

CUSTER'S ORDERS PRIOR TO LITTLE BIGHORN BATTLE

Government Document

Author(s): Terry, Alfred H.

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Source: Terry, Alfred H. Custer's Orders Prior to Little Bighorn Battle. 1876. Reproduced in History Resource Center. Detroit: Gale.

These are the orders conveyed to General Custer on June 22, 1876, by General Alfred H. Terry. Terry ordered Custer to pursue a band of Lakota and Cheyenne Indians and to prevent the possibility of their escape. On June 25 and 26, Custer and two battalions of his Seventh Cavalry were wiped out in a fight with Lakota and Cheyenne Indians at the Little Bighorn River, in present-day Montana. These orders thus became significant in the controversy that followed. Terry's supporters point out that he ordered Custer to wait for the rest of the army units before attacking the Indian encampment. Although many members of the Army held Custer in high esteem (the document mentions his "zeal, energy and ability"), Custer's behavior almost earned him a court-martial several times after 1867. This time his "zeal" cost him his life.

PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENT

Official Orders to General Custer, by General Alfred H. Terry

Camp at the Mouth of Rosebud River, June 22, 1876.

The Brigadier General commanding directs that as soon as your regiment can be made ready for the march, you proceed up the Rosebud in pursuit of the Indians whose trail was discovered by Major Reno a few days ago. It is, of course, impossible to give you any definite instructions in regard to this movement, and were it not impossible to do so, the Department commander places too much confidence in your zeal, energy and ability to wish to impose upon you precise orders which might hamper your action when nearly in contact with the enemy.

He will, however, indicate to you his own views of what your action should be, and he desires that you should conform to them unless you shall see sufficient reason for departing from them. He thinks that you should proceed up the Rosebud until you ascertain definitely the direction in which the trail above spoken of leads. Should it be found, as it appears to be almost certain that it will be found, to turn toward the Little Big Horn he thinks that you should still proceed southward, perhaps as far as the headwaters of the Tongue, and then turn toward the Little Big Horn, feeling

constantly however, to your left so as to preclude the possibility of the escape of the Indians to the south or southeast by passing around your left flank.

The column of Col. Gibbon is now in motion for the mouth of the Big Horn. As soon as it reaches that point it will cross the Yellowstone and move up at least as far as the forks of the Big and Little Big Horn. Of course its future movements must be controlled by circumstances as they may arise; but it is hoped that the Indians, if upon the Little Big Horn, may be so nearly enclosed by the two columns that their escape will be impossible.

The Department Commander desires that on your way up the Rosebud you should thoroughly examine the upper part of Tullocks Creek, and that you should endeavor to send a scout through to Col. Gibbon's column with information of the result of your examination. The lower part of this creek will be examined by a detachment from Col. Gibbon's command.

The supply steamer will be pushed up the Big Horn as far as the forks of the river are found to be navigable for that space, and the Department Commander, who will accompany the column of Col. Gibbon, desires you to report to him there not later than the expiration of the time for which your troops are rationed, unless in the meantime you receive further orders.

Respectfully,

E. W. Smith,

Capt. 18th Infantry,

Acting Asst. Adjt. Genl.