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Pages 26-40 in “Battles and Skirmishes of the Great Sioux War, 1876-1877: the military view”, edited by Jerome A. Greene.

Published by the University of Oklahoma Press.

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Chapter 3
The Battle of Rosebud Creek,
June 17, 1876
Reuben Briggs Davenport

On June 20, Davenport filed his description of Crook’s battle with the Sioux and Cheyennes along the headwaters of Rosebud Creek. In this report he criticized both Crook’s direction of affairs and the role of the Crow scouts. It appeared in the New York Herald on July 6, 1876.

Three days ago the first fight of the campaign against the Sioux in this military department took place. The fighting column marched from the camp, situated at the fork of Goose Creek, on June 16, accompanied by the 250 Indian auxiliaries who had arrived on the preceding day, and numbered about 1,300 men. The infantry were mounted upon mules borrowed from the pack trains. Twenty mounted packers were also allowed to go, and carried carbines. The cavalry battalions contained 832 able soldiers. The friendly Indians were loaned firearms belonging to the government and their belts filled with cartridges. Old Crow was the principal leader of the Crows, and Medicine Crow and Good Heart his lieutenants. Louissant [Luishaw], called by his tribe “Weesaw,” was the chief of the Snakes, or Shoshonees [Shoshones], who are divided into two companies, regularly disciplined in imitation of the white soldiers. Louissant is captain of one and [Tom] Cosgrove, a white man, commands the other. They march sometimes in column, and nearly every Shoshonee, in going to war, carries a long white wand ornamented with pennants or streamers of fur, hair and red cloth. They wear parti-colored blankets,
and ride usually either white or spotted ponies, whose tails and manes they daub with red or orange paint. Nothing could be more bright and picturesque than the whole body of friendly Indians as they galloped by the long column of the expedition early in the first morning of the march, as it wound around the bases of the low foot hills called the Chetish or Wolf Mountains, which were traversed in moving toward the head waters of Rosebud Creek. Several of the Snakes still carry their ancient spears and round shields of buffalo horn and elk hide, besides their modern firearms. Imagination did not require more than the presence of the brown arid hills and the distant snow-capped mountains to convert them into a cavalcade of Bedouins. After crossing the sterile hills and leaving behind them stunted thorns and cedars the column stretched like a great serpent over a green divide, whose surface is undulating as billows of mid-ocean, and which separates the watersheds of the Tongue River and the Rosebud Creek. The country is beautiful. The march was silent as possible, and the column was dispersed so as to avoid causing dust, which might give warning to the enemy. It was hoped to approach within thirty miles of the Sioux village and then to advance on it during the night.

After a weary march of thirty-five miles the column bivouacked at the head of the valley of the Rosebud on June 16. The soldiers placed their blankets so that in sleeping their lines formed a hollow square, inside of which the animals were picketed.

On the morning of June 17 the command moved at five o'clock. The Crow scouts went in front and on the flanks, but they had omitted to send forward their spies during the night, although on the previous day they had found indubitable signs that the Sioux were then engaged in hunting the buffalo southward. About half-past seven an advance of ten miles had been made, when, suddenly, the Old Crow appeared on a hill near the stream, and gave
a signal. Soon other scouts dashed into the valley. Meanwhile the Crows were catching their war ponies, stripping off their superfluous garments, and some of them had formed in line and were singing their war song. A halt had been made at the first signal of the scouts, and the order was given to unsaddle the animals, it being supposed that they had merely seen some of the Sioux, near their village upon the hills, engaged in herding their ponies. The two battalions of the Third cavalry were resting on the south side of the creek and the one of the Second on the north side. Suddenly yells were heard beyond the low hill on the north, and shots were fired, which every moment were becoming more frequent. The Crows were wild with excitement, and shouted to the interpreters that their scouts were being killed and that they must go to join them. After circling on their ponies in the valley for ten minutes they dashed over the hill and disappeared. The firing became more and more rapid. The cavalry were making ready to mount, when scouts came galloping back again, hallooing that the Sioux were charging.

