

# WOUNDED KNEE REVISITED

by

BRIGADIER GENERAL S. L. A. MARSHALL (USAR-RET)

(Editor's Note: *In his latest book, Crimsoned Prairie, the Indian Wars on the Great Plains, (reviewed in this issue) General Slam Marshall writes:*

What persuaded me to write was the discovery that in this large library on the Plains wars there is no serious and critical examination of the characteristics of engagement. Pomp and ceremony in the frontier army went hand in hand with lackadaisical operational control. Commanders hunted the Sioux with brass bands—this supposedly to stimulate troop morale—while not bothering to get their scouts out. Hard-charging recklessness

Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall, USAR (Ret) has seen combat with the United States Army during both World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam. During his rise from private to general he served as a unit commander, a combat historian, and as an operations analyst of modern battle. He is the author of more than 30 books about the American soldier in combat and the art of war. General Marshall's works include *Men Against Fire, Pork Chop Hill, Bastogne, Night Drop, Bird, Battles in the Monsoon, The River and the Gauntlet, Sinai Victory, and Blitzkrieg.*

His latest book, *Crimsoned Prairie*, which covers the wars against the Plains Indians, has just been awarded the Western Heritage annual prize for the best work on the winning of the west by The National Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center of Oklahoma City. That General Marshall holds no rancor against the American Indian might well be illustrated by pointing out that he inherited Indian blood from his mother. In his youth he was adopted by the Sioux during a ceremony in the Badlands and was given the tribal name Iron Eyes. His grandfather was the principal of an Indian School and is buried among those whom he taught.



was rampant as leaders got on the scent of dangerously smiling fortune. Almost routinely, forces were wasted, communications were neglected, and supply was mismanaged, though seldom was any commander relieved for his sins. Training was in sad disrepair. It was an era of military regression wherein the fundamentals were almost forgot. To say that the people cared so little for the army that the army became indifferent to its own standards would be to shift the burden of responsibility for sloth inexcusable. An army must but try the harder to preserve tradition, up standards, and keep the trust when it is not loved—the way to solve a difficult problem hardly being to transfer one's attention to an insoluble one.

*Later in the same book, in the chapter that deals with the first Wounded Knee, he writes:*

Once such a tragedy of violence and horror is unloosed, there is no telling where it may end. Armed men massed and suddenly panicked may not be held to account. Nigh mindless, they are wholly irrational in action.

So it is wholly vain that afterwards from their easy chairs historians and tacticians lament that all control became lost, that no one intervened to block the almost inevitable reaction, and having thus deplored, from that point move to apportion the blame between the sides. While as a human creature, man is rational and emotional, at the cutting edge he is animal, framed in the struggle for existence. In that unfathomable and terrible instant of unexpected change when his life is put at stake, he responds

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to his most primitive instincts and becomes unaccountable. A platoon, a company, may be that quickly shocked beyond the bounds of reason and the hiatus may continue until the completion of the action. Described in two of my books, Milsap's Patrol in the Normandy Invasion and Millett's Bayonet Charge in Korea, are instances of this kind of thing happening. There are still more recent examples that should enable us better to understand what went wrong at Wounded Knee.

*In the short piece that follows, written in March 1973, General Marshall gives some penetrating observations about the Battle of Wounded Knee which occurred in 1890, pointing out that "an actual battle took place there—it was not just an unprovoked massacre." His observations are important because they illuminate again the complex recurring relationships that exist between two of the many antagonistic elements of our society. At the end of his piece he invites those who feel inspired to challenge his main theme "... to lay on." We hope our readers will take up this challenge.)*

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That sorrowfully named country crossroads in South Dakota, Wounded Knee, has been much in the news this year even as it was in 1890. Furthermore, the happenings then and now are not unconnected.

During recent years this wretched place has been made the Wailing Wall of the United States, or more correctly, the blood-drenched ground on which all others should stand with heads bowed low, doing penance for the great crimes committed against the American Indian.

It was precisely because it is so identified, and almost exclusively so in the public mind and emotion, that the Sioux staged their second stand there 83 years after the first. The leaders of the recent events there knew that the name "Wounded Knee" itself would make big medicine for their cause. And the second affair at Wounded Knee, not unlike

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## AT THE FIRST WOUNDED KNEE THERE WAS MORE THAN ENOUGH BLOOD.

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the first, although for quite different reasons, should make a unique entry in our history. Never before has a war been declared against the United States in which there was so little bloodshed.

