The Battle of the Little Bighorn, also known as Custer's Last Stand and, by the Native Americans involved, the Battle of the Greasy Grass, was an armed engagement between combined forces of Lakota, Northern Cheyenne and Arapaho people against the 7th Cavalry Regiment of the United States Army. It occurred on June 25 and June 26, 1876, near the Little Bighorn River in eastern Montana Territory, near what is now Crow Agency, Montana.

The battle was the most famous action of the Great Sioux War of 1876–77 (also known as the Black Hills War). It was an overwhelming victory for the Lakota, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho, led by several major war leaders, including Crazy Horse and Gall, inspired by the visions of Sitting Bull (TatáKka Íyotake). The U.S. Seventh Cavalry, including the Custer Battalion, a force of 700 men led by George Armstrong Custer, suffered a severe defeat. Five of the Seventh's companies were annihilated; Custer was killed, as were two of his brothers, a nephew, and a brother-in-law. Total U.S. deaths were 268, including scouts, and 55 were wounded.

Public response to the Great Sioux War varied at the time. The battle, and Custer's actions in particular, have been studied extensively by historians.

In 1875, Sitting Bull created the Sun Dance alliance between the Lakota and the Cheyenne,[citation needed] a religious ceremony which celebrates the spiritual rebirth of participants. One had taken place around June 5, 1876, on the Rosebud River in Montana, involving Agency Native Americans who had slipped away from their reservations to join the hostiles.[2] During the event, Sitting Bull reportedly had a vision of "soldiers falling into his camp like grasshoppers from the sky."[3] At the same time, military officials had a summer campaign underway to force the Lakota and Cheyenne back to their reservations, using infantry and cavalry in a three-pronged approach.

Col. John Gibbon's column of six companies (A, B, E, H, I, and K) of the 7th Infantry and four companies (F, G, H, and L) of the 2nd Cavalry marched east from Fort Ellis in western Montana on March 30, to patrol the Yellowstone River. Brig. Gen. George Crook's column of ten companies (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, I, L, and M) of the 3rd Cavalry, five (A, B, D, E, and I) of the 2nd Cavalry, two companies (D and F) of the 4th Infantry, and three companies (C, G, and H) of the 9th Infantry, moved north from Fort Fetterman in the Wyoming Territory on May 29, marching
toward the Powder River area. Brig. Gen. Alfred Terry's column, including twelve companies (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, K, L, and M) of the 7th Cavalry under Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer's immediate command,[4] Companies C and G of the 17th U.S. Infantry, and the Gatling gun detachment of the 20th Infantry departed westward from Fort Abraham Lincoln in the Dakota Territory on May 17. They were accompanied by teamsters and packers with 150 wagons and a large contingent of pack mules that reinforced Custer. Companies C, D, and I of the 6th U.S. Infantry, moved along the Yellowstone River from Fort Buford on the Missouri River to set up a supply depot, and joined Terry on May 29 at the mouth of the Powder River.

The coordination and planning began to go awry on June 17, 1876, when Crook's column was delayed after the Battle of the Rosebud. Surprised and, according to some accounts, astonished by the unusually large numbers of Native Americans in the battle, a defeated Crook was compelled to pull back, halt and regroup. Unaware of Crook's battle, Gibbon and Terry proceeded, joining forces in early June near the mouth of the Rosebud River. They reviewed Terry's plan calling for Custer's regiment to proceed south along the Rosebud, while Terry and Gibbon's united forces would move in a westerly direction toward the Bighorn and Little Bighorn rivers. As this was the likely location of Indian encampments, all Army elements were to converge around June 26 or 27, attempting to engulf the Native Americans. On June 22, Terry ordered the 7th Cavalry, composed of 31 officers and 566 enlisted men under Custer, to begin a reconnaissance and pursuit along the Rosebud, with the prerogative to "depart" from orders upon seeing "sufficient reason." Custer had been offered the use of Gatling guns but declined, believing they would slow his command.

While the Terry/Gibbon column was marching toward the mouth of the Little Bighorn, on the evening of June 24, Custer's scouts arrived at an overlook known as the Crow's Nest, 14 miles (23 km) east of the Little Bighorn River. At sunrise on June 25, Custer's scouts reported they could see a massive pony herd and signs of the Native American village roughly 15 miles (24 km) in the distance. After a night's march, the tired officer sent with the scouts could see neither, and when Custer joined them, he was also unable to make the sighting. Custer's scouts also spotted the regimental cooking fires that could be seen from 10 miles away, disclosing the regiment's position.