General Crook rode to the first crest and saw that they were coming forward to attack the whole command in the valley. Orders were given Colonel [Lieutenant Colonel William B.] Royall to lead the battalions of the Third cavalry across the stream, deploy his troops as skirmishers and occupy the hills in the possession of the enemy. Captain [Guy V.] Henry's battalion of the Third cavalry, consisting of Companies D, B, L and F, advanced northward up a series of ridges occupied by the Indians, who retired before the steady charge from point to point. At last was reached the top of a ridge lying adjacent to the highest crest, but separated from it by a deep ravine. The Sioux were in front and were promptly attacked. They occupied also a palisade on the left, about 800 yards distant. Captain [William H.] Andrews' company had become detached from its battalion and had advanced on the extreme left, and it was employed
in checking an early flanking movement of the Indians. Colonel Royall, in advancing, had crossed and left behind him the deep hollow west of the main ridge on which the Sioux first appeared and back over which they had been driven by a line of infantry to a higher crest, stopping its northern extremity.

The troops were going forward with an ardor and enthusiasm which found vent in cheers, and their officers were surprised to observe that they were receiving no support from the centre, which was yielding ground and permitting the enemy to turn their fire against the right flank. After checking the advance behind a friendly crest behind which his soldiers lay while pouring into the Sioux a hot answering fire, Colonel Royall was expectant of seeing the advance on his right resumed, as the latter were then apparently beginning to feel a panic. Seeing the long gallant skirmish line pause, however, they dashed forward on the right and left, and in an instant nearly every point of vantage within, in front and in the rear, and on the flank of the line, was covered with savages wildly circling their ponies and charging hither and thither, while they fired from their seats with wonderful rapidity and accuracy.

At this moment the loss to the troops commenced. They opened a severe fire upon the Indians, which was seen to have instant effect, but a cry arose that they were the Crows, and immediately it was checked. Thus was lost an excellent opportunity for punishing them severely. They screened themselves behind elevations and continued a harassing fire. Still the troops on the right did not advance, and the suspense grew terrible as the position was every moment more perilous as the Sioux appeared at intervals on the left flank, charging on their ponies and each time further toward the rear. In the meantime they swept down into the valley where the command had halted in the morning at the first alarm, directly behind the left wing, and, killing a Snake, captured a small herd of ponies which
Brigadier General George Crook, who commanded the Big Horn and Yellowstone expedition in 1876. Courtesy of Paul L. Hedren.

Romantic portrayal of the cavalry charging at Rosebud Creek, June 17, 1876. From Richard Irving Dodge, *Our Wild Indians: Thirty-three Years' Personal Experience Among the Red Men of the Great West* (Hartford: A. D. Worthington and Company, 1881).
he was guarding. Lieutenant [James E. H.] Foster, with a squad of men from Captain Andrews' company, was sent to cut off the Sioux and recapture the ponies. He dashed after them two miles and only halted when he found the enemy springing up so thickly around him that he feared it would be impossible to fight his way back. In rejoining the left wing he rode through a series of ravines, and in emerging from them at full gallop was unfortunately mistaken for a party of the enemy and three volleys were fired at him by the troops. No damage was done to his men.

As Colonel Royall was determining to make a rapid charge on the heights held by the Sioux, and by desperately dislodging them, extricating himself from his exposed position, Captain [Azor H.] Nickerson, aide-de-camp, having made a wide circuit around the hollow lying between the General's headquarters and Colonel Royall's line, dashed down a steep side hill under a concentrated fire, the bullets making the dust fly under his horse's hoofs, and delivered the unexpected order to fall back. The line on the main ridge, backed by a mass of cavalry and infantry, still remained stationary. To retreat into the hollow on the right, which would be necessary in order to form a junction with the centre, was to risk the certain loss of nearly the whole battalion. Colonel Royall, however, obeyed his order to extend his line in that direction by sending Captain [Charles] Meinhold's company of the Third cavalry around by such a route as saved it from much exposure and then slowly receded from crest to crest, keeping a strong line of skirmishers continually deployed to amuse the enemy. As the retreat progressed they obtained better range upon the troops at every moment, but the skirmishers did their utmost in firing coolly and with steady aim. It cannot be doubted that their bullets took effect among the savages crowded on the high point of the main ridge. Many were seen to fall and subsequently several dead ponies strewed the ground. The horses belonging to the dismounted caval-
rymen were led first into the small ravines in the bottom of
the valley.