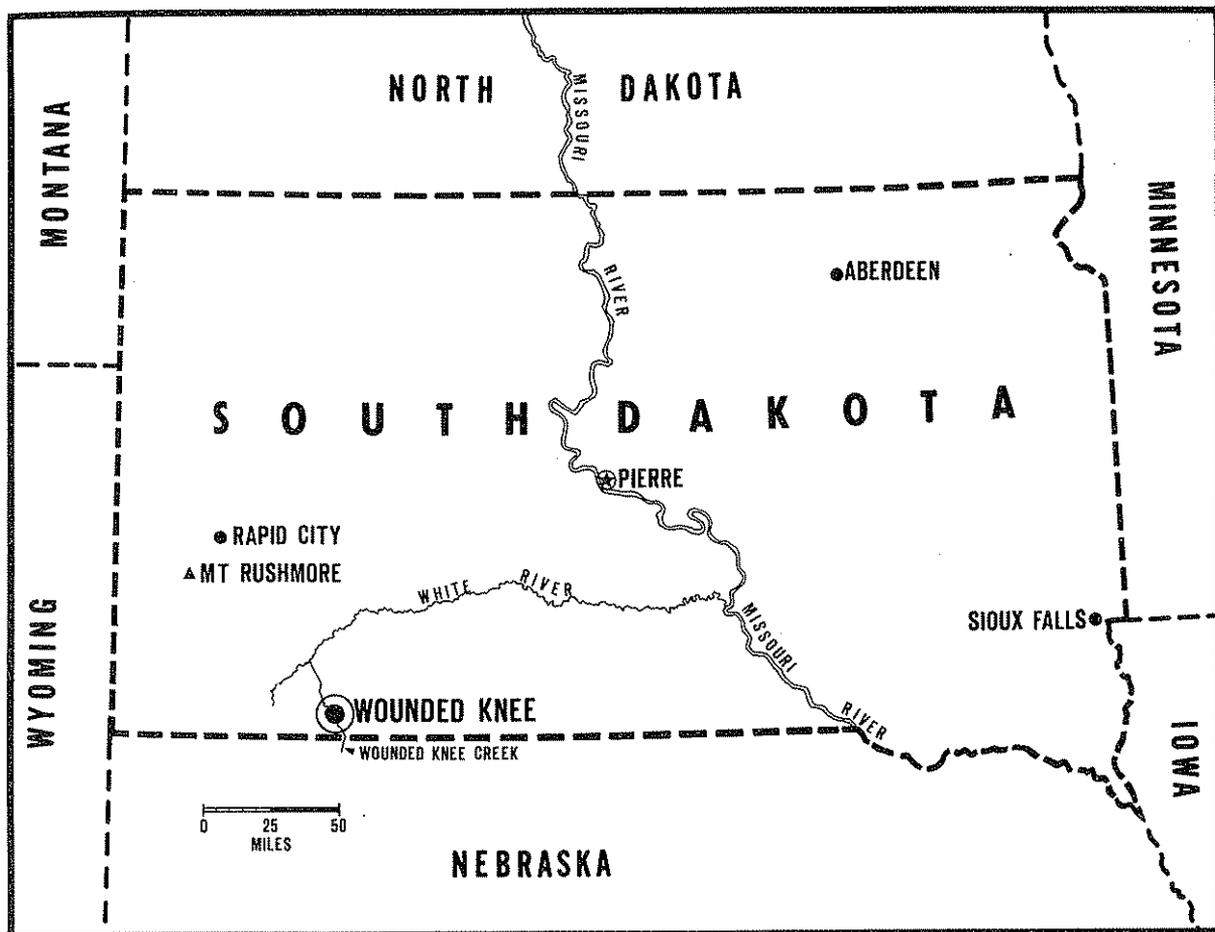
At the first Wounded Knee there was more than enough blood. And today all of that blood is widely held to be on the hands of the Seventh US Cavalry. It is now called the Wounded Knee Massacre so that the story of an unprovoked slaughter of some 300 helpless Sioux men, women, and children by fiendish soldiers, will remain imperishable.

But when I was a youth, it was still called the *Battle of Wounded Knee*, though soldiers spoke with regret that due to a loss of control, what had started as a fire fight turned into an orgy of senseless slaughter. I knew four of the survivors in my early reporting days, including Colonel Selah R. H. Tompkins. From them, I could draw only narrow, personal glimpses of the action, as is usually the case when one talks with the individuals who have been in a given combat. Therefore, they are not to be blamed for my conclusions about the first Wounded Knee, even though I could name and recklessly quote eyewitnesses, all now dead. My reflections and deductions are my own, and I think it is better that way.

When the second Wounded Knee was at white heat, I was being interviewed about the first Wounded Knee by my friend, Charles Lord, over NBC-TV in Philadelphia.

Lord asked: "Could that first tragedy have been avoided?"

I said: "Yes, there was a time that morning when Colonel George A. Forsyth had every reason to believe that part of Big Foot's band was definitely hostile and direct provocation would likely occur. He could have marched his troops off. That is, he could have decided to let the Sioux stew in their own juice and return to the reservations as best they could. But he had his orders. Had he pulled out, his



men would probably have lost some of their respect for him and he might have drawn a reprimand or relief.”