Custer contemplated a surprise attack against the encampment the following morning of June 26, but he then received a report informing him several hostile Indians had discovered the trail left by his troops. Assuming his presence had been exposed, Custer decided to attack the village without further delay. On the morning of June 25, Custer divided his 12 companies into three battalions in anticipation of the forthcoming engagement. Three companies were placed under the command of Major Marcus Reno (A, G, and M); and three were placed under the command of Capt. Frederick Benteen (H, D, and K). Five companies (C, E, F, I, and L) remained under Custer's immediate command. The 12th, Company B, under Capt. Thomas
McDougald, had been assigned to escort the slower pack train carrying provisions and additional ammunition.

Unbeknownst to Custer, the group of Native Americans seen on his trail were actually leaving the encampment on the Big Horn and did not alert the village. Custer's scouts warned him about the size of the village, with scout Mitch Bouyer reportedly saying, "General, I have been with these Indians for 30 years, and this is the largest village I have ever heard of." Custer's overriding concern was that the Native American group would break up and scatter in different directions. The command began its approach to the Native American village at 12 noon and prepared to attack in full daylight.

Seventh Cavalry organization

The Seventh Cavalry was a veteran organization created just after the American Civil War. Many men were veterans of the war, including most of the leading officers. A significant portion of the regiment had previously served four-and-a-half years at Ft. Riley, Kansas, during which time it fought one major engagement and numerous skirmishes, experiencing casualties of 36 killed and 27 wounded. Six other troopers had died of drowning and 51 from cholera epidemics.

Half of the 7th Cavalry's companies had just returned from 18 months of constabulary duty in the Deep South, having been recalled to Fort Abraham Lincoln to reassemble the regiment for the campaign. About 20 percent of the troopers had been enlisted in the prior seven months (139 of an enlisted roll of 718), were only marginally trained, and had no combat or frontier experience. A sizable number of these recruits were immigrants from Ireland, England and Germany, just as many of the veteran troopers had been before their enlistments. Archaeological evidence suggests that many of these troopers were malnourished and in poor physical condition, despite being the best-equipped and supplied regiment in the army.[10][11]

Of the 45 officers and 718 troopers then assigned to the 7th Cavalry (including a second lieutenant detached from the 20th Infantry and serving in Company L), 14 officers (including the regimental commander, Col. Samuel D. Sturgis) and 152 troopers did not accompany the 7th during the campaign. The ratio of troops detached for other duty (approximately 22%) was not unusual for an expedition of this size,[12] and part of the officer shortage was chronic, due to the Army's rigid seniority system: three of the regiment's 12 captains were permanently detached, and two had never served a day with the 7th since their appointment in July 1866.[13] Three second lieutenant vacancies (in E, H, and L Companies) were also unfilled.
Number of Native American combatants

Historians continue to debate the number of Indian warriors participating in the battle. They estimate that in the overall battle, the warriors outnumbered the 7th Cavalry by approximately three to one, or roughly 1,800 against 600.[14] In Custer's fight, this ratio could have increased to as high as nine to one (1,800 against 200) after his isolated command became the main focus of the fighting. Some historians, however, claim the ratio of the Custer fight to be as low as three to one. Custer's detachment was certainly outnumbered and was caught in the open on unfamiliar terrain. Within weeks of the battle, the public estimate by whites of the number of Indian warriors rapidly increased. For example, in a letter to his wife dated soon after the battle, Benteen indicates 3,000 Indians; his later estimates were much higher.[15] Some recent research points to a force of Indians much closer in size to Custer's own, however.