At this juncture the soldiers felt great discouragement,
but preserved their coolness, although death had just be-
gun his work among them, a murderous enfilading fire
causing them to drop every moment. Captain [Peter D.]
Vroom, Lieutenant [Charles] Morton and Lieutenant
[Henry R.] Lemley [Lemly], of the Third cavalry, took
places in the skirmish line when the enemy were within
range, and used their carbines with effect. Unwilling to let
slip an opportunity for helping the extrication of the left
line, with which my own fate was identified by the chance
of battle, I dismounted at several points during our retreat
and fired with the skirmishers. At last, when the receding
line reached the last ridge next the fatal hollow, it became
evident that the sacrifice of a few lives was inevitable for
the salvation of many more. Colonel Royall sent his adju-
tant, Lieutenant Lemley, through the storm of bullets to
ask a support of infantry to protect his retreat. About the
same moment Captain Guy V. Henry, who had remained
at the head of his battalion under the hottest fire, was horri-
bly wounded in the face. He was lifted from his horse and
led to the rear by two of his soldiers. The tide of retreat
now grew more excited and turbulent, and I was pressed
back, with the soldier attending me, over the rearward
crest upon the slope, which was raked by an oblique fire
from the north.

The infantry which was expected to relieve this line
was not in position soon enough to check the wild advance
of the Sioux, who, observing the retiring body becoming
crowded together on the edge of the gap which it must
cross under fire, rushed both down and up the valley on
the right while they poured their fire from the high bluff
across the low elevation, rendering it utterly untenable,
while they were charging at the same time to prevent its
abandonment. A swarm of Sioux were within 1,000 yards of
me in front and I heard their shots in the rear as they murdered the poor soldiers of the rear guard of the retreat. I was obliged either to take the chance of death then or wait to cross with the battalion, which would attract a still more fatal fire, because it would form a large mark for the aim of the enemy. The hill where the General’s headquarters were and a large body of troops which had not yet been engaged was more than half a mile distant. I chose the converging ravines and rode through them a greater part of the way, but as I galloped up the slope opposite the one I had left I heard the yells of the savages close behind, and the reports of their rifles, as I emerged from the safer ground, sounded remarkably near and loud.

Looking behind I saw a dozen Sioux surrounding a group of soldiers who had straggled behind the retreat. Six were killed at one spot. A recruit surrendered his carbine to a painted warrior, who flung it to the ground, and cleft his head with a stroke of the tomahawk. William W. Allen, a brave, old soldier, who had been twenty years in the army, fought with magnificent courage, and was killed. The Sioux rode so close to their victims that they shot them in the face with revolvers and the powder blackened the flesh. Captains [Thomas B.] Burrow’s [Burrowes’s] and [Andrew S.] Burt’s companies of infantry by this time were firing well directed volleys from a position half way down the west side of the high bluff, and just after my escape the Snake Indians, gallantly led by their chiefs, Louissant and Cosgrove, dashed with thrilling shouts into the hollow, among the Sioux who were on the rear of the cavalry, and drove them back. Captain Henry, weak from the bleeding of his wound, had been unable to keep up with the retreat and had sunk on the ground. Louissant put himself astride the body and for five minutes kept the Sioux off, when some soldiers of his company rushed back and rescued him. About the same time a corporal of F company, of the Third cavalry, made a last charge, with three men, and cap-
tured from the enemy the bodies of their comrades, thus saving them from the scalping knife. The Snakes took two scalps from the Sioux whom they killed in the hollow, and swung them, fresh and bleeding, with gleeful triumph above their heads as they returned. The infantry under Captains Burrows and Burt executed their part admirably.

