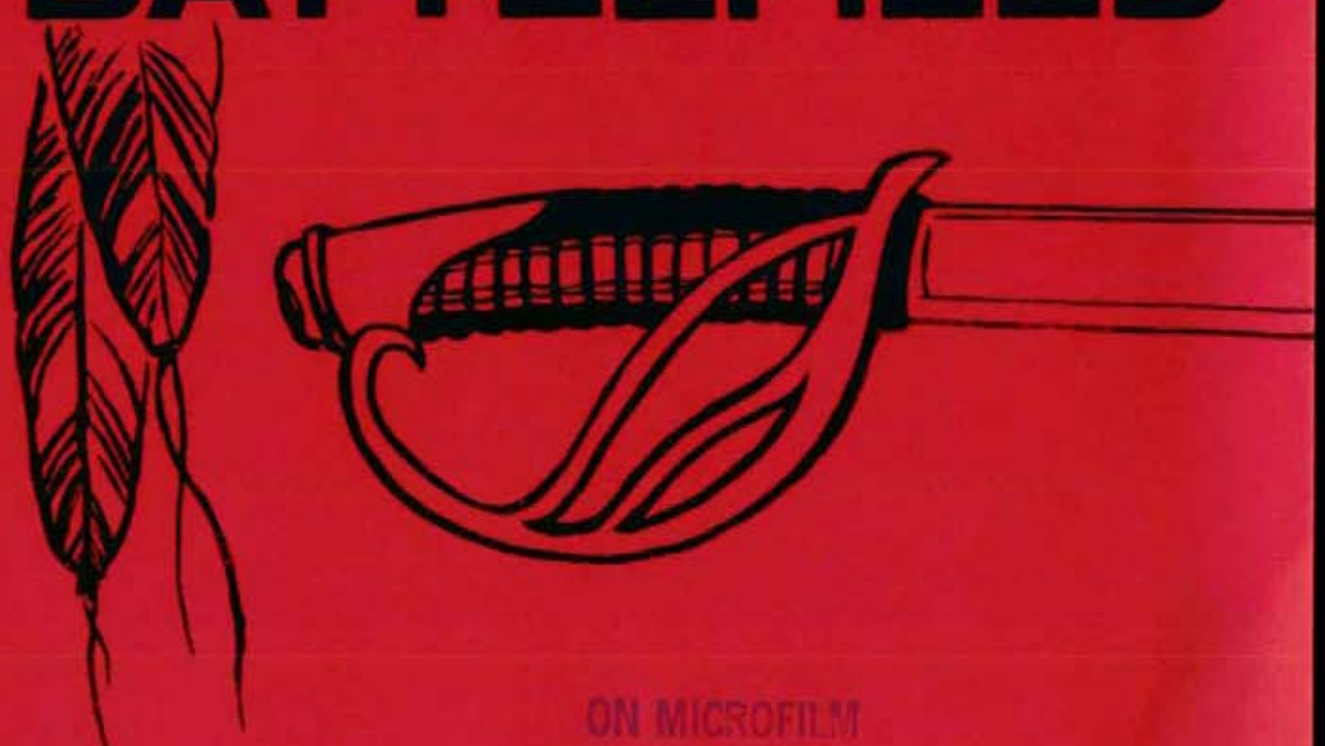
WASHITA BATTLEFIELD



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The National Survey
of
Historic Sites and Buildings

Special Report

on

WASHITA BATTLEFIELD, OKLAHOMA

Division of
NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM STUDIES
Room 3212
Chester C. Brown's Copy

by

William E. Brown
Historian

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PREFACE

On January 30, 1964, Mrs. Bess Thornton, President of the Elk City Chamber of Commerce and the Western Oklahoma Industrial and Recreation Association, proposed to Secretary Udall that the site of the Battle of the Washita near Cheyenne, Oklahoma, be established as a unit of the National Park System. On February 17 a delegation of 17 proponents met personally with the Secretary at Bartlesville, Oklahoma, and were assured that a reevaluation of the site would be made by the National Park Service. Subsequently, all 8 members of the Oklahoma congressional delegation endorsed the park proposal and requested that the Service study it. As a result of these meetings and communications, Regional Historian Robert M. Utley met in Elk City on April 25 with Congressman Victor Wickersham and a sizable delegation of western Oklahoma political and business leaders headed by Mrs. Thornton. The day's program included an onsite inspection of the battlefield led by Cheyenne Attorney Harry C. Chapman, an able local historian. Following Mr. Utley's visit, I was assigned to prepare a special report on the Battle of the Washita, concentrating on its historical significance. In preparation for this work, I visited the site on May 31 and was fortunate to have Mr. Chapman's guidance in tracing the events that occurred on the battlefield. Based on this visit and subsequent correspondence with Mr. Chapman, I have provided a short Appendix to this report giving basic information concerning the present status of the site. Also included in the Appendix are my conclusions and recommendations with respect to the significance of the site.

The historical narrative forming the body of this report is not a research study. It is an interpretation. The Battle of the Washita and the Winter Campaign of which it was the climax have been thoroughly studied and documented by the scholars listed in the Bibliography. It would have been mere pedantic redundance to have retraced ground they have so ably covered. Anyway, the essential facts concerning the battle itself are quite clear-cut, and I saw no reason to believe that significant new evidence concerning them could be uncovered. Rather, it seemed to me that the contribution of this report should be to fit the Battle of the Washita into a larger context--by considering its causes and consequences to show that it was a turning point in the history of the Indian Wars and that it resulted in a fundamental, even if futile and short-lived, change in the Nation's Indian policy.

The Washita Battlefield was studied in 1958-59 by the National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings as part of the theme "Military and Indian Affairs." Despite its considerable academic significance and high integrity, it was recommended for the "Other Sites Considered" category. This evaluation, chiefly based on the principle of thematic balance, was confirmed by the Consulting Committee and the Advisory Board.

I wish to acknowledge the help of Mrs. Mary Huey, who drew the two battlefield maps; Miss Joyce Fox, who designed the cover; and Miss Ortencia Gonzales, who typed and proofed the manuscript.

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THE BATTLE OF THE WASHITA

The cultural collision between white man and Indian, civilization and savagery, reached its tragic climax in the post-Civil War years on the Great Plains. The white pioneer-settler--with his farms, villages, rails, and roads--aimed to domesticate the land, to own it, to locate permanently upon it. The nomadic Plains Indian--with his horse, mobile home, and migratory buffalo herds--aimed to adapt to bountiful nature, not conquer and subdue it. Private, exclusive ownership of the land was a concept totally alien to his way of life. Two such diametrically opposed philosophies were like flint and steel: whenever they met sparks flew.

For a time it had been government policy to insulate Indians from whites by means of a vast Indian territory comprising the Great Plains between Missouri and the Rocky Mountains. But in the decade of the 1840s the Indian frontier was breached, and by the end of the Civil War land-hungry settlers were penetrating the plains along the river valleys. Thus the Indian hunting grounds were encroached upon from the east. To the west were inhospitable mountains and deserts--and more white men of the eastward moving mining frontier. The Indian had his back to the wall. No longer could he strike at the white man, then retreat into wilderness. He must stand fast and defend his way of life.

It is impossible to assign blame to either white or Indian for the final great wars on the plains. There were Indians who sought to follow the white man's road. There were whites who sought through

moral suasion to convert the Indians to civilized ways. But most of the Indians wanted to continue their wild and predatory life. For this they had been trained since childhood. They were warriors, not women. And it is not difficult to understand the sweetness of revenge among the pioneers whose wives and daughters the Indians had cruelly ravished and killed, or condemned to unspeakable slavery.

It is in this context of cultures in collision that the Battle of the Washita achieves significance.

Prologue

The story of the Battle of the Washita really begins with the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864. During the spring and summer of 1864 Colorado settlers and Cheyennes waged bloody warfare. Enmity between the Coloradans and the Indians was climaxed on November 29 when Col. J. M. Chivington surprised and attacked the camp of Chief Black Kettle on Sand Creek, 40 miles from Fort Lyon. Black Kettle considered himself at peace and under military protection at this time. Therefore Indian resistance was ineffective. The slaughter was terrible. An official government commission later stated that the atrocities committed by Chivington's militia against Indian men, women, and children "would put to shame the savage ingenuity of interior Africa."

The same commission, in its Report on the Condition of the Indian Tribes, fixed part of the blame for Indian troubles on the "fire and sword" policy of the military. Humanitarians in the East immediately went to the defense of the poor Indian, clamoring for a civilized solution to the Indian problem. In response Congress created a Peace

Commission to remove the causes of the Indian wars and to devise a plan by which the Indians could be converted from their nomadic way of life and settled on reservations.

On the Southern Plains, the work of the Peace Commissioners culminated in the Medicine Lodge Treaties of October 1867. By the terms of these treaties the Arapahoes, Cheyennes, Comanches, and Kiowas were assigned to reservations in the Indian Territory. Here they would have permanent homes, farms, agricultural implements and teachers to direct them on "the white man's road." Annuities of food, blankets, and clothing would be provided to start them on their new way of life. The Indians who signed agreed to abstain from their roving after the buffalo and their warring on white settlers and travelers.

But the treaties were doomed to failure. Many chiefs did not sign; and those who did could not control their people, especially the younger warriors. A modern-day anthropologist would be hard-pressed to express the Indians' antipathy toward the treaties as succinctly and persuasively as did the Kiowa Chief Satanta: "I have heard that you want to settle us on a reservation. . . . I don't want to settle. I love to roam over the prairies. There I feel free and happy, but when I settle down I grow pale and die."