Lord then said: “You have talked about how the battle started, but can you really excuse the massacre that followed?”

I replied that any massacre is by definition inexcusable; that’s what the word means—mass slaughter without reason. But I could understand how the beginnings of that fight turned the field into an abattoir, and because of that understanding, I could certainly not apportion all blame for the bloodpath to one side.

After the interview was over and we were homeward bound, I told my friend about Milsap’s Patrol in Normandy, which story is found in my book, *Night Drop*, and about another such incident—Lew Millett’s Bayonet Charge in Korea.

These two episodes are uppermost in my

memory, for only twice in my combat experience have I known this phenomenon to happen when I was in close enough proximity to the scene to document it beyond doubt.

This sort of thing occurs when a troop body is committed to battle under conditions of such inordinate, unbearable stress that once killing starts, group dementia takes over. The people become robots temporarily as unthinking as men in a flight of panic. Surprise and consequent shock can cause this as well as pressure beyond limit.

Then there is another thing—man must see much just to know a little more. For example, I have group-critiqued either immediately post-battle or in rare instances amid action, somewhere around 1100 rifle companies, 80 artillery batteries, and a round dozen tank outfits.

In this schooling grind, patterns begin to form and certain norms become fixed in the

mind. One comes to distinguish between the probable and the unreal, the usual instance of order and the fantasy unacceptable.

Not more than six times in all of the critiquing have I had to stop the proceedings and say: "Now, wait a mintue. No fight begins in that manner. Either someone is holding something back or one happening has been forgotten. So we start all over again."

### THE FIRST WOUNDED KNEE

Now I return to my beginning theme. What I have read through the years about how the first Wounded Knee got started and what came of it at last did not make sense.

The all too readily accepted myths about the outset of this engagement were in diametrical contrast to nearly everything I have learned about man's nature and human reactions to surprise fire. The myths have so mushroomed that only recently I read in a metropolitan daily that at the first Wounded Knee, only one Sioux had a rifle and that he fired the only bullets from the Indian side.

Certain facts are not in dispute:

– Big Foot surrendered his band unconditionally.

– Next morning Forsyth decided that for the safety of his troops the Sioux had to yield their firearms.

– Search of the teepees by the cavalymen turned up only 40-odd firearms, none in working condition.

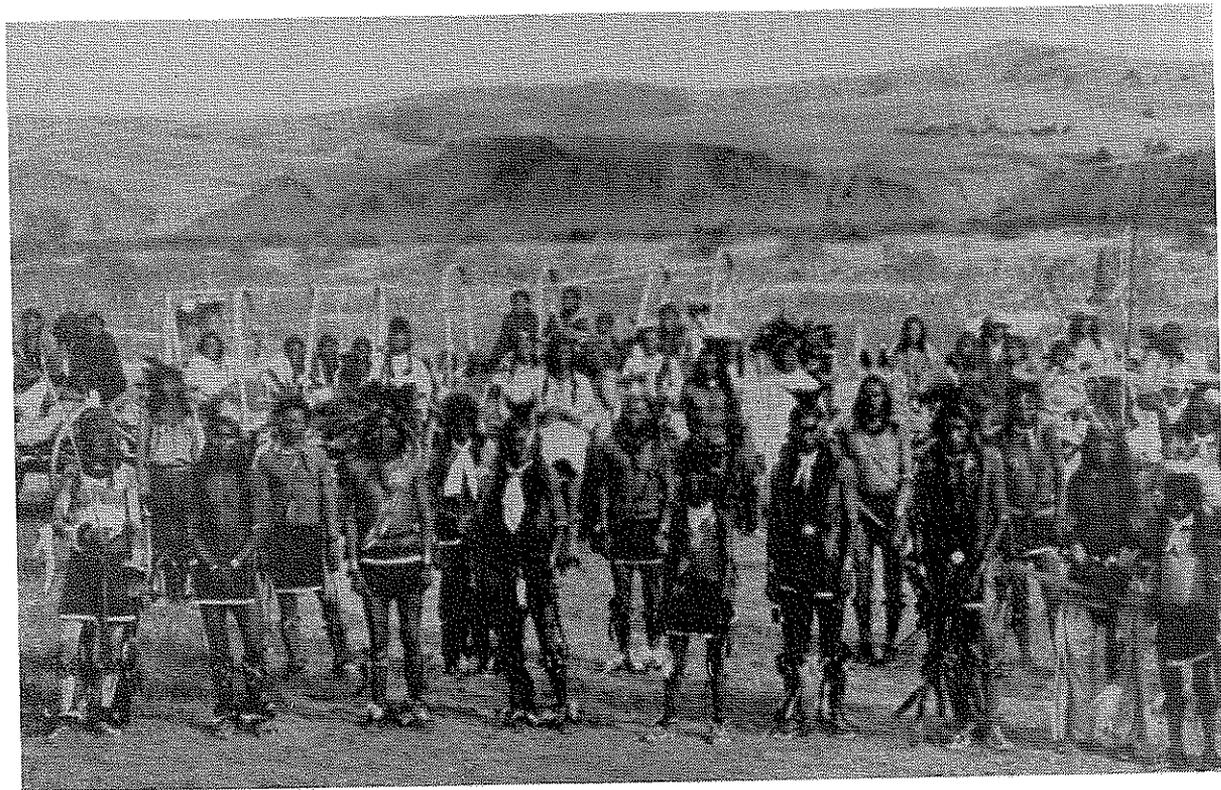
– The squaws began muttering and yelling to protest the search.