It remains to be said of the portion of the engagement which I have thus far described that it was the most important and dangerous, and that in it Captain Henry’s battalion of the Third cavalry and Captain Andrews’ company of the Second cavalry, with all their officers, displayed a most honorable degree of fortitude and bravery. They had a more arduous duty and suffered more severely than any other portion of the command. Colonel Royall was circumscribed by orders in every one of his movements, and the disaster attending the retreat would have been much greater had it not been so skillfully directed by him. On the left of his line was a lofty crescent-shaped palisade, toward which, early in the morning, he deployed skirmishers. Had the order to fall back been a little later this would have been occupied. It would then have been impossible for the Sioux to have circled around to the rear, and a fire could have been turned upon the last high point held by them, which would have compelled them to hide behind it, while the cavalry could have charged up the hollow and reached them before they could realize their predicament. Then the soldiers could have dismounted and fired such volleys as would have ended the fight and made a chase.

It is now time to glance at the other portions of the field, where there were three times as many troops as were on the left, and yet where there was hardly any fighting, except that done by successive lines of skirmishers, which held the southern end of the great ridge.

In the morning, after the Crows and Snakes had rushed forward to meet the Sioux, Captain [Avery B.] Kane’s [Cain’s] company of infantry was first ordered for-
ward to the top of the nearest hill. From that point it commenced firing. The Sioux were seen in great numbers beyond, covering every summit, and were engaged with the friendly Indians in a warm fusillade. The infantry advanced toward the high ridge, resting upon each successive elevation, which they mounted to discharge volleys into the groups of the enemy occupying still higher points.

Captain [Henry B.] Noyes, in command of the battalion of the Second cavalry, composed of companies A, B, D, E and I, saw the importance of carrying a portion of the main ridge immediately before they could advance further south and attack the column in the valley, where a portion of the cavalry was not yet mounted. He, therefore, advanced before receiving any orders, passed the right flank of the infantry and took a knoll beyond them.

The friendly Indians had been carried by the impetuosity of their first charge far beyond the front of the infantry, and a party of the Snakes seemed to be fighting independently on a cone-shaped mound, just visible two miles away. As the sequel showed, they killed and scalped a small party of Sioux there, and held their ground until the troops advanced beyond them. The Crows and the rest of the Snakes were between the troops and the Sioux, and it was feared that the bullets intended for the latter would strike our allies. After great shouting by the interpreters of General Crook’s wishes they retired running, as if in flight.

The Sioux, as well as the cavalry on the left, mistook the movements, and the former became extremely bold and advanced in swarms. It was then that Colonel Royall’s line found itself too far ahead in the very midst of the enemy. Captain Mills’ battalion of the Third cavalry, composed of companies A, E, I and M, which had been ordered to make the first charge, now advanced through the battalion of the Second cavalry, deployed in a skirmish line and charged the point above where the smoke of the Indian rifles was growing dense. It was carried with inspiriting shouts, and
the Sioux ran back to another, still higher, apex. The hostile lines were here face to face, although each availed itself of the protection of the stony summits. Volley after volley was exchanged between them, and the Sioux lost several of their warriors. General Crook saw thirteen of them fall.

Early in the engagement a squadron of the Third cavalry, comprising companies C and G, under command of Captain [Frederick] Van Vliet, had occupied a steep bluff on the south side of the stream to protect the troops in the bottom while they were saddling their horses. It was withdrawn as soon as the whole command was engaged in the forward movement, and was now posted on the high ridge, dismounted and ready for action in the rear of Captain Mills' line. The Indians meanwhile were flocking to a butte northeast of this position, and had opened fire upon it.