Even if the Indians had accepted the treaties wholeheartedly, most probably they would have failed to achieve peace. For Congress had to ratify them and appropriate money to implement them. Not until the following July was this done, and by that time the raiding

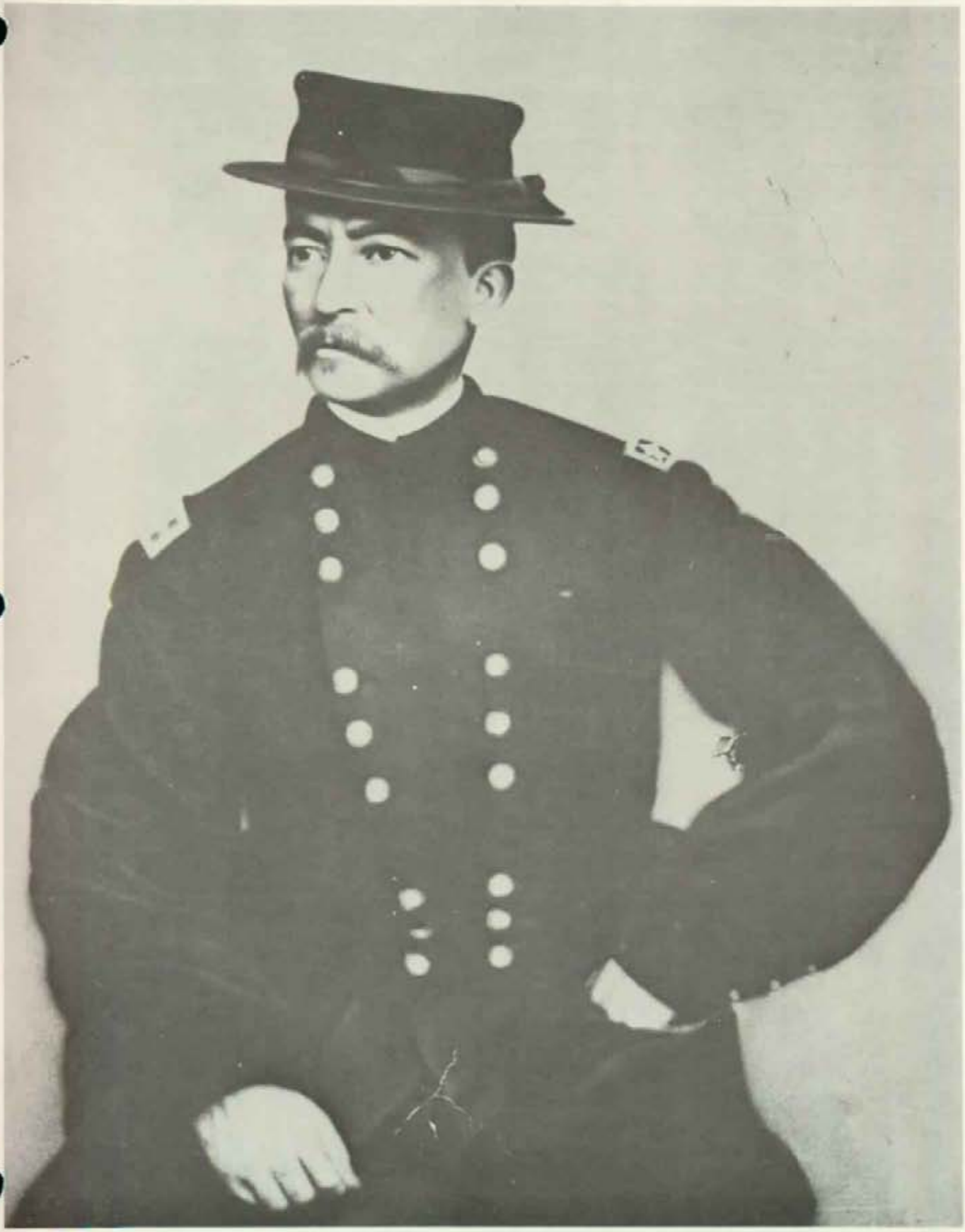
season was well underway. As the months passed with little indication that the government intended to carry out the promises made at Medicine Lodge, the Indians grew increasingly restless. They had not been assigned to their reservations, and white settlers were moving into their tribal lands. The buffalo were disappearing. In the spring of 1868, when the grass began to grow and the Indian ponies became sleek and fat again, the beat of the drum was heard on the Southern Plains.

Sheridan - Problems and a Policy

Maj. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan was assigned command of the Department of the Missouri in September 1867, but because of poor health it was March 1868 before he took active control. The Department of the Missouri encompassed New Mexico, Colorado, Indian Territory, and Kansas--nearly 400,000 square miles. Sheridan's chief problem was how to restrain the Indians of the Great Plains--the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Comanche, and Kiowa. Five thousand warriors of these tribes wandered with their families over more than 150,000 square miles of Sheridan's department. They were nomads who followed the buffalo herds. They were heedless of the white man's land claims. And now, as in the past, treaties of peace were little more than pieces of paper whose signing brought presents and whose substance the Indians neither understood nor pretended to obey. To police these Plains Indians, Sheridan was allowed only 2,600 men--1,200 cavalry and 1,400 infantry.

In addition to the immediate necessity of controlling the restless Indians, Sheridan had to steer a course midway between the

"A Hot Trail," by Charles Schreyvogel.



General Phil Sheridan.

demands of the frontiersmen, who wanted the Indians exterminated, and the "sickly sentimentalists" of the East, who attributed all Indian troubles to the white man's rapacity. At first Sheridan stood aloof from the debate between the frontier realists and the philanthropic theorists. But as events of the spring and summer of 1868 developed, he listened ever more closely to the army officers, scouts, and Westerners who counseled a stern policy in dealing with the Indians. He realized that the cultural transformation required of the Indians by the visionary Easterners would take time--generations. Meanwhile he must curb the Indians as they were--bold and free warriors whose greatest ambitions were realized on the field of battle. He adopted the policy that "punishment must follow crime." And in that policy was the seed of the Battle of the Washita.

The Frontier Aflame

During the spring and summer of 1868 the Southern Plains ran red with blood. From the Platte to the Rio Grande, from Council Grove to Denver, the Indians went to war. Operating in small bands of 50 to 100 warriors, they swept through the inadequate frontier defense system and spread death and destruction over the land. Comanches and Kiowas raided in Texas and New Mexico. Cheyennes and Arapahoes struck in Kansas and Colorado. Knowing every water hole in this arid region, traveling lightly and swiftly from place to place, living off the land, the Indians appeared out of nowhere to pillage and burn and rape and kill--then disappeared with the same alacrity. When Sheridan's supply-laden troopers attempted to follow the war

parties, the Indians dispersed in all directions, reuniting again at some prearranged meeting place a hundred miles distant.

Sheridan, with his small and scattered army, could not hope to cope with the Indians offensively during the raiding season, so he set up an elastic defense. A screen of garrisoned military posts protected the frontier settlements. Mobile cavalry columns moved beyond the forts attempting to intercept the Indians. This defensive policy was only partially successful. Maj. George A. Forsyth's heroic stand at Beecher's Island on the Arickaree in northeastern Colorado dealt the Indians a heavy blow; Maj. E. A. Carr's expedition in the Republican River country put to flight a large band of marauding Cheyennes, doubtless saving the frontier settlements from their attentions. But despite these and other limited successes, reports from the frontier were discouraging. On August 17 Governor Crawford of Kansas telegraphed President Johnson:

> I have just returned from northwestern Kansas, the scene of a terrible Indian massacre. On the thirteenth and fourteenth instant, forty of our citizens were killed and wounded by hostile Indians. Men, women and children were murdered indiscriminately. Many of them were scalped, and their bodies mutilated. Women, after receiving mortal wounds were outraged and otherwise inhumanly treated in the presence of their dying husbands and children.

A month later Acting Governor Hall of Colorado reported:

> The Indians have again attacked our settlements in strong force, obtaining possession of the country to within twelve miles of Denver. They are more bold, fierce, and desperate in their assaults than ever before. It is impossible to drive them out and protect the families at the same time, for they are better armed, mounted, disciplined, and better officered than our men. Each hour brings intelligence of fresh barbarities and more extensive robberies. We have been impoverished of horses by the frequency and success of these attacks. The prospect was never so dark as now.

Sheridan was furious with the Cheyennes and Arapahoes who were causing the trouble in his department. Early in August they had been issued the annuity goods, including arms and ammunition, that had been promised at the Medicine Lodge conclave. It was after this issue of rations and arms that the Indians had begun their reign of terror. Sheridan communicated his rage to his commander, Gen. W. T. Sherman, and through him to U. S. Grant, commanding general of the Army. Despite the protests of Indian sympathizers, Sheridan convinced his superiors that renewed war by the Indians was inexcusable. They had been issued food, clothing, and arms; they had promised peace. Yet the entire frontier was aflame and outrage followed outrage with sickening swiftness. With the approval of Sherman and Grant, Sheridan now made plans for a strong punitive campaign. By now, too, he saw that it was useless to classify the Indians as good or bad. He mistrusted even those chiefs who had signed the Medicine Lodge Treaties. Experienced plainsmen charged that the chiefs had feigned friendship only to get annuities and arms. Sheridan believed that the chiefs could no longer legitimately blame a few "bad young warriors" for the bloody raids in Kansas and Colorado. He determined to treat the Indians as a single group and to hold them collectively accountable for every hostile act.

Genesis of the Winter Campaign

Sheridan's experience with the Plains Indians during the 1868 raiding season convinced him that only a strong offensive blow could halt depredations. He had learned, too, the rhythm of the seasons

that set the pattern of Indian warfare and dictated the strategy of reprisal.

Randolph B. Marcy, in his book Thirty Years of Army Life on the Border, had well described the difficulties of Indian fighting:

> To act against an enemy who is here to-day and there tomorrow; who at one time stampedes a herd of mules upon the headwaters of the Arkansas, and when next heard from is in the very heart of the populated districts of Mexico, laying waste haciendas, and carrying devastation, rapine, and murder in his steps; who is every where without being anywhere; who assembles at the moment of combat, and vanishes whenever fortune turns against him; who leaves his women and children far distant from the theatre of hostilities, and has neither towns nor magazine to defend, nor lines of retreat to cover; who derives his commissariat from the country he operates in, and is not encumbered with baggage-wagons or pack-trains; who comes into action only when it suits his purpose, and never without the advantage of numbers or position--with such an enemy the strategic science of civilized nations loses much of its importance.

But this was Indian fighting in the spring and summer when war ponies were nourished on rich plains grass. Then, as Marcy had stated, the Indian was mobile, swift, cunning, and dangerous. Without warning he raided and destroyed, then seemingly vanished into thin air, leaving many a pursuing cavalry column dangling at the end of a trail to nowhere. Fighting Indians during the grass season was, as Custer put it in My Life on the Plains, "meeting them on ground of their own selection . . . when every natural circumstance . . . was wholly in their favor."

Winter was a different matter. Then the horse herds starved and the ponies were unfit for all but the most limited service. Plains blizzards forced the Indian into sheltered breaks and river valleys where he could warm himself by his tepee fire. In his refuge,

immobilized by the condition of his horses, surrounded by his women and children, the Indian was vulnerable. His only protection was isolation and brutal weather.

Sheridan proposed to ally himself with the weather. He would thus expose his troopers to hardship and suffering. He would go counter to the advice of scouts and plainsmen, who pronounced the sleet and ice and snow of winter an insurmountable barrier to the prosecution of a successful campaign. But if he could pull it off, a successful winter campaign--possible because the army could transport its forage and supplies in wagons--would not only punish the guilty Indians, but would destroy their belief that winter protected them from reprisal for their summer misdeeds. It would be a psychological blow of the first magnitude--a revolution in plains warfare. Thus Sheridan settled on a winter campaign, the most formidable yet undertaken and one that would set the pattern for the final defeat of the Plains Indians.

The next step was to get approval from higher headquarters. Sherman approved Sheridan's plan and immediately went to work to get the assent of the Interior Department, under whose authority Indian affairs were conducted. With the proviso that some means be found to protect the innocent from the fate of the guilty, this assent was finally forthcoming in early October. Friendly Indians were advised to proceed to Fort Cobb, Indian Territory, and there put themselves under the protection of Col. W. B. Hazen, Superintendent of Southern Plains Indians. Sheridan told Hazen that the Kiowas and Comanches

could take advantage of this arrangement, for they had not raided in Sheridan's department. He was determined, however, to punish the Cheyennes and Arapahoes. Accordingly he denied them sanctuary.