Military assumptions prior to the battle

As the Army moved into the field on its expedition, it was operating with incorrect assumptions as to the number of Indians it would encounter. The Army's assumptions were based on inaccurate information provided by the Indian Agents that no more than 800 hostiles were in the area. The Indian Agents based the 800 number on the number of Lakota led by Sitting Bull and other leaders off the reservation in protest of US Government policies. This was a correct estimate until several weeks before the battle, when the "reservation Indians" joined Sitting Bull's ranks for the summer buffalo hunt. As one historian wrote: "The (US) Army's strength estimate didn't change, because the civilian Indian agents on the reservations didn't tell the Army that large numbers of Indians had left."[17] Nor did the agents take into account the many thousands of "reservation Indians" who had "unofficially" left the reservation to join their "uncooperative non-reservation cousins led by Sitting Bull". The latter were those groups who had indicated that they were not going to cooperate with the US Government and live on reservation lands. Thus, Custer unknowingly faced thousands of Indians, in addition to the 800 non-reservation "hostiles". All Army plans were based on the incorrect numbers. While after the battle, Custer was severely criticized for not having accepted reinforcements and for dividing his forces, it must be understood that he had accepted the same official Government estimates of hostiles in the area which Terry and Gibbon also accepted.

Additionally, Custer was more concerned with preventing the escape of the Lakota and Cheyenne than with fighting them. From his own observation, as reported by his trumpeter John Martin (Martini)[18] Custer assumed the warriors had been sleeping in on the morning of the
battle, as virtually every native account attested later, giving Custer a false estimate of what he was up against. When he and his scouts first looked down on the village from Crow's Nest across the Little Bighorn River, they could only see the herd of ponies. Looking from a hill 2.5 miles (4.0 km) away after parting with Reno's command, Custer could observe only women preparing for the day, and young boys taking thousands of horses out to graze south of the village. Custer's Crow scouts told him it was the largest native village they had ever seen. When the scouts began changing back into their native dress right before the battle, Custer released them from his command. While the village was enormous in size, Custer thought there were far fewer warriors to defend the village. He assumed most of the warriors were still asleep in their tepees. [18]

Finally, Custer may have assumed that in the event of his encountering Native Americans, his subordinates Benteen and the pack train would quickly come to his aid. Rifle volleys were a standard way of telling supporting units to come to another unit's aid. In a subsequent official 1879 Army investigation requested by Major Reno, the Reno Board of Inquiry (RCOI), Benteen and Reno's men testified that they heard distinct rifle volleys as late as 4:30 pm during the battle.

Reno's attack

The first group to attack was Major Reno's second detachment (Companies M, A and G), conducted after receiving orders from Custer written out by Lt. William W. Cooke, as Custer's Crow scouts reported Sioux tribe members were alerting the village. Ordered to charge, Reno began that phase of the battle. The orders, made without accurate knowledge of the village's size, location, or the warriors' propensity to stand and fight, had been to pursue the Native Americans and "bring them to battle." Reno's force crossed the Little Bighorn at the mouth of what is today Reno Creek around 3:00 p.m. [20] They immediately realized that the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne were present "in force and not running away."

Reno advanced rapidly across the open field towards the northwest, his movements masked by the thick bramble of trees that ran along the southern banks of the Little Bighorn river. The same trees on his front right shielded his movements across the wide field over which his men rapidly rode, first with two approximately forty-man companies abreast and eventually with all three charging abreast. The trees also obscured Reno's view of the Native American village.
until his force had passed that bend on his right front and was suddenly within arrow shot of the village. The tepees in that area were occupied by the Hunkpapa Sioux. Neither Custer nor Reno had much idea of the length, depth and size of the encampment they were attacking, as the village was hidden by the trees.[21] When Reno came into the open in front of the south end of the village, he sent his Arikara/Ree and Crow Indian scouts forward on his exposed left flank. Realizing the full extent of the village’s width, Reno quickly suspected what he would later call “a trap” and stopped a few hundred yards short of the encampment.

He ordered his troopers to dismount and deploy in a skirmish line, according to standard army doctrine. In this formation, every fourth trooper held the horses for the troopers in firing position, with five to ten yards separating each trooper, officers to their rear and troopers with horses behind the officers. This formation reduced Reno’s firepower by 25 percent. As Reno’s men fired into the village and killed, by some accounts, several wives and children of the Sioux leader, Gall or Pizi, mounted warriors began streaming out to meet the attack. With Reno’s men anchored on their right by the impassable tree line and bend in the river, the Indians rode hard against the exposed left end of Reno’s line. After about 20 minutes of long-distance firing, Reno had taken only one casualty, but the odds against him had risen (Reno estimated five to one) and Custer had not reinforced him. Trooper Billy Jackson reported that by then, the Indians had begun massing in the open area shielded by a small hill to the left of the Reno’s line and to the right of the Indian village. From this position the Indians mounted an attack of more than 500 warriors against the left and rear of Reno’s line,[24] turning Reno’s exposed left flank. They forced a hasty withdrawal into the timber along the bend in the river. Here the Indians pinned Reno and his men down and set fire to the brush to try to drive the soldiers out of their position.