Captain Mills received an order to wheel his battalion to the right, advance a furlong, then wheel to the left and charge the steep incline. It was executed with rapidity, and the summit carried, but not until the enemy before dispersing had delivered three heavy volleys at the advancing line. The battalion, after halting on the bluff, was ordered by General Crook to advance directly through the canyon of the stream northward, toward the supposed locality of the Sioux village. By transposition of the forces, it now formed the right of the command, and the Second cavalry battalion was ordered to follow it as a support. The General directed that the battle in progress should be ignored by this wing of the command and that it should capture and destroy the village. Frank Gruard was ordered to ride in the front and select the route of march. It was expected that the tepees of the bands of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse would be found only ten miles distant. Hardly had the first battalion moved away when Captain Noyes was sent a counter order, based upon a new report brought to General Crook by a Crow, that the village was in an exactly opposite direction. Captain Nickerson, aide and acting as-
sistant adjutant general, was dispatched at full gallop to check Captain Mills' advance, and overtook him only after a chase of five miles, during which he was accompanied by a solitary orderly. The two battalions recalled were ordered to positions to protect the rear and command the valley where the morning halt had been made.

The Indians, after the withdrawal of Captain Mills' battalion from the long ridge, had regained the crest which he evacuated, and engaged Van Vliet's squadron at the same time that they poured a terrible fire into Colonel Royall's line on the left, compelling him, after holding his position at a disadvantage so long and with such brave retaliation, to order at last a rapid retreat across a deep defile, with the enemy charging both flanks and the rear. This was the last effort of the Sioux. The infantry and Snakes drove them steadily back from the moment that the left wing emerged from its race of the gantlet.

After the firing had ceased the whole force was concentrated, and it advanced in pursuit of the Indians. It was observed, however, that the Crows remained behind on the summit of a hill, where they were holding a pow-wow. They had captured a pony from the Sioux, which they had left at home in their village and they feared lest it had been attacked during their absence. They also desired to take back two of their braves who were wounded, and to con- dole with the squaw of a young Snake who belonged to their band and who was killed. General Crook, on learning of their disaffection, determined to return to the point where the battle began and to rest there until evening, so that the Crows might fully determine what they would do. They told him, at length, that they could not stay, but must have their war dance at home over the scalps which they had won. Believing that the Sioux village had been removed during the fight, and dreading to march forward through so rough a country after the desertion of his scouts, General Crook determined in the morning to move back
toward Goose Creek. The object of the scout, which was so unsuccessful and yet not without an encouraging result, was to discover and destroy the village of the Sioux, which the guides, while half-breed and Indian, agreed in declaring to be on the Yellowstone River, between the mouths of the Rosebud and the Tongue. It proved to be nearer the base of the expedition than was believed, and General Crook’s ignorance of its proximity, due to the negligence and inactivity of the Crow allies, who were intrusted with the work of scouting, is the cause of the failure of the movement. The Sioux were certainly repulsed in their bold and confident onset, and lost many of their bravest warriors, but, when they fled, could not be pursued without great danger in the rough country through which their way lay.

Had his scouts proved faithful, so that he could have been prepared to occupy the commanding positions with infantry in advance of the main column, he would have had warning of the concentration of the enemy to impede his course, and could have driven him back into his village and ended the campaign by destroying it. It will be seen that the blame of the miscarriage of the scout belongs to the Crows, whose instincts, vigilance and knowledge of their own country was relied upon to render every move of the force intelligent. On the contrary, their undisciplined frenzy and failure to discover the lodgment of the enemy in time to frustrate their meditated attack precipitated a battle which began with a stupendous advantage on his side and in a spot of his own choice naturally suitable to the success of their method of warfare. The Sioux’s strength was masked, except when, emboldened by the disastrous withdrawal of the left wing of the cavalry, they made a dash from both ends of a deep hollow which lay in its way and exposed it to a murderous fire, and suddenly swarmed on the front, left and rear. Then it was that the timely fire of the infantry upon their main body, the charge of the Snakes into the hollow and rapid pursuit of them for three miles,
dismayed them utterly and they fell back and disappeared. Had it not been for their occupation, unperceived by the General, of positions from which they could pour an enfilading fire upon both flanks of the body of cavalry on the left, they would not have stood in the face of the troops a moment after their first charge. The injury inflicted upon them must have been much greater than that which we suffered. Their loss of lives is estimated at about one hundred. There is no doubt that all the northern Sioux warriors were engaged in the battle, and it is believed that they have been severely crippled.