Much controversy has swirled over this denial. Black Kettle of the Cheyennes and Big Mouth of the Arapahoes both pledged peace. But Sheridan reasoned that even though some Indians of these tribes were innocent, they had not restrained the guilty, nor had they given them up as required by the Medicine Lodge Treaties. The record showed conclusively that it was Cheyennes and Arapahoes who had created havoc in Colorado and Kansas during the past summer. Sheridan's blanket denial of sanctuary to these tribes thus consigned the innocent and the guilty to the same fate. It is easy, far removed from the exigencies of Indian campaigning, to condemn Sheridan. But to contribute to an understanding of his action, it is worthwhile to note that he faced the same loose tribal organization that confounded the entire history of the Indian wars. Because of this loose tribal organization, it was impossible to deal with any particular tribe as a unified political entity. The perennial problem of the "bad young warriors," who gave a bad name to an entire tribe, perplexed Sheridan and led to tragedy for the Cheyennes. Sheridan's decision to punish the Cheyennes and Arapahoes, <u>as tribes</u>, was one of desperation. He was not responsible for the political anarchy of the Indian tribes, and he lacked the means for precise discrimination in his war of retribution. While this is regretable it is understandable.

There were guilty Indians among the Cheyennes and Arapahoes. Sheridan meant to punish them. The others, though innocent of raiding,

were accomplices, for they sheltered the guilty ones. Absolute justice would require distinction between the two sorts of guilt. The nature of Indian warfare forbade it. In this lack of discrimination the Battle of the Washita exemplifies one of the more tragic facets of the Indian wars. Here, as on so many other battlefields, the Army erred against justice. No matter the reasons for these errors, which in the context of the times were ample, the history of the Indian wars will always conjure up an overtone of the white man's guilt. The Battle of the Washita significantly illustrates this unhappy theme.

Strategy and Logistics

The prime objective of Sheridan's campaign was to drive the Indians onto the reservations set aside at Medicine Lodge. Secondarily he would pursue and kill Indians guilty of raiding or those who refused to go to the reservations.

His strategy was the favored one of Indian campaigning: converging columns. The main force under Lt. Col. Alfred Sully included 11 companies of Lt. Col. George A. Custer's 7th Cavalry, a battalion of 5 companies of infantry commanded by Maj. John H. Page, and the 19th Kansas Volunteer Cavalry under Governor S. J. Crawford. This column was to proceed south about 100 miles from Fort Dodge, Kansas, and there establish a depot, Camp Supply, which would be used as the base of operations against tribes in the Indian Territory and in the Staked Plains of Texas. Two other columns were to penetrate the Indian Territory in conjunction with the main force: Maj. A. W. Evans was to march eastward from Fort Bascom, New Mexico, with 6 companies of the

3d Cavalry and 2 companies of infantry; Maj. E. A. Carr was to move southeastward from Fort Lyon, Colorado, with 7 companies of the 5th Cavalry. The function of these other two columns was that of "beaters." They would drive eastward any straggling bands camping west of the main column's line of march. Once Camp Supply was established, Custer would march south and attack hostile bands camped on the Washita or the headwaters of Red River.

Sheridan planned a 6 months' campaign, one that would keep the Indians reeling throughout the winter. The logistics of such an operation were enormous. Vast stores were accumulated at Forts Dodge, Lyon, Arbuckle, and Bascom. Wagon- and pack-trains were formed to transport the supplies. Troops received winter outfits and rigorous training to improve their survival and fighting abilities. White and Indian scouts and trailers were recruited. Notable among them were the Mexican-Indian interpreter, Romero; ex-Forty-niner, California Joe; his partner, Jack Corbin; and the Osage trailers, Little Beaver and Hard Rope.

The 7th Cavalry, spearhead of the campaign, was quickly whipped into shape by Colonel Custer. This recently formed unit was notably poor in morale when Sheridan called Custer to command it. Within a few weeks, devoted to improving the horsemanship and markmanship of the troopers, Custer had made the 800-man command an elite corps. The 40 best sharpshooters were designated the elite of the elite and as a unit were given preference in the order of march and in the performance of camp duties. They were placed under command of Lt. W. W. Cooke.

WINTER CAMPAIGN, 1868-1869

Drawn from Sheridan's field map which was furnished through courtesy of the Office of the Chief Signal Officer, War Department. Washington, D. C.

- Carr's route, Dec., 1868
- Custer-Sheridan route, Oct.-Dec., 1868
- Custer's route, Nov., 1868
- Evans' route, Nov.-Dec., 1868
- Custer's route, Jan., 1869
- Sully-Custer route, Nov., 1868

P. J. CONKWRIGHT

Thus, in the atmosphere of impending historic events, the army made ready for the campaign.

To Camp Supply

On November 1 Sheridan issued marching orders to his subordinate commanders. On November 12 Custer and the 7th Cavalry left Fort Dodge and proceeded south toward the junction of Wolf and Beaver Creeks where Camp Supply was to be located. Custer was straining at the leash to get on with the campaign. As one of Sheridan's divisional commanders during the Civil War he had time and again exhibited a kind of reckless courage and dash that appealed to the department commander.

Custer made his first camp on Mulberry Creek. Here Sully, Page's infantry, and the 400-wagon supply train joined him. The Kansas volunteers were delayed and would later meet the column at Camp Supply. Even minus the Kansans, the command made an impressive picture. The wagons, in four columns, were preceded by the painted Osages and the rangy scouts. Cavalry held advance, rear guard, and flanking positions, while marching with the wagons was the infantry. Several days' march produced no incident. But field and camp routine was set, and the troops, already lean from their training, toughened to the rigors of actual campaigning.

On the fifth day they reached the valley of the Beaver. Moving downstream they struck the trail of a north-bound war party. Custer immediately requested Sully's permission to back-track the Indian trail and attack the village at its end. Sully, however, was cautious. Fearing that the village would be alerted, he refused Custer's request, much to the latter's disgust.

Next day the column reached the intended site of Camp Supply and the infantry went to work building the post.

Meanwhile, Custer and Sully, completely incompatible men, indulged in a dispute over command of the column. Fortunately, Sheridan arrived on November 21st with two companies of the 19th Kansas and settled the dispute by sending Sully back to Fort Dodge. Henceforth Custer was in command of the troops in the field, deferring, however, to Sheridan's wishes.

Eight companies of Kansans were still missing, but at Custer's urging Sheridan ordered the campaign to commence without them. Despite a snow storm throughout the day and night of the 22d, Custer prepared the 7th Cavalry for a scout toward Antelope Hills, a favorite Indian campsite. By dawn of the 23d they were ready. Their supply train was loaded, equipment had been checked, and the troopers were completely outfitted. Through 12 inches of snow Custer rode to Sheridan's tent and announced that he was ready to depart. The bitter cold and snow made Sheridan hesitate to give the final command, but Custer convinced him that nothing could be better for Indian hunting than severe weather that would keep the warriors close to their fires and remove any suspicion of impending attack. Sheridan could not help but agree.

With inimitable flourish Custer rode back to the head of his troopers. "Mount!" and "Advance!" followed in quick succession. The band struck up the marching tune, "The Girl I Left Behind Me." Preceded by Custer and the scouts, all 11 companies of the 7th Cavalry moved out.

The March to the Washita

The long column soon disappeared into the falling snow. So dense was it that the surrounding country was cut off from view. Even the Indian scouts were lost, unable to perceive the landmarks on which they depended for guidance. Custer himself guided the column, compass in hand. That afternoon Wolf Creek was reached and crossed and the column turned west up its right bank. Camp was set up at a spot 15 miles from Camp Supply. Custer noted that the short march through deep snow had fatigued the horses more than the ordinary day's quota of 30 miles. The troops gathered wood from the fallen timber along the creek bed. Soon fires were blazing and the company cooks prepared the troopers' supper. Hot coffee restored warmth, and despite the uninviting weather spirits were high.

Next day it was clear. Camp was struck and the march continued up Wolf Creek. About noon on the 25th, course was altered southward toward the Canadian, which was reached that evening. Custer took counsel with the Osages and California Joe as to the next step. At their suggestion, on the morning of November 26, Custer sent three companies under Maj. Joel H. Elliott up the north bank of the Canadian to look for the trails of any war parties that might have crossed the river since the storm. Custer counted on the storm forcing back the war party whose north-bound trail had been discovered during the march from Fort Dodge. Elliott's instructions were to follow any trail discovered. He was to send word immediately to Custer, who would follow with the main column. Meanwhile Custer would cross the Canadian and head south toward Antelope Hills.

As Elliott departed, the main column and wagon train commenced crossing the swollen, ice-flecked Canadian. This difficult task was barely completed when Scout Jack Corbin was sighted struggling through the snow with a message from Elliott. Breathlessly he told Custer that a trail less than 24 hours old had been struck just 12 miles upstream. It headed southeast and Elliott was following it at his best speed. The durable Corbin was given a fresh mount and directed to return to Elliott with these orders: Elliott was to continue the pursuit while the main column sought to intercept his trail and overtake him. If this was not accomplished by 8 p.m., Elliott was to halt and wait for Custer.

Corbin had barely regained his breath and set out on his return journey when Custer issued a series of quick orders that turned the 7th Cavalry into a disturbed ant-hill of running, cursing men. The main wagon train was to be abandoned. With an escort of 80 men it would follow the light-marching cavalry as best it could. The fighting men would strip their outfits of all unnecessary gear and prepare for a swift march. Each trooper was to carry with him 100 rounds of ammunition, a small amount of coffee and hard bread, and on his saddle an equally small ration of forage for his horse. A detail of seven ammunition wagons was to accompany the fighting troops. These wagons were lightened so they could keep up with the hard-marching cavalry. Twenty minutes were allowed for these preparations before "The Advance" would be sounded. The troopers took care, within limits of time, to put on extra clothes for the winter march. They would have no tents,

no campfires to keep them warm. They would be shelterless and exposed in the midst of the open plains where unhindered winds would magnify the bitter cold.

The column was nearly ready to march when Capt. Louis McLane Hamilton, grandson of Alexander Hamilton, came to Custer and asked if he must remain behind with the wagon train. On that day the duty of officer of the day routinely fell on Hamilton. Protection of the wagon train was the main duty of the officer of the day. Custer sympathized with Hamilton's desire to lead his crack squadron in battle, but he could not order any other officer to stay behind in Hamilton's place. A willing substitute was the only solution. One officer, blinded by the snow, offered to take Hamilton's place and the latter exultantly joined his troopers. For Louis Hamilton it was "the final fork in life's trail."

As soon as Hamilton's quandary was resolved the troops marched. Custer pushed them hard. All day long they struggled through snow and cold without a halt. No sign of Elliott's trail was found. Custer feared that some change in the direction of pursuit had occurred, throwing him off the proper course for interception. But just before sunset one of the advanced scouts signalled that the trail had been found. The column swung onto the tracks of Elliott's men and continued without a break. A detail was sent ahead to halt Elliott. The main column descended into a river valley fringed with timber. Still the troops marched, on into the darkness. Hour after hour they struggled forward hoping to overtake the three companies in advance. Hunger and cold made the men miserable and the horses were about to

give out. Finally, at 9 p.m., the main command stumbled upon Elliott's troops, halted in the heavily timbered valley. An hour's rest was ordered. The men built small fires within the creek bed's deep banks and made coffee to go with their hard bread. A good feed of oats restored the horses.