After giving orders to mount, dismount and mount again, Reno told his men, “All those who wish to make their escape follow me,” and led a disorderly rout across the river toward the bluffs on the other side. The retreat was immediately disrupted by Cheyenne attacks at close quarters. Later Reno reported that three officers and 29 troopers had been killed during the retreat and subsequent fording of the river, with another officer and 13–18 men missing. Most of these men were left behind in the timber, although many eventually rejoined the detachment. Reno's hasty retreat may have been precipitated by the death of Reno's Arikara Scout Bloody Knife, who had been shot in the head as he sat on his horse next to Reno, his blood and brains splattering the side of Reno's face.

Reno and Benteen on Reno Hill

Atop the bluffs, known today as Reno Hill, Reno’s shaken troops were joined by Captain Benteen’s column (Companies D, H and K), arriving from the south. This force had been on a
lateral scouting mission when it had been summoned by Custer's messenger, Italian bugler John Martin (Giovanni Martini) with the hand-written message "Come on...big village, be quick...bring pacs" ("pacs" referring to ammunition, meaning that by this time Custer was most likely aware of the large numbers of Indians they were having to face). Benteen's coincidental arrival on the bluffs was just in time to save Reno's men from possible annihilation. Their detachments were reinforced by McDougall's Company B and the pack train. The 14 officers and 340 troopers on the bluffs organized an all-around defense and dug rifle pits using whatever implements they had among them, including knives. This practice had become standard during the last year of the American Civil War, with both Union and Confederates troops utilizing knives, eating utensils, mess plates and pans, to dig effective battlefield fortifications.[26]

Despite hearing heavy gunfire from the north, including distinct volleys at 4:20 p.m., Benteen concentrated on reinforcing Reno's badly wounded and hard-pressed detachment, rather than continuing on toward Custer. Benteen's apparent reluctance to reach Custer prompted later criticism that he had failed to follow orders. Around 5:00 p.m., Capt. Thomas Weir and Company D moved out against orders to make contact with Custer. They advanced a mile, to what is today Weir Ridge or Weir Point, and could see in the distance Indian warriors on horseback shooting at objects on the ground. By this time, roughly 5:25 p.m., Custer's battle may have concluded. The conventional historical understanding is that what Weir witnessed was most likely warriors killing the wounded soldiers and shooting at dead bodies on the "Last Stand Hill" at the northern end of the Custer battlefield. Some contemporary historians have suggested that what Weir witnessed was a fight on what is now called Calhoun Hill. The destruction of Keogh's battalion may have begun with the collapse of L, I and C Company (half of it) following the combined assaults led by Crazy Horse, White Bull, Hump, Gall and others.[27] Other Indian accounts contradict this understanding, however, and the time element remains a subject of debate. The other entrenched companies eventually followed Weir by assigned battalions, first Benteen, then Reno, and finally the pack train. Growing Indian attacks around Weir Ridge forced all seven companies to return to the bluff before the pack train, with the ammunition, had moved even a quarter mile. There, they remained pinned down for another day, but the Indians were unable to breach this tightly held position.

Benteen displayed calmness and courage by exposing himself to Indian fire and was hit in the heel of his boot by an Indian bullet. At one point, he personally led a counterattack to push back Indians who had continued to crawl through the grass closer to the soldier's positions.[28]
Interpretations of Custer's fight are conjecture, since none of his men survived the battle. The accounts of surviving Indians are conflicting and unclear.

