs might alarm the Indians' dogs and arouse the camp, and I understood that Custer had to kill two of his hounds. One dog in my company, of whom the men were very fond, was a little black dog called Bob, and harmless as a kitten. We had to part with him, and one of our men drove a picket pin into Bob's head and left him for dead."

The tribal camp is located in a wooded valley. It is 1:00 a.m. as Custer gathers his officers and asks them to temporarily remove their sabers, believing the weapons might accidentally make a metallic clanking sound that can be heard in the distance. He then lays out a daring plan, which calls for splitting his force and attacking the Indians from four directions at once.

The next five hours are spent carefully moving the separate columns of troops into position. The snow is deep, with a layer of ice on top that makes a crunching sound as the horses walk forward. There

is nothing that can be done to silence the animals, but in the end the noise is not a problem. The tribe fears nothing and has posted no guards. All is silent in the Indian encampment, and not even their dogs bark to send the alarm.

At dawn a low fog settles over the valley. “The hour was so still that a man could almost hear his watch tick,” one American soldier will long remember.

The calm is shattered when Custer gives the regimental band the order to play “Garry Owen,” a triumphal drinking song that has become the Seventh’s official anthem. Custer has positioned the band near the river crossing leading to the Indian encampment. Though the cold is so intense that spittle almost instantly freezes within the brass horns, the raucous tune can be heard across the river and into the trees.\*

The Seventh Cavalry gallops into the sleeping village with orders to spare no one.

“The Indians were taken completely by surprise and rushed panic-stricken from their lodges, to be shot down almost before sleep had left their eyelids,” chief scout Ben Clark will remember.

“The air was full of smoke from gunfire, and it was almost impossible to flee, because bullets were flying everywhere. However, somehow we ran and kept running to find a hiding place,” a fourteen-year-old Cheyenne girl will remember. “In the grass we lay flat, our hearts beating, and we were afraid to move.”

Wounded Indian ponies moan loudly in pain as they limp off to escape the battle. American soldiers shoot every man, woman, and child they can find in the village—even as many other Indians escape to hide in the freezing river or in the snow and tall grass. Scalps are taken. Bodies are mutilated and stripped.

Soldiers looting the many lodges come across coffee, as well as

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\* The original Irish title was spelled “Garryowen,” based on a village near Limerick of the same name. The composer Ludwig von Beethoven wrote his own version of the song. British soldiers during the Peninsular and Crimean Wars made it their regimental march. The song came to America in 1851, when a group of Irish immigrants formed a volunteer regiment and made it their official marching song. The Seventh Cavalry adopted “Garry Owen” as their official “air” in 1867. To this day, the regimental band plays this song.

U.S. Army pots and pans, evidence that this tribe had been given these gifts as signatories of the 1867 Medicine Lodge Treaty and are thus peaceful. Yet the killing does not stop. The corpses of dead Indian men and women are posed by the soldiers in sexually provocative positions. Other dead are hurled into the flames as the entire village is set ablaze. Finally, to ensure that the Indians lack the ability to ever again raid or wage war, Custer gives the order to shoot each and every one of the spotted Indian ponies. Eight hundred horses are quickly shot dead. The skulls of these ponies will litter these lands for decades to come.

“The loss of so many animals of value was a severe blow to the tribe,” Custer will write, “as nothing so completely impairs the war-making facilities for the Indians of the Plains as the deprivation or disabling of their ponies.”

The village leader is a chief named Black Kettle. He is known as a man of peace and for many years has been eager to establish treaties with the whites to protect his people. It was Black Kettle's Southern Cheyenne tribe who were attacked at Sand Creek on November 29, 1864, even though he had personally flown a white flag of truce and the American Stars and Stripes over his tepee on that day so soldiers would not see him as a threat. Black Kettle survived the infamous slaughter, as did his wife—who suffered nine bullet wounds.

Yet once again, Black Kettle's people are now being attacked without cause, even though he signed a treaty with the U.S. government that promised his tribe “perpetual peace” after their sufferings at Sand Creek. Black Kettle is in his late sixties on the morning Custer and the Seventh Cavalry thunder into his camp, the American soldiers shouting fierce battle cries. Black Kettle panics and mounts a horse with his wife in retreat. Back in the village, the chief's own warriors mock him as he tries to gallop away.

But Black Kettle and his wife do not get far. They are shot in the back by American soldiers, their corpses falling into the Washita River.

“We saw the bodies of Black Kettle and his wife, lying under the water,” the Cheyenne teenager named Moving Behind Woman will recount many years later. “It was getting late, and we had to go, so we

left the bodies. As we rode along westward, we would come across the bodies of men, women and children strewn about. We would stop and look at the bodies and mention their names.”



With more than a hundred Indians dead, George Custer writes his full report shortly after the battle. Messengers travel through the night to deliver news of the great victory to General Sheridan’s headquarters. Custer’s success is a validation of Sheridan’s strategy of taking the battle to the enemy during the winter, when they least expect it.

“The Major General Commanding announces to this Command the defeat, by the Seventh Regiment of Cavalry, of a large force of Cheyenne Indians under the celebrated Chief Black Kettle . . . on the morning of the 27th instant, on the Washita River, near the Antelope Hills, Indian Territory, resulting in a loss to the savages of one hundred and three warriors killed, including Black Kettle.”

So reads Major General Phil Sheridan’s after-action report about the surprise attack on the Cheyenne at the Washita. The general does not mention that women and children were slaughtered.

“The gallantry and bravery displayed, resulting in signal success, reflect the highest credit upon both the officers and men of the Seventh Cavalry.

“Special congratulations are tendered to their distinguished commander, Brevet Major-General George A. Custer, for the efficient and gallant services rendered.”

The history of Washita was initially written by the victors, as is so often the case. But the slaughter sets forth a series of events on the plains that would eventually shock America. Because a nonthreatening tribe had been annihilated, peace and negotiation will become much more difficult between the Indians and the U.S. government.

Payback is coming.