While they rested the moon came up, and the night ride continued by its light. All gear was tied down to prevent rattling. Men talked only in whispers. To the sound of creaking leather and crunching hoofs, the column followed the Indian trail across the white prairie and into the valley of the Washita.

Two Osage trailers led the serpentine line of troops. Behind them came Custer and a few scouts. Full half mile to the rear the troopers followed. Despite these precautions the column made noise. The snow, which had thawed during the day, refroze in the zero cold and formed a crust. Plunging through this, the horses' hoofs crunched and squeaked, the sound carrying hundreds of yards in the night air.

At about midnight Little Beaver halted. Custer rode forward to investigate. "Me smell fire" was Little Beaver's electrifying intelligence. At first Custer and his officers could not credit the Indian's marvelous senses, but within a half mile they came upon the embers of a dying fire. It was determined that Indian horse herders had warmed themselves here. Obviously the village was near.

Custer ordered the column to drop still farther back and, joining the two Osages at the point, resumed the trail. Approaching the crest of a hill, Little Beaver again halted. He looked intently into the valley, then whispered to Custer, "Heaps Injuns down there."

Custer peered over the crest and in the moonlight made out a large body of animals. Then a dog barked, a small bell tinkled, and, to clinch the matter, the wail of an infant sounded through the clear air from afar. This last sound awoke in Custer a feeling of remorse that women and children must suffer in Indian warfare, but he overcame it and proceeded at once making plans for his attack on the village.

The column was halted and Custer and his officers went forward to the crest to look the situation over. In the moonlight they conjectured the lay of the land and the location of the village. Then, moving back from the crest, Custer explained the plan of attack and assigned each officer his part.

Tactics

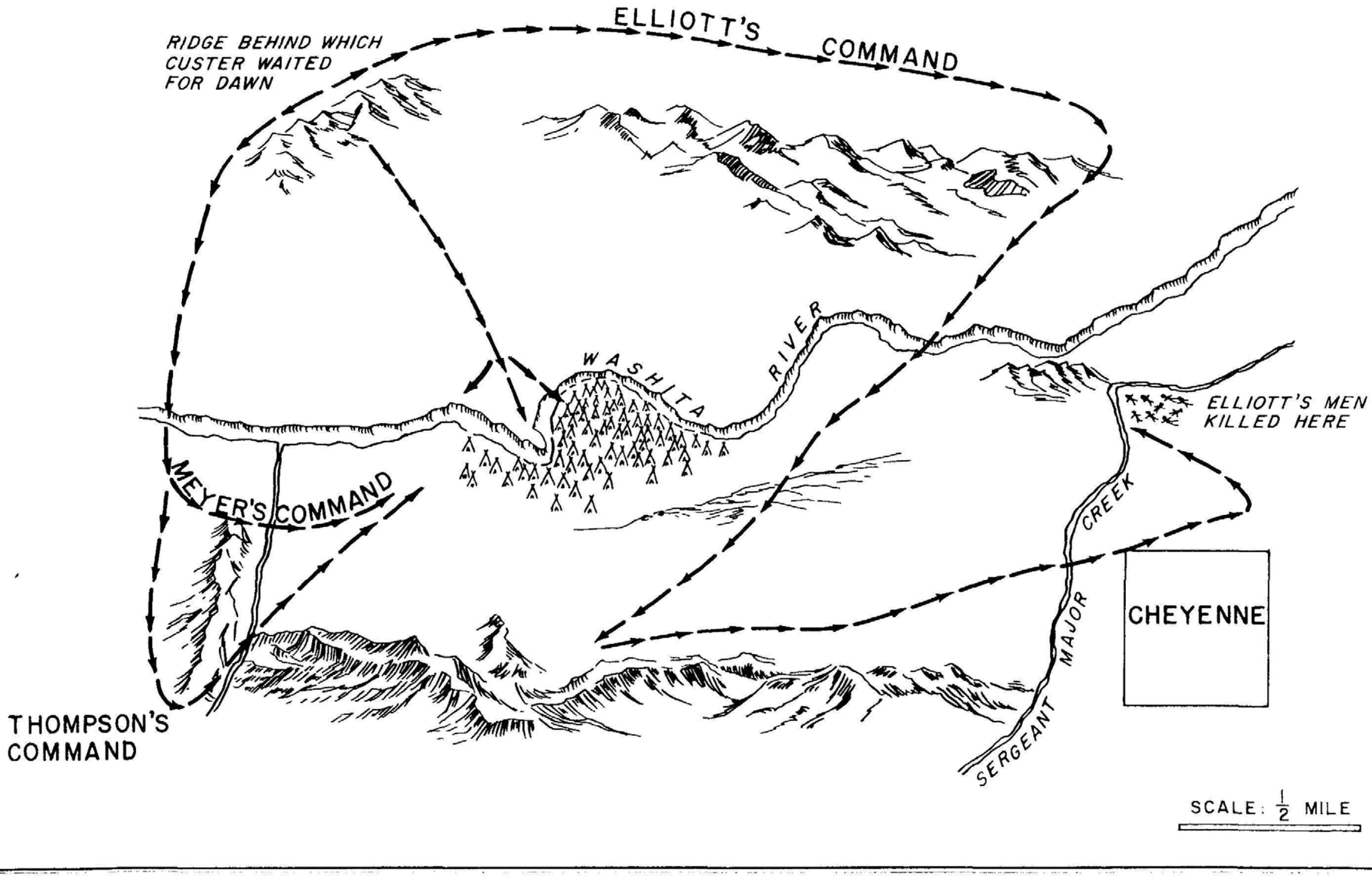
The general plan was for the 800-man command to break up into four attack groups of 200 men each, surround the village in the remaining hours of darkness, and at first light strike the Indians from all sides. Major Elliott was to take the first group and circle east. Capt. William Thompson, with the second group, was to circle right and take the Indians from the southwest. These two columns set out at once for they had to march several miles to reach their attack points. The third detachment, commanded by Capt. Edward Meyers, moved to the right into the timber about an hour before daylight. Custer's column, accompanied by the band, the Osages, the scouts, and the sharpshooters, prepared to charge frontally from the crest of the hill where the horse herd and village had been discovered. Lt. James Bell, in charge of the ammunition wagons, was to wait until the firing began, then make a dash for the village.

The Osages were appalled at the thought of attacking with such scant information concerning the numbers and position of the enemy. But Custer believed that surprise would win the day, and he feared that if he waited beyond daylight to launch the attack, the Indians would be alerted and flee. Colonel Nye in his excellent book, Carbine & Lance, evidently agrees with the Osages:

> This plan involved an advance over unexplored terrain against an enemy of unknown strength, culminating in a double envelopment. Such a maneuver implies overwhelming superiority of numbers. Custer had no information as to his relative strength. As it turned out, the village which he was about to assault consisted of only fifty-one lodges, with perhaps two hundred warriors under the ill-fated Cheyenne chieftain, Black Kettle. But below this camp, for a distance of fifteen miles, extended the entire winter encampment of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, together with small bands of Kiowas . . . Thus there were present in the immediate vicinity hostile reinforcements numbering into the thousands.
>
> The danger inherent in a plan calling for such a wide dispersion of forces, especially since no reserve was held out, is quite apparent. It reflected, however, the impetuous nature of its author. This time luck was with Custer. But on another field, eight years later, his famous star of fortune was to be blotted out. It may well be that his decision on that later field was influenced largely by the favorable outcome of the action of this winter morning on the Washita.

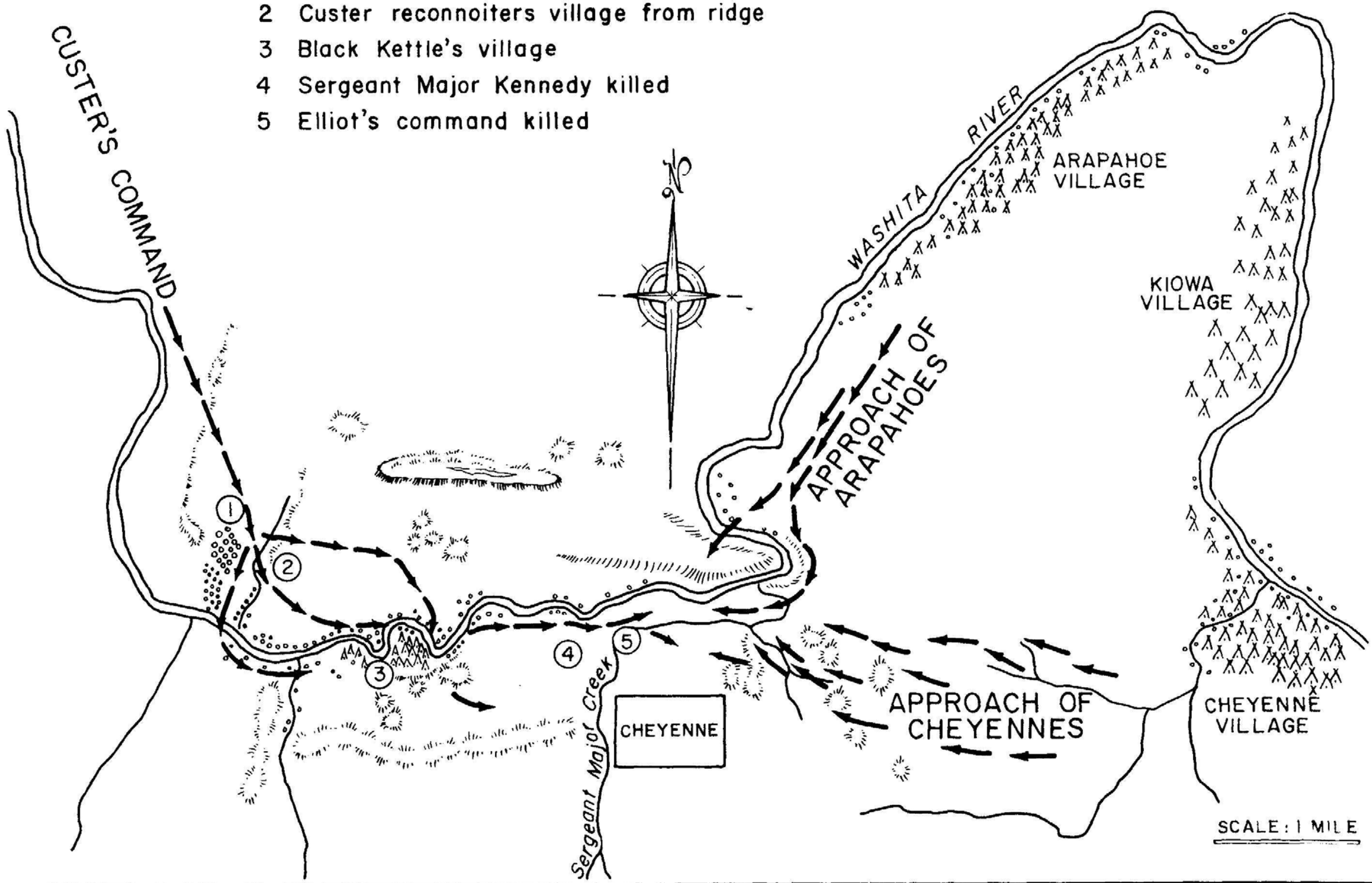
After the first two columns had departed for their posts, the other men settled down to a long, cold wait. It was still four hours until daylight, and all that time the temperature would be going down, down, below zero. The troopers were allowed to dismount, but of course they could not build fires or smoke. They were even forbidden to stamp their feet or walk around because of the noisy, crunching snow. Impatiently the shivering men scanned the eastern horizon for the first signs of dawn.