While the gunfire heard on the bluffs by Reno and Benteen's men was probably from Custer's fight, the soldiers on Reno Hill were unaware of what had happened to Custer until General Terry's arrival on June 26. They were reportedly stunned by the news. When the army examined the Custer battle site, soldiers could not determine fully what had transpired. Custer's force of roughly 210 men had been engaged by the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne about 3.5 miles (6 km) to the north. Evidence of organized resistance included apparent breastworks made of dead horses on Custer Hill.[29] By this time, the Indians had already removed most of their dead from the field. The soldiers identified the 7th Cavalry's dead as best as possible and hastily buried them where they fell. By the time troops came to recover the bodies, they found most of the dead stripped of their clothing, ritually mutilated, and in an advanced state of decomposition, making identification of many impossible.[30]

Custer was found with shots to the left chest and left temple. Either wound would have been fatal, though he appeared to have bled from only the chest wound, meaning his head wound may have been delivered post-mortem. He also suffered a wound to the arm. Some Lakota oral histories assert that Custer committed suicide to avoid capture and subsequent torture. Several Indian accounts note several soldiers committing suicide near the end of the battle. The account of Custer's suicide is usually discounted since the wounds were inconsistent with his being known as right-handed. His body was found near the top of Custer Hill, which also came to be known as "Last Stand Hill." There the United States erected a tall memorial obelisk inscribed with the names of the 7th Cavalry's casualties.[30]

Several days after the battle, Curley, Custer's Crow scout who had left Custer near Medicine Tail Coulee, recounted the battle, reporting that Custer had attacked the village after attempting to cross the river. He was driven back, retreating toward the hill where his body was found.[31] As the scenario seemed compatible with Custer's aggressive style of warfare and with evidence found on the ground, it was the basis of many popular accounts of the battle.

But, Chief Gall, a major participant, told Lt. Edward Settle Godfrey that Custer never came close to the river.[32] In turn, some Cheyenne and Sioux warriors criticized Gall's account of the battle, so there remain questions about what took place.[33]

Cheyenne oral tradition credits Buffalo Calf Road Woman with striking the blow that knocked
Custer off his horse before he died.[34]

Custer at Minneconjou Ford

Having isolated Reno's force and driven them away from the encampment, the bulk of the native warriors were free to pursue Custer. The route taken by Custer to his "Last Stand" remains a subject of debate. One possibility is that after ordering Reno to charge, Custer continued down Reno Creek to within about a half mile (800 m) of the Little Bighorn, but then turned north, and climbed up the bluffs, reaching the same spot to which Reno would soon retreat. From this point on the other side of the river, he could see Reno charging the village. Riding north along the bluffs, Custer could have descended into a drainage called Medicine Tail Coulee, which led to the river. Some historians believe that part of Custer's force descended the coulee, going west to the river and attempting unsuccessfully to cross into the village. According to some accounts, a small contingent of Indian sharpshooters opposed this crossing.

White Cow Bull claimed to have shot a leader wearing a buckskin jacket off his horse in the river. While no other Indian account supports this claim, if White Bull did shoot a buckskin-clad leader off his horse, some historians have argued that Custer may have been seriously wounded by him. Some Indian accounts claim that besides wounding one of the leaders of this advance, a soldier carrying a company guidon was also hit.[36] Troopers had to dismount to help the wounded men back onto their horses.[37] The fact that each of the non-mutilation wounds to Custer's body (a bullet wound below the heart and a shot to the left temple) would have been instantly fatal casts doubt on his being wounded and remounted.

Reports of an attempted fording of the river at Medicine Tail Coulee might explain Custer's purpose for Reno's attack, that is, a coordinated "hammer-and-anvil" maneuver, with Reno's holding the Indians at bay at the southern end of the camp, while Custer drove them against Reno's line from the north. Other historians have noted that if Custer did attempt to cross the river near Medicine Tail Coulee, he may have believed it was the north end of the Indian camp, although it was only the middle. Some Indian accounts, however, place the Northern Cheyenne encampment and the north end of the overall village to the left (and south) of the opposite side of the crossing.[39] The location of the north end of the village remains in dispute, however.

Other views of Custer's actions at Minneconjou Ford
Other historians claim that Custer never approached the river, but rather continued north across the coulee and up the other side, where he gradually came under attack. According to this theory, by the time Custer realized he was badly outnumbered, it was too late to break back to the south where Reno and Benteen could have provided assistance. Two men from the 7th Cavalry, the young Crow scout Ashishishe (known in English as Curley) and the trooper Peter Thompson, claimed to have seen Custer engage the Indians. The accuracy of their recollections remains controversial, as accounts by battle participants and assessments by historians almost universally discredit Thompson's claim.