THE BATTLE OF THE WASHITA - November 27, 1868

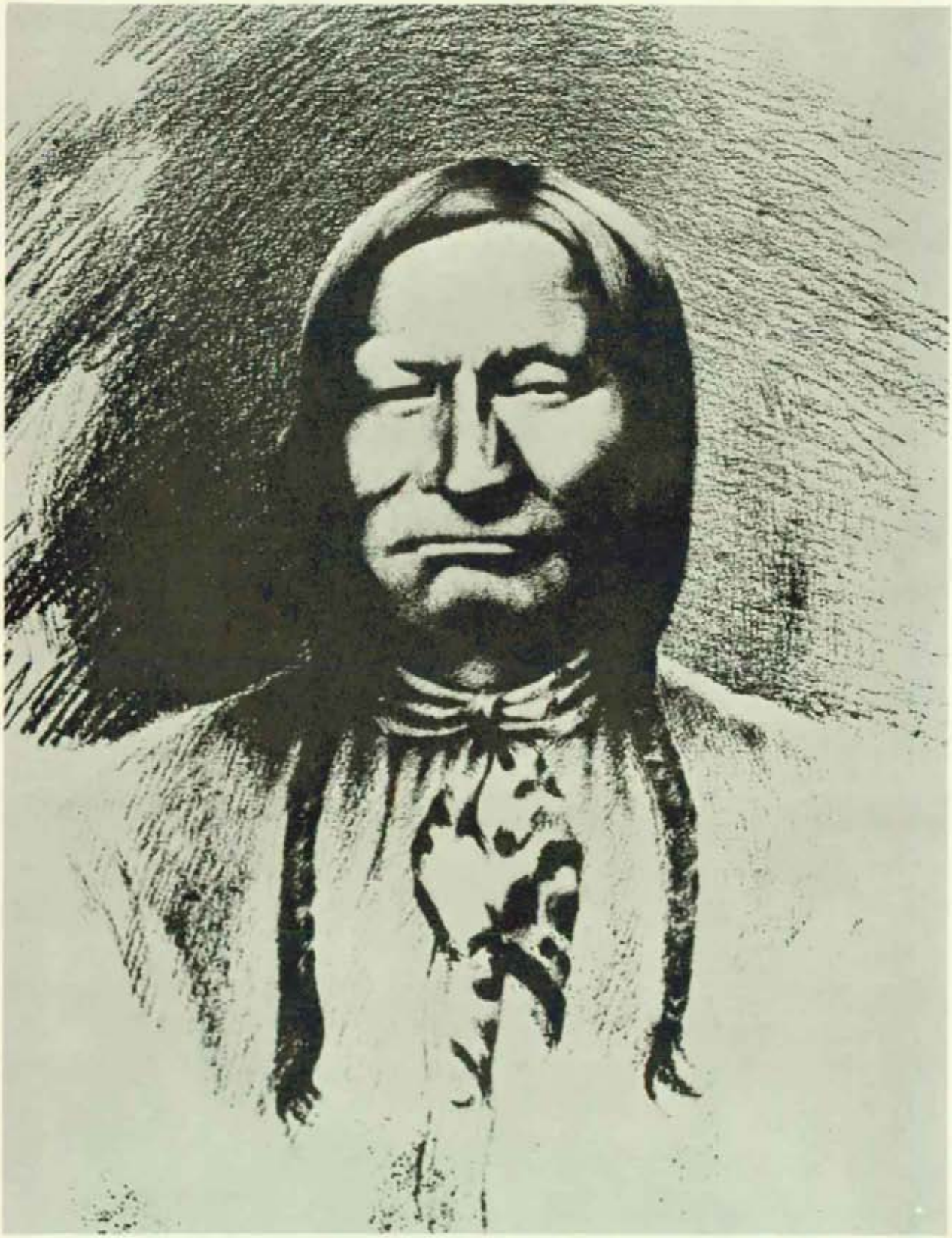


WASHITA BATTLEFIELD VICINITY

1 Custer's command halts and waits for morning
2 Custer reconnoiters village from ridge
3 Black Kettle's village
4 Sergeant Major Kennedy killed
5 Elliot's command killed



Lt. Col. George A. Custer.



"Chief Black Kettle," by Herschel Lee.

GPO 843-844

At first light Custer ordered his men to pile their overcoats and haversacks on the snow. Then they began moving forward slowly over the uneven ground, attempting to gain a closer position from which to launch the charge. As the sky brightened they could see the pony herd drifting toward the south. Indian dogs began to bark. Scattered through the bare timber stood gray tepees, with here and there a wreath of smoke rising skyward. No Indians could be seen.

Suddenly the morning air was shattered by a single rifle shot from the edge of the village. Cooke's sharpshooters answered with a scattering volley from their carbines. The trumpeters sounded the stirring notes of the "Charge," and at a signal from Custer the band struck up "Garry Owen," ever after the regimental song of the 7th Cavalry. Within seconds 800 troopers "were thundering into the vortex of battle."

The Red Moon

Colonel Nye's description of the Battle of the Washita is the most vivid and balanced ever written. It is here quoted in full:

> From sundown until just before midnight on the twenty-sixth of November the war drums had throbbed in the village of Black Kettle. A large band of braves had just returned from a successful raid on the Kansas settlements. The Cheyennes were celebrating the scalp dance around the flickering fire. Among the dancers was Eonah-pah (Trailing-the-Enemy), a Kiowa who had turned back from a recent expedition against the Utes and who, with a companion, had reached the Cheyenne village at dusk. On the way they had crossed a broad trail made by shod horses. When they arrived at the Cheyenne camp they told the Cheyennes about the trail which they had seen, but the Cheyennes only laughed at them. The other Kiowa thought that they ought not to stop at this place; it was too dangerous. Eonah-pah ignored his companion's fears. He had been reassured by the nonchalance of the Cheyennes. Besides, there was going

to be a big scalp dance in Black Kettle's village. He could see several very pretty Cheyenne girls making ready for it. He intended to get a partner and participate.

And so the dance went on. The dancers, alternately young men and women, tied themselves together with rawhide ropes. It was the custom that no one could disengage himself until the dance was over.

Black Kettle and Little Robe did not take part in the dance. They were extremely uneasy. They sat in the chief's tepee, smoking thoughtfully and discussing the unfavorable result of the visit to Colonel Hazen. Black Kettle thought perhaps it would be safer to move the camp the next day.

"But before we move we will take other precautions," said Black Kettle.

"It does not seem possible that soldiers will come so far, or travel in such weather, to attack us. Neither do I think they can find us. But lest so incredible a thing should happen, we will fasten this piece of white cloth to a pole. If soldiers approach it will be the duty of the warrior on guard over the camp to raise the cloth above my lodge, in token that we are peaceful."

Late into the night the tom-toms boomed. Finally the dance was ended and the weary Indians rolled themselves in their robes and slept.

Double Wolf went forth to relieve the man who had been on watch since sundown. Everything was still. The bright moon illuminated the surrounding hillsides. A papoose wailed for a moment and was quiet. Soon the insistent, bitter cold penetrated the sentinel's blanket. He stole inside a lodge to warm himself over the dying embers of the fire. In a few moments he too was asleep.

Early in the morning a Cheyenne woman, troubled with rheumatic pains, went out to get firewood. She saw something shining on the hillside, something moving. Soldiers! Hastily she roused her children, sent them scurrying down the creek. Then she followed, afraid to shout lest the soldiers see her and shoot. The savage barking of camp dogs aroused the negligent Double Wolf. He seized his rifle and went to the edge of the frozen river. A woman ran from the timber where she had gone to get her horse.

"Soldiers!" she cried.

Double Wolf listened intently, all faculties alert. Unmistakably there came the noise of many hoofs breaking through the snow, crackling the underbrush. The head of a white man appeared over a fallen tree. Thoughts of the Sand Creek tragedy raced through the Indian's mind; orders about raising the white flag were forgotten. He lifted his gun and fired.

From the distinctive black tepee of the chief came the old leader, shouting to arouse his people. With trembling fingers he strove to untie his pony, tethered close at hand. He was on its back, with his squaw up behind. As Black Kettle rode to the banks of the Washita a volley of carbine shots rang out from the woods across the stream. Double Wolf fell dead. Black Kettle slithered from his mount and flopped in the icy waters, his body half awash. More shots. The woman dropped dead beside her chief.

Two minutes after the sounding of the charge Custer, with Hamilton's and West's squadrons, was in and through the village. With him, boot to boot, rode Scout Ben Clark. The troopers fired at every blanketed fleeing figure, hacked savagely at every topknot. Many Cheyennes plunged waist deep in the icy waters of the Washita and then from the shelter of the river bank fired at the soldiers. Others ran south across the sand dunes. Thompson and Meyers drove these back into the village, or chased them south and east along the stream. Women and children cowered within the tepees, taking refuge under piles of buffalo robes; yelling Osages dragged them out by the heels. The snow became stained with blood.

Captain Meyers' column, impeded by brush and fallen timbers, moved to the right and crossed the river over a little pony ford. They charged through the west side of the village, saw no hostiles, emerged on the sand bluffs to the south and engaged in individual fights with scattered warriors. Two platoons under Lieutenant E.S. Godfrey were detailed to round up the Indian horse herd.

The Indians who were not shot down in the village fled east along the Washita, wading the chill waters, or dodging along the bank. Some took refuge in gullies or behind logs and trees. With these the sharpshooters kept up a continuous exchange of shots. Seventeen Cheyennes were found dead in one of these hollows.

Troopers motioned the women and children back into the village. Some obeyed. Others ran east along the river bank.

While the turmoil was at its height, Major Elliott, seeing a group of Indians escaping down the valley, called for volunteers to make pursuit. Sergeant Major Walter Kennedy and eighteen other men responded. As the detachment moved away Elliott turned to Lieutenant Hale, waved his hand, and called cheerily:

"Here goes for a brevet or a coffin!"

The Kiowa visitor, Eonah-pah, was one of those who fled down the river. As he ran he saw little geysers sprouting up all around him in the snow where the bullets were striking. Cheyenne women and children were panting along on either side of him. Now and then one of them would fall in a heap.

"Scatter out!" shouted the Kiowa. "Don't bunch up so much."

A squad of blue-clad riders dashed to intercept the fugitives. One of them charged Eonah-pah with drawn saber. The Kiowa stopped short, fitted an arrow to the string, loosed it at the cavalryman. The arrow missed its mark. Dodging the flashing blade, Eonah-pah drove a shaft into the horse. The wounded beast reared abruptly, threw its rider. The Indian was able to gain many yards on his pursuers.

More of Meyers' and Thompson's men appeared. The low bluffs on either side of the Washita resounded with gun shots, yells, shrill whoops. Women and children screamed in fright and pain. Dogs barked and howled. The valley was a bedlam of noise.

Soon Eonah-pah's quiver was empty. But he had assisted twenty Cheyenne women to escape the uniformed terror. He ran to the river bank. Down the stream came Little Rock (second in command to Black Kettle), and She Wolf, accompanied by a number of other women. Eonah-pah joined them. Before the fugitives lay a deep pool in the stream. They must climb the bank to avoid it. As they emerged into view they were spied by Elliott and his volunteers. At once the troopers turned that way.

Pistol shots hurtled into the little group of Indians. The chief fell dead. Eonah-pah seized the Cheyenne's full quiver. He fired several arrows in quick succession, then ran. Soon he was safe in the timber which lay two miles east of Black Kettle's village. Other refugees, farther east, were not so fortunate. Buffalo-Woman fell exhausted in the snow. Elliott detailed a near-by soldier to lead her back to camp. This man was Sergeant Major Kennedy. His horse was lame. Kennedy dismounted and motioned the woman to walk back to the village. The rest of the soldiers continued east in pursuit of a group of young Indian boys.

Suddenly from the river bank to the north appeared a group of Indians, riding hard. Straight at Kennedy they came. He fired once. One of the horses swerved. Then his carbine jammed. Frantically he worked with the mechanism. Bob-tailed Bear led the charge. His hatchet rose and fell. The soldier's body slumped to the ground; his skull was broken in bits. A few yards to the east of where he lay a little creek trickled unheeding on its way to join the Washita. From that day on it has been called Sergeant Major Creek.

East of this creek Elliott was pursuing several half-grown Cheyenne boys. He had not reached the timber when there emerged to his front a swarm of mounted Indians--Cheyennes and Arapahoes arriving from the lower camps.

Their scarlet-and-white war bonnets gleamed in the light of the winter sun. It seemed that there were hundreds of them. Elliott's detachment stopped short. Then they turned to withdraw to the main command.

Too late! Other warriors, fresh from killing Kennedy, appeared in Elliott's rear, on the east side of the tributary. Elliott was cut off. More hostiles were arriving every moment. They were circling the little band of soldiers, riding closer and closer, whooping shrilly, shooting as they flashed past.

The soldiers moved back slowly until they were within pistol range of the little creek. From its banks could be seen feathered heads bobbing, brown arms signaling to other savages. There were more Indians than eighteen men could handle. Elliott had to make a quick decision. He dismounted his men and turned the horses loose. He ordered his men to lie in a thicket of tall grass.

It was the worst thing Elliott could have done. He violated thus the basic principle of defensive combat. He sacrificed a good field of fire. His men could not see out of the thicket; the high banks of the opposite stream dominated the position and furnished shelter to the dismounted Indian riflemen.

Touching-the-Sky found a place from which he could look right down into the thicket. There in its very center he saw the soldiers lying in a circle with their feet to the inside. Little piles of cartridges lay ready beside each man. The whites were not far away; he commenced shooting at them. It was very easy. He motioned some of his friends to join him. The swelling horde rode round and round the beleaguered cavalrymen, sending showers of arrows and bullets into the weeds. Few shots replied from the thicket. Elliott's ammunition was running low. He only hoped now to hold out until reinforcements came.

The fight did not last long. Probably not much over an hour. The shots from the tall grass grew more and more infrequent. The yelling, revolving mass of Indians drew closer and closer. At length a belated brave arrived from the lower village; he was freshly painted and feathered. It was Smokey (or Tobacco), an Arapaho. He had taken too much time with his ceremonial toilet. Was he too late to win a coup?

With an earnest yell Smokey thrust himself through the circle of Indians and charged into the thicket. The whole horde followed like flotsam sucked into a whirlpool. There was a brief, terrific tussle; a chorus of shots, thuds, groans. When the heap was untangled, Smokey was found lying at the bottom. He was dead.

The bluecoats too lay still. The Indians turned them over. There was the young major. Most of them had seen

him many times before, at the treaty grounds of Medicine Lodge. Those who had not made coup deliberately fired arrows or bullets into the unresisting bodies. It was good medicine. Then She Wolf led the squaws up from the creek bottom where they had been resting after the pursuit. With knives and hatchets they completed the ghastly work. No enemy must be left in such condition that his spirit could follow the Indians into the night.

Did Custer know what was happening to Elliott? No one can say for sure. The commander was busy mopping up the village--burning tepees, examining evidences that the Indians had participated in the Kansas raids. Stolen albums of daguerrotypes, unopened mail, household implements from murdered settlers' cabins--all testified to the guilt of the Cheyennes. While this was going on, four soldiers carried Captain Hamilton's body in and laid it tenderly on the ground before the colonel. Hamilton had died instantly from a shot through the heart. He had fallen at the head of his squadron, in the first rush to the village. Captain Barnitz too was wounded--seriously. They thought he would die. A number of enlisted men were down. Elliott had not been seen since his detachment rode away to the east.

Lieutenant Godfrey had rounded up the herd of seven hundred Indian ponies against the bluffs south of the village. After completing this task he led his platoon to the north bank and pursued fleeing Cheyennes east along the ridges. Two miles away he topped a high hill and made an alarming discovery. In front of him in the river valley were hundreds of tepees, in front of which, and to either side as far as his vision extended, were groups of mounted, circling warriors. It was the Indian signal for combat.

Godfrey retired at once. But the Indians had seen him. They rode to attack. The platoon retreated by successive rushes, the odd-numbered files halting to cover the withdrawal of the even-numbered, and vice versa. On the south side of the river Godfrey could hear continuous heavy firing. But the thick timber screened from his sight the tragedy which was being enacted there. At length he reached the safety of the village.

Custer stood thoughtfully in the center of the ruined camp. Godfrey told him of the big villages which he had seen to the east. Custer was interested immediately. The lieutenant also described the firing which he had heard; he thought that it might be where Elliott was.

The colonel pondered for a moment, then replied slowly, "No, I don't think so. Colonel Meyers has been down there all morning, and probably would have reported it."

Increasing numbers of Indians began to appear on the ridges surrounding the valley. Custer became alarmed.

The day was growing shorter. Ammunition was running low. He was worried about his wagon train, which had been left on the Canadian, many miles to the north. What if the Indians should learn that it was there, inadequately guarded? Lieutenant Bell had brought the ammunition wagons safely through the hostile ring, but he had been unable to save the overcoats and haversacks. These had fallen into the hands of the Indians. The command was alone in a hostile wilderness, in subzero weather, without food, overcoats, or shelter. They would perish if they lost the wagon train.

Then there was the question of what to do with the captured horses. Custer would have preferred to take them with him. But the animals were too wild to be managed. The Indians must be punished thoroughly; Custer knew full well that the horse herd represented their principal wealth. So he gave orders to have the animals destroyed. This was a painful duty for the men, but they went to work with pistols. The horses, after being shot, broke away and ran bleeding in all directions. In this way the snow on the great bend of the river was made red with blood. For this reason the Indians call it the "Red Moon."

The watching Indians were wild with rage and grief. But they could do nothing. They dared not fire into the village for fear of striking their women and children held captive there. They could only press anxiously forward, closer to the camp. Custer detailed a squadron to drive them back. The skirmishing continued until late in the afternoon.

Toward evening the regiment was formed in column to withdraw. There was no time to search for the missing Elliott; it seemed certain that he and his men were dead. There was only slight hope that they had broken through and would join the column on the Canadian.

Custer moved east, feinting as if to attack the other villages. The surprised Indians withdrew before him. Suddenly they vanished into the woods along the great bend of the river. Perhaps they were preparing an ambush. But Custer did not make an effort to follow; he turned abruptly north into the gathering darkness. Long after midnight he halted to rest the horses. The keen frosty air bit through the shoddy blue tunics of the men. They were numb with cold and fatigue. But after a brief rest the march was resumed.

At 10 o'clock the next morning the wagon train was found safely corralled where Custer had left it. The reunited column pressed on until mid-afternoon, then went into camp. Exhausted men and horses filled their bellies for the first time since they had parted from

the train 2-1/2 days before. Custer sent two scouts ahead with a battle report for Sheridan. Next morning the cavalry followed slowly and reached Camp Supply without incident.

Results and Follow-up

To celebrate his victory, Custer staged a review upon his return to Camp Supply. Before descending into the valley where the post was located, he stopped to reform his command into parade order, then resumed the march. In the lead were the noisy Osages, whooping, firing their rifles, and waving Cheyenne scalps taken in battle. Next came the scouts, led by California Joe astride his mule. Immediately to the rear, watched by a cordon of guards, followed the colorfully dressed Indian prisoners mounted on ponies. Then, in regular marching order, led by the band playing "Garry Owen," paraded the long troop column. With sabers raised in salute, the 7th Cavalry marched past Sheridan and his staff, producing a scene he later described as one of the most beautiful and interesting he had ever witnessed.

Custer immediately went into a huddle with Sheridan and reported the results of the battle. He claimed 103 warriors killed (bodies later found on the field raised this total by a third), 53 women and children prisoners, and total destruction of the horse herd and the village--tepees, weapons, clothing, blankets, food, and other provisions. He had dealt the death blow to Black Kettle's band, for even those Indians who had escaped were now naked, shelterless, and hungry in winter's cruel grip.

It was apparent that the Battle of the Washita was one of the greatest victories yet recorded in the annals of Plains warfare. The Indians had suffered not only heavy casualties and great material losses. They had been severely jolted psychologically. As news of the battle spread across the Southern Plains, a spasm of fear gripped the Indians. Where would they be safe from soldiers who could march and fight in winter storms? Panic seized many bands, and despite the suffering it entailed they broke camp and fled to more isolated retreats. Like refugees in any war, they abandoned much property; exposure killed the young and the old and the weak; many horses, already half-starved, died on these marches. Thus the impact of the Battle of the Washita displaced thousands of Indians, drove them from their comfortable winter encampments, shattered their security.

Sheridan had planned his campaign to achieve this very objective. Now he was eager to follow up the victory on the Washita and keep the Indians on the run. Thus he proposed to break down their will to war and force them to surrender.

He was delayed, however, by the condition of Crawford's newly-arrived Kansas volunteers. Their march from the Little Arkansas had been beset by difficulties and terrible weather. Most of the horses were badly jaded. During the week it took to refit the Kansas regiment, Sheridan and Custer planned the next phase of operations. They would march to the battlefield on the Washita to learn the fate of Elliott's command, then proceed downstream toward Fort Cobb, striking any Indians encountered and forcing them to surrender.

Though Sheridan would accompany the troops as an observer, Custer was to retain field command.