Scholars' interpretation of 20th-century findings of archaeological evidence and giving more credence to Indian testimony has given rise to a new interpretation of the battle. In the 1920s, battlefield investigators discovered hundreds of .45–70 shell cases along the ridge line, known today as Nye-Cartwright Ridge, between South Medicine Tail Coulee and the next drainage at North Medicine Tail (also known as Deep Coulee). Historians believe Custer divided his detachment into two (and possibly three) companies, retaining personal command of one while presumably delegating Captain George W. Yates to command the second.

The 1920s' evidence supports the theory that at least one of the companies made a feint attack southeast from Nye-Cartwright Ridge straight down the center of the "V" formed by the intersection at the crossing of Medicine Tail Coulee on the right and Calhoun Coulee on the left. The intent may have been to relieve pressure on Reno's detachment (according to the Crow scout Curley, possibly viewed by both Mitch Bouyer and Custer) by withdrawing the skirmish line into the timber on the edge of the Little Bighorn River. Had the US troops come straight down Medicine Tail Coulee, their approach to the Minneconjou Crossing and the northern area of the village would have been masked by the high ridges running on the northwest side of the Little Bighorn River.

That they might have come southeast, from the center of Nye-Cartwright Ridge, seems to be supported by Northern Cheyenne accounts of seeing the approach of the distinctly white-colored horses of the Company E, known as the Grey Horse Company. Its approach was seen by Indians at that end of the village. Behind them, a second company, further up on the heights, would have provided long-range cover fire. Warriors could have been drawn to the feint attack, forcing the battalion back towards the heights, up the north fork drainage, away from the troops' providing cover fire above. The covering company would have moved towards a reunion, delivering heavy volley fire and leaving the trail of expended cartridges discovered 50 years later.

Last stand
In the end, the hilltop was probably too small to accommodate the survivors and wounded. Fire from the southeast made it impossible for Custer's men to secure a defensive position all around Last Stand Hill. On Last Stand Hill, the soldiers put up their most dogged defense. According to native accounts, far more Indian casualties occurred in the attack on Last Stand Hill than anywhere else. The extent of the soldiers' resistance indicated they had few doubts about their prospects for survival. According to Cheyenne and Sioux testimony, the command structure rapidly broke down, although smaller "last stands" were apparently made by several groups. Custer's remaining companies C (half of it), E, and F were soon eradicated, with the final 28 survivors making a running dash through Indian lines south for the river. They were trapped in the box canyon called "Deep Ravine". Their deaths ended the battle and completed the Lakota annihilation of Custer's five companies. No human remains associated with the battle have been found in "Deep Ravine".

By almost all accounts, the Lakota annihilated Custer's force within an hour of engagement. David Humphreys Miller, who between 1935 and 1955 interviewed the last Indian survivors of the battle, wrote that the Custer fight lasted less than one-half hour.[44] Other Indian accounts said the fighting lasted only "as long as it takes a hungry man to eat a meal." The Lakota asserted that Crazy Horse personally led one of the large groups of warriors who overwhelmed the cavalrymen in a surprise charge from the northeast, causing a breakdown in the command structure and panic among the troops. Many of these men threw down their weapons while Cheyenne and Sioux warriors rode them down, "counting coup" with lances, coup sticks, and quirts. Some Indian accounts recalled this segment of the fight as a "buffalo run."