On December 7 the 7th Cavalry and 10 companies of the 19th Kansas departed Camp Supply, accompanied by a 300-wagon supply train. After an uncomfortable march through snow and cold, they reached the Washita on December 10. Next morning Sheridan and Custer led a small party over the battlefield. Wolves and crows were gorging on the slain horses and Indian dead. Proceeding down the south bank of the river about 2 miles, the party discovered the body of Sergeant Major Kennedy. A short distance beyond they found Elliott's detachment--naked, mutilated, and frozen in grotesque positions. Wagons hauled the dead into camp, and after identification they were buried on a ridge overlooking the valley. Elliott's body was later taken to Fort Gibson.

This sad business ended, the troops continued their march toward Fort Cobb. A little way downstream they passed through the deserted villages of the Arapahoes and Kiowas. Amid the litter of abandoned lodge-poles, cups, pots, kettles, and other camp equipment, the soldiers found the bodies of a white woman and her child. Kansans identified her as a Mrs. Blynn who had been captured by Arapahoes near Fort Lyon. When Custer attacked, the Indians had shot the woman and bashed the little boy's head against a tree.

The discoveries on the battlefield heightened the command's desire to strike the Indians a devastating blow. After nearly a week of slow progress down the valley of the Washita, their chance

seemed to have come when Osage scouts reported a strong force of Indians on the column's immediate front. But with the scouts was a courier from Colonel Hazen with this message for Custer:

> HEADQUARTERS SOUTHERN INDIAN DISTRICT, FORT COBB,
> 9 A.M., December 16, 1868
> To the Officer Commanding Troops in the Field.
>
> 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 to have been reached, friendly, and have not been on the warpath this season. If this reaches you, it would be well to communicate at once with Satanta and 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 our camp.
>
> Respectfully,
> W. B. HAZEN
> Brevet Major General.

The courier identified the Indians ahead as Kiowas under Lone Wolf and Satanta. Custer and Sheridan wanted to attack them, for their recent raids in Texas made them as guilty as the Cheyennes. But Hazen had been appointed personally by General Sherman to offer sanctuary to "friendly" Indians. To disregard Hazen's message would not only go counter to Sherman's orders and betray Hazen's assurances to the Indians--it would expose the Army to virulant attacks by the Indian Peace Party back East. Reluctantly Sheridan and Custer decided to honor the message. Negotiations with Satanta and Lone Wolf resulted in their promise to bring the whole tribe of Kiowas to Fort Cobb where they would be allowed to encamp in safety. Despite this agreement, the Kiowas tried to slip away. Thereupon Sheridan seized the two chiefs and threatened to hang them if the tribe did not come in. Within a few days after the command reached Fort Cobb, all but one small band of Kiowas had surrendered.

Meanwhile Hazen had informed Sheridan of the movements of other tribes since the Battle of the Washita. The Cheyennes and Arapahoes had fled west to the headwaters of Red River. The Comanches had refused to join them and were drifting into the Fort Cobb area, sending messages to Hazen to assure him of their peaceful intent. Thus, by the end of December, though a few bands of irreconcilables were still out, most of the Kiowas and Comanches had been rounded up.

Before going after the remaining hostiles, Sheridan decided to establish a new post that would afford better protection to the Texas frontier and would be more centrally located with respect to the Kiowa-Comanche reservation. He selected a site at Medicine Bluff at the east foot of the Wichita Mountains, about 40 miles south of Fort Cobb. By January 10 the command had moved to the site and was laying out Camp Wichita, later named Fort Sill in honor of Sheridan's West Point classmate killed in the Civil War.

End of the Campaign

Custer's victory on the Washita and Sheridan's sweep from Camp Supply to Fort Cobb had resulted in the submission of nearly all Kiowas and Comanches and their settlement on the reservation. But the Cheyennes and Arapahoes, main targets of the winter campaign, along with scattered bands of Kiowa and Comanche irreconcilables, were still on the loose. It was now necessary to pursue them and drive them onto the reservation if the campaign were to be counted a success.

The supporting columns of Evans and Carr, driving in from the west and northwest, played an important role in this final phase of

the campaign. Evans, marching from Fort Bascom, New Mexico, followed the Canadian River across the Llano Estacado, struck southeast toward the Wichita Mountains, and on Christmas Day attacked and destroyed a Nakoni Comanche village at Soldier Spring. Most of the Indians got away, but the battle again demonstrated that soldiers could go anywhere in winter. Carr's column from Fort Lyon, Colorado, did not engage in a single battle, but it did march hundreds of miles through territory used by the Indians for their winter encampments. Time and again the two columns came upon recently deserted villages littered with the evidence of hasty departure. Their success, then, could not be measured in terms of dead Indians, but rather of tired and harrassed Indians who could find no safe hideout. As a result of this relentless pressure, a number of bands surrendered at Fort Cobb.

As Custer had begun the campaign, now he concluded it with the final roundup of the Arapahoes and Cheyennes. In late January 1869 he set out from Camp Wichita with a picked group of cavalry and Indian intermediaries to establish contact with the Cheyennes and persuade them to surrender. On a long march toward the Llano Estacado he found signs of the Cheyennes, but he could not find their village. Little Robe, a friendly Cheyenne accompanying the expedition, was sent on alone to find the village and convince the Indians that Custer came in peace to parley. But Little Robe did not return. Forced to give up the search because his supplies were exhausted, Custer turned around and headed for Camp Wichita. On the return march he encountered the Arapahoes under Little Raven. The Indians were hungry and tired. They surrendered to Custer and followed him into camp.

His attempt to use peaceful persuasion with the Cheyennes having failed, Custer now mounted a punitive expedition against them. On March 2 the 7th Cavalry and the 19th Kansas took up the march. After a 2-week search that extended far westward into the Texas Panhandle, Custer located the Cheyennes camped along Sweetwater Creek. The Kansans wanted to wipe them out in revenge for their raids the previous summer. But Custer restrained the volunteers because the Indians held two captive white women--he did not want them to meet the fate of Mrs. Blynn. In a series of conferences marked by trickery and deep distrust on both sides, Custer finally got the upper hand and forced the Indians to release the captives. Then, under threat of instant annihilation, the Cheyennes capitulated and agreed to go on the reservation.

Thus ended the Winter Campaign of 1868-69. Custer's command marched back to Kansas where the volunteers were disbanded and the 7th Cavalry was refitted. The Cheyennes, except for one renegade band, eventually made their way to Camp Wichita and surrendered. Sheridan's final report to Sherman stated that all tribes south of the Platte had been forced onto the reservations set aside for them.

Consequences of the Campaign

Carl Coke Rister, in his book, Border Command, has summed up the significance of the Winter Campaign:

> Unquestionably a new chapter had been written in western Indian wars. Sheridan had proved that winter military operations on the Great Plains were possible. And no one realized this better now than the hostile Indians. Heretofore they had been secure in their winter villages, and during the spring and summer they

> could generally keep out of the way of the soldier who came to destroy them. But the destruction of Black Kettle's band and the forced removal of the Arapaho and the Cheyenne were concrete examples of a new order. No longer would winter bring security. Still more important, in the conferences at Fort Cobb and Fort Sill, both Sheridan and Custer had told the Indians that their tribes were not considered nations. Hostile raiders in the future would be regarded as "refractory subjects of a common government," and would be tried for their crimes before the white man's courts just as white men who committed offenses were tried. Sheridan undertook no general punitive measures against those bands which came to Fort Sill, but he made their leaders understand that they would be held strictly accountable for their future misdeeds.

Rister's evaluation must be qualified slightly. Winter campaigns had been tried before, both on the Southern and Northern Plains. But these had been limited efforts of short duration. The genius of Sheridan's strategy was the winter-long attrition which it inflicted on the Indians. Indeed, their pattern of life had been temporarily destroyed, their seasonal respite snatched away by the ceaselessly pursuing troopers. With the coming of spring, usually the signal for commencement of raiding, the Indians found themselves impoverished and exhausted and afraid. Their taste for war had soured in the suffering of the winter. For the first time the specter of inevitable retribution came to haunt the Indian, and he felt the vise of civilization closing upon his wild and free existence. Enlightened Indian leaders glimpsed the eventual defeat that awaited them.

The Winter Campaign of 1868-69 did not end the Plains Wars, but it was the prototype of the campaigns of the 1870s that did end them. This winter campaigning was a cruel form of war; it was a species of the total war that would reach its climax in the 20th century. It was

not discriminating for it hurt noncombatants as much as combatants. The military adopted this form of war because the fantastic mobility of the Indian during the grass season frustrated slow-moving cavalry--only in winter did cavalry have the advantage. Charged with the mission of protecting settlers, the military adopted this strategy as the only one that gave promise of success. And in military terms it was successful. But to a Nation rebounding from the carnage of Civil War, a Nation steeped in romantic notions of the "Noble Savage," a Nation still strong in its faith in humanitarian reform, Sherman and Sheridan and Custer assumed the aspect of heartless butchers. While the frontier cheered, the East wept. The Battle of the Washita and the larger campaign of which it was a part symbolized man's inhumanity to man. Led by the Quakers, Eastern humanitarians railed against the military and rallied to the cause of the Indian. By now General Grant had become President Grant. To him the philanthropists came, and being kindly disposed toward the Indian he listened to their pledges to solve the Indian problem by applications of gentleness and understanding. Thus in the summer of 1869 was born the Grant or Quaker Peace Policy. And thus was the Army discredited.

But the Peace Policy failed. The Indians, given a new lease on life and spurred on by continued white intrusions, enjoyed a final, bloody fling that decimated the frontier. Within a few years even the Quaker Indian agents realized that the Indians must be subdued by military force before "the good work of civilization, education, and religious instruction" could take effect. So the Army was called

in again to fight the Red River War and the Sioux Wars of the 1870s. It employed the strategy developed during the Winter Campaign of 1868-69, and it forever crushed the power of the Plains Indians.

Significance

This report has endeavored to show that Sheridan's Winter Campaign, climaxed by the Battle of the Washita, was not an isolated episode of the Indian Wars. In its causes, in its execution, and in its sequel, this campaign illustrates the cultural collision that brought on those wars. It illustrates the heroism of the settler and the soldier. It illustrates the tragedy of the Indian fighting for a way of life that satisfied him and gave him joy, but is now extinct. Destruction of the Indian way of life, the inevitable concomitant of the advancing frontier, has disturbed the white man. As early as 1841 the artist George Catlin foresaw this destruction and proposed that the Great Plains be set aside as a sort of museum where the Indian might live undisturbed. The modern student, understanding the cultural inflexibility of both the Indian and the frontiersman, and thus the historical imperatives at work on the frontier, nevertheless wishes that somehow there could have been a solution short of absolute destruction. The picture of civilization's juggernaut crushing out not only the life, but the pride, of a race that was nothing if not proud, has left an uncomfortable legacy--a kind of lingering regret that transcends our understanding of historical necessity. This feeling of discomfort, guilt if you will, has been a basic theme of the Indian Wars. And,

as shown by Eastern reaction to Custer's victory on the Washita, this feeling is not the product of latter-day novelists. It was a powerful force in America while the conflict raged. Though the Eastern humanitarians were not interested in preserving the Indian way of life--they wanted to convert and civilize the Indian--they did oppose what they viewed as the Army's policy of extermination. They caused adoption of the Peace Policy which, though a failure, was an extremely significant chapter in our attempt to solve the Indian problem. As the immediate antecedent of the Peace Policy, the Battle of the Washita brought to a head the Nation's dilemma with respect to Indian relations. Was force or love to rule those relations? Love was tried, but it proved impotent when pitted against the primordial forces that clashed on the frontier.