Debate over effectiveness of cavalry weapons

In defense of Custer, some historians claim that some of the Indians were armed with repeating Spencer, Winchester and Henry rifles, while the 7th Cavalry carried single-shot Springfield Model 1873 carbines, caliber .45–70.[46] These rifles had a slower rate of fire than the repeating rifles and tended to jam when overheated. The carbines had been issued with copper cartridges. Troopers soon discovered that the copper expanded in the breech when heated upon firing; the ejector would then cut through the copper and leave the case behind, thus jamming the rifle. Troopers were forced to extract the cartridges manually with knife blades; thus, the carbines were nearly useless in combat except as clubs. During Reno's fight, Captain French was reported to have sat in the open, completely exposed to native American gunfire, extracting jammed shells from guns, reloading, and then passing them back to troopers in exchange for other jammed weapons to clear.[47]
The Springfield Model 1873 was selected by the Army Ordnance Board after extensive testing in competition with other rifles. It was considered to be the most reliable rifle after multiple weathering tests. The choice of a single-shot rifle over repeat-firing rifles was the Army's choice to prevent overuse of ammunition, following its emphasis at that time on marksmanship, as well as the costs of transporting cartridges along a 1,000-mile (1,600 km) supply line. While Indian accounts of the Custer fight noted men throwing down their rifles, in panic or possibly anger, accounts of jammed Springfield carbines were not reported in other confrontations during the Indian Wars. The jamming could have been due to the men's lack of familiarity with the Springfields, as they had been issued only weeks before the Battle of the Little Bighorn.\[48]\n
Additionally, subsequent archaeological excavations of the battlefield from 1983 to present have discovered evidence that cast light on the issue of jammed weapons. Fox, in 1993,[49] notes that only 3.4% (3 out of 88) of .45/55-caliber Springfield cartridge cases from the Custer battlefield and 2.7% (7 out of 257) cases from the Reno-Benteen field exhibit any indication they were pried from jammed weapons. These findings suggest accounts of jammed carbines were the result of misconception or a myth that grew after the defeat.

Indian accounts were documented in paintings on buffalo hides. They indicated a fight between Indian bows and arrows and cavalry pistols. While this representation may support the claims of the Army's carbines' malfunctioning, the single-shot Springfield rifles used by the 7th had a much greater range than the Winchester and Henry rifles supposedly used by the Indians. Thus, if the troopers used skirmishers' covering fixed arcs of fire, the soldiers would have been able to keep the Indians at bay for some time. Indian leaders spoke of several of their charges against the soldiers' positions being repulsed, forcing the Indians to return to cover below the ridge.

As more Indians joined the fight, fire on Company L and Company C's two positions increased steadily in intensity. Indian accounts described warriors' rushing army positions with bright robes to induce panic in the cavalry mounts. Another account related that soldiers (probably I Company, held initially in reserve over the crest of Finley Ridge) were rushed by warriors' waving blankets and by lone warrior "bravery runs," which forced troopers to choose between holding horse reins, or letting go to return fire. Soldiers aiming at oncoming Indians also had their hands pulled upwards by the frightened mounts, resulting in weapons discharged uselessly in the air. When horses' carrying ammunition packs were driven off, the Indians quickly gained control of them.

While some warriors were armed with rifles (including antiquated muzzle-loaders and Army Sharps carbines which they had acquired years before in trades with settlers), the Indians also
carried a large variety of traditional weapons. These included bows and arrows and several styles of heavy, stone-headed war clubs. According to the Indian accounts, at least half of the Indian warriors were armed only with bows and "many arrows," making this the primary weapon. Many of the Indian participants, including the thirteen year-old Black Elk, claimed to have acquired their first gun from dead troopers at the battle. The Sioux warrior White Bull described the Indians' systematically stripping slain troopers of guns and cartridge belts. As the losses mounted among Custer's men, the soldiers' fire steadily decreased, while the gunfire by the Indians with newly acquired weapons increased until reaching a crescendo. Cheyenne participants gave similar testimony: the Indians' firepower was increased by the new carbines they took off the soldiers, and ammunition recovered from the saddlebags of the troopers' captured horses.

Lakota and Cheyenne bows and arrows gave a deadly advantage over the troopers on the ridge due to the exposed terrain of the battlefield. Unlike the valley, the heights above the Little Bighorn River are considered completely unsuited for mounted troops. Custer's men were essentially trapped on higher ground, from which direct fire at the Indians through the high, dense brush would have been difficult. On the other hand, the Lakota and Cheyenne were able to shoot their arrows from heavy sagebrush below the ridge by aiming their arrows upward over obstacles at the puffs of smoke from the troopers' weapons. Their large volume of arrows ensured severe casualties. Many of the slain troopers were found with numerous arrows protruding from their bodies. Many also had crushed skulls, likely from the Indians' stone-headed war clubs. Historians have not determined when the latter injuries occurred. Some accounts of the Indian wars describe Indian women coming onto the field after a battle and systematically bashing in the heads of the enemy dead and wounded alike.