Even if discussion of the Battle of the Washita is shorn of these general themes and is limited to narrow military considerations, the battle is remarkable as the first application of what became the final solution to the Plains Indian barrier. Since the beginning of the Plains Wars dusty troopers had been chasing Indians without decisive results. Bogged down by supply trains and heavy equipment, they had plodded while the Indian flew. Usually their long marches ended with a glimpse of a lone Indian vedette disappearing over a distant ridge, slapping his backside in disdain as he did so. But Sheridan had produced a winning combination in the Winter Campaign of 1868-69. Utilizing superior military technology, expressed most significantly in the form of logistical support, he had made the Army an all-weather

force that could destroy at will the fragile ecological balance that the Indian had struck with winter. Once relieved of the restrictions of the Peace Policy, the Army used this combination to make short work of the Plains Indian.

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APPENDIX

Conclusions and Recommendations:

I believe that the Battle of the Washita meets the historian's criteria of national significance. Having applied items 1, 3, and 6 of the National Survey criteria in reevaluating the Washita Battlefield, I am convinced that the site is exceptionally valuable.

As noted in the Preface, this site was placed in the "Other Sites Considered" category as a result of the original evaluation in 1958-59. Even then, however, it was recognized as having considerable academic significance and high integrity. Two things influenced the decision not to recommend the Washita Battlefield for "exceptional value": (1) because nearby Fort Sill was recommended for classification--a site with similar historical associations--it was thought that the principle of thematic balance ruled out the Washita Battlefield; (2) because of the multitude of sites covered by the theme "Military and Indian Affairs," and the rapid pace of the Survey at that time, it was not possible to study the Battle of the Washita in depth.

Such a study preceded the writing of this report. It became apparent as the study progressed that the Battle of the Washita was the salient event in a larger context that embraces the full sweep of Indian-white relations during the climactic period of the Indian Wars. Here is not only a rousing tale of victory and defeat. Considered in its context, it is a key to understanding the cultural confrontation that produced the Indian Wars, the evolution of

military science that in large measure brought them to a close, the moral predicament of a Nation whose only effective solution to the Plains Indian barrier was the sword.

I believe that the Washita Battlefield, properly interpreted, would offer even the casual visitor insights into the demise of the wild Indian that heretofore have been reserved only for serious students. Here could be treated the difficult problem of historical necessity as it operated on the border. Here could be banished superficial views of Indian-white relations that blame the Indian or blame the white man. Here could be revealed the inner dynamics of the frontier struggle that cleared a continent of its aboriginal inhabitants and opened the way for a more advanced civilization. It is my opinion that this site is unsurpassed by any other in the Nation as a springboard for such a broad approach to the subject.

The concluding section of this Appendix describes the present status of the site. It is enough to say here that the battlefield possesses a high degree of natural integrity. In addition, local and State agencies have recently exhibited increased consciousness of the value of historical preservation at the site. In the nearby town of Cheyenne is the handsome Black Kettle Museum operated by the State Historical Society and the State Planning and Resources Board. Though at present it contains indifferent exhibits, it is a potential nucleus for interpretation of the Cheyenne Indians. West of town on a 3-acre fenced tract overlooking the Washita Valley is an attractive granite memorial inscribed with a brief account of the battle. Both

the monument and the acreage represent recent projects sponsored by the town of Cheyenne. The museum and monument are significant additions to the historical atmosphere of the site.

In view of the academic significance of the Battle of the Washita and the integrity of the battle site, I recommend that the Washita Battlefield be considered for "exceptional value" classification. Should it be so classified by the Advisory Board, I further recommend that it be studied for possible inclusion in the National Park System.

Present Status

The Washita Battlefield is in the center of Roger Mills County, which borders the Texas Panhandle. The area of battle action stretches west and northwest from the county seat, Cheyenne, a town of about 1,000 persons. All essential topographic and historical features are encompassed in a rectangle running approximately 3 miles east and west, and 2 miles north and south.

The lay of the land is illustrated by the maps accompanying this report. In general terms, the battle site is a natural amphitheater formed by the Washita River. The river flows easterly on a meandering course. Cutting through the red shale of the region, the stream has carved a valley about 1-1/2 to 2 miles wide. Flanking the valley on north and south are craggy bluffs and hills of resistant red sandstone standing 250 to 400 feet above the lowlands. The course of the river is timbered with elms, cottonwoods, and willows. Bordering the timber are parallel swaths of agricultural land which quickly give way to broken slopes covered with grass, sage, and shinnery.

The low oaks and brush thicken as the land rises into the hills. This higher, broken land is presently used for grazing.

In his report to Sherman following the march to Fort Cobb, Sheridan described the Valley of the Washita as "the best country I have ever seen." He noted that it was full of game. For this reason, and because it was well-watered, grassed, and timbered, and rimmed by sheltering hills, the valley was an ideal campsite for the Indians.

Western Oklahoma is not generally plugged as one of the beauty spots of the Nation, and it must be granted that it does not have the spectacular scenery of a Colorado. Yet, there is an intimate beauty in this land. The area encompassed by the Washita Battlefield illustrates this subdued but pleasant aspect very well. After travelling over the open plains, the valley appears as an oasis. And the bordering hills define the limits of both land and sky--a relief after the limitless sweep of the plains. The lure of running water and of green, growing things is magnified in this generally arid land--thus one's response to a grass-lined pool or a shade-bestowing grove is distorted. This same distortion applies to the red hills--in the prevailing plains environment they are a terrain feature with elements of ruggedness and even a kind of impressiveness that belie the minor elevations involved. After the rattlesnakes and buzzards of the plains, the valley's song birds and small game bespeak a friendly place. While intrinsically pleasing, this friendly, inviting aspect of the valley is also an important element of its

historical integrity. It explains why the Indians were attracted to the place.

Notable landmarks of the battlefield include the ridge from which Custer discovered Black Kettle's village and behind which the main column waited to attack, the site of the village, and the spot where Elliott's men met death. Also within the general bounds of the battlefield are the routes followed by the detached commands as they marched through the night to their attack points, the hills and bluffs upon which warriors from the downstream villages gathered to watch the horseherd slaughter, and many minor terrain features that mark particular actions during the battle.

Aside from some agricultural activity in the bottomland, the site retains a high degree of integrity. Except for a few satellite farm houses, the town of Cheyenne does not intrude on the battlefield. A little-used, single-track railroad runs along the periphery of the battlefield south of the river. But it does not seriously impair the integrity of the site and is not noticeable from principal viewpoints.

The battlefield from the north.

The battlefield from the south.

The field of Elliott's last stand.

Battle of the Washita Memorial.

WASHITA
BATTLEFIELD

BEAVER
HARPER
Buffalo
Supply
ELLIS
Woodward
WOODWARD
Mutua
Arnett
WOODS
Alva
ALFALFA
Cherokee
GRANT
Jefferson
Newkirk
Blackwell
KAY
MAJOR
GARFIELD
Enid
Waukomis
NOBLE
Perry
Ralston
PAWNEE
Cleveland
OSAGE
Pawhuska
Bartlesville
WASHINGTON
NOWATA
CRAIG
Vinita
Miami
Wyandotte
OTTAWA
Pensacola
Spavinaw
Claremore
ROGERS
Pryor
MAYES
DELAWARE
Okeene
Canton
Hennessey
Stillwater
PAYNE
Tulsa
TULSA
Broken Arrow
Watts
Camargo
DEWEY
Oakwood
KINGFISHER
Perkins
BLAINE
Watonga
Kingfisher
LOGAN
Cuthrie
CREEK
Bristow
WAGONER
Tahlequah
Okay
CHEROKEE
ADAIR
Ft. Gibson
Muskogee
ROGER MILLS
Cheyenne
Hammon
CUSTER
Arapaho
Weatherford
Geary
CANADIAN
Reno Junc.
Ft. Reno
OKLAHOMA
Oklahoma City
LINCOLN
Chandler
Meeker
OKMULGEE
Okmulgee
MUSKOGEE
OKFUSKEE
Okemah
Webbers Falls
SEQUOYAH
Sallisaw
Elk City
Union City
BECKHAM
Erick
WASHITA
Cloud Chief
CLEVELAND
Norman
Shawnee
POTTAWATOMIE
SEMINOLE
MC INTOSH
Eufaula
HASKELL
CADDO
Carnegie
Chickasha
GRADY
Mc CLAIN
Purcell
Holdenville
HUGHES
Calvin
Poteau
LEFLORE
Mc Alester
PITTSBURG
Wilburton
LATIMER
GREER
Hobart
Mangum
KIOWA
Apache
HARMON
Hollis
Altus
JACKSON
Wichita Nat'l Forest
COMANCHE
Lawton
Marlow
STEPHENS
Pauls Valley
GARVIN
Ada
PONTOTOC
COAL
Tuskahoma
Sulphur
MURRAY
Chattanooga
Frederick
TILLMAN
Walters
COTTON
CARTER
Ardmore
JOHNSTON
Tishomingo
Atoka
ATOKA
PUSHMATAHA
Antlers
Idabel
Mc CURTAIN
Waurika
JEFFERSON
LOVE
MARSHALL
Durant
BRYAN
CHOCTAW
Hugo
Kenton
CIMARRON
Boise City
Hooker
TEXAS
Goodwell
Beaver
BEAVER

OKLAHOMA

SCALE OF MILES
0 5 10 20 30 40

THE NATIONAL SURVEY OF
HISTORIC SITES AND BUILDINGS

CRITERIA FOR THE EVALUATION OF HISTORIC
SITES AND BUILDINGS

1. Structures or sites at which events occurred that have made an outstanding contribution to, and are identified prominently with, or which best represent, the broad cultural, political, economic, military, or social history of the Nation, and from which the visitor may grasp the larger patterns of our American heritage.

2. Structures or sites associated importantly with the lives of outstanding historic personages.

3. Structures or sites associated significantly with an important event that best represents some great idea or ideal of the American people.

4. Structures that embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen, exceptionally valuable for a study of a period style or method of construction; or a notable structure representing the work of a master builder, designer, or architect.

5. Archeological sites that have produced information of major scientific importance by revealing new cultures, or by shedding light upon periods of occupation over large areas of the United States. Such sites are those which have produced, or which may reasonably be expected to produce, data affecting theories, concepts, and ideas to a major degree.

6. Every historic and archeological site and structure should have integrity - that is, there should not be doubt as to whether it is the original site or structure, and in the case of a structure, that it represents original materials and workmanship. Intangible elements of feeling and association, although difficult to describe, may be factors in weighing the integrity of a site or structure.

7. Structures or sites which are primarily of significance in the field of religion or to religious bodies but are not of national importance in other fields of the history of the United States, such as, political, military, or architectural history, will not be eligible for consideration.

8. Structures or sites of recent historical importance, relating to events or persons within 50 years, will not, as a rule, be eligible for consideration.

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