– Several hours thus passed futilely.

– As noon approached, the troopers had pulled back to open space.

– Directly in front of them were the assembled, blanketed warriors, some of them squatting. None had been searched. Some of the cavalymen were off to the flanks of the grouped warriors.

This is the point at which I suggest Forsyth might have recognized that the situation was potentially explosive and then pulled away. The weather was freezing. The Sioux were near starvation, but they had made their own problem. Tenderheartedness at the wrong



*Members of Big Foot's band at Cheyenne River, South Dakota, shortly before Wounded Knee.*



*Some members of Big Foot's band killed at Wounded Knee in December of 1890.*

moment can be a greater folly than useless bravado.

But Forsyth stood firm.

Then one brave, egged on by a medicine man, raised a rifle and shot a cavalry officer dead. And there is no dispute that this was the beginning of the tragedy.

Thereafter, according to the Sioux version of first Wounded Knee, a regiment in mass went berserk. An isolated incident, one man dead, possibly the work of a cracked brain, and hundreds of men suddenly go mad. Is this believable as a psychological phenomenon? No, it is an utter absurdity.

But, so far, this recital has dealt only with the precipitating incident which in itself explains nothing.

#### **FIGURES DO NOT LIE**

The Hotchkiss guns were on high commanding ground and already sighted on the Sioux camp. But they were also close enough that their crews must have had the

mass confrontation between soldier and brave in clear sight. Much of the killing of the day, and the setting afire of the teepees, is credited to these guns. But even in mad pursuit, soldiers do not run blindly into their own fire, though some few might have fallen that way.

The statistics say, however, that when the first Wounded Knee was over, the Seventh Cavalry had taken 59 casualties, of which 25 were killed, including one officer, Captain Wallace, who had fought with Reno at the Little Big Horn. Two other officers were among the 34 wounded in action.

These would be extremely heavy losses in a standup fire fight with only a few more than a hundred opposing braves present. It is a toll inconceivable if the armed Sioux were in small numbers and initially taken at disadvantage. At best they were not expert with the rifle at any distance, and moreover, even the best marksmen do not have true aim when suddenly surprised.<sup>1</sup>

So we come to the main question—the very heart of the issue. When did most of the

Army losses occur? It had to be right at the very beginning of the engagement. Most of the cavalymen must have fallen from point-blank aimed fire.

Now to go back over the scenario stage by stage. The shooting of the officer was the first incident of shocking surprise to the Army side. In such a moment there is always an instinctive hesitation, a shudder, a brief recoiling of the flesh, a flashing doubt about what to do next.

Had the massed cavalymen, formed in somewhat of a crescent, been primed to counter any act of lethal violence with volley fire into the thronged warrior body, supposedly unarmed, and had they done so,

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there would have been massive counter surprise of such shocking dimension as to have stampeded the stoutest fighting hearts on earth. Even men in armor could not have withstood it.

There is one rule in logic that I have found to be inviolable. When the facts as known exclude all but one possible theory of the case or situation, that has to be the answer. I have applied it repeatedly as in my combat studies in the field and some gruelling decisions have come of it. I now apply it to Wounded Knee. It is not extrapolation or analysis-and-deduction. Just call it "Marshall's Law."

The casualty figures at first Wounded Knee are the incontrovertible, immutable witness. They say it was the Sioux side that had to be armed and ready to instigate prearranged mass violence. The lodges had been searched without one usable weapon being found. Still, 25 soldiers died and 34 more were wounded. The Indians were not disconcerted or alarmed by the shooting of the officer; that could even have been the signal. For there had to be organized volley fire from rifles that had been

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concealed under blankets, or first Wounded Knee could not have happened in the way it did.

#### **CONSPIRACY AND CONSEQUENCE**

When one uses the word *organized*, that implies people with a plan working toward a predetermined end. Here we leave a planned mad act exploding a greater unplanned madness. That is why I did not hesitate to use the word *conspiracy* in writing of the first Wounded Knee. All of the elements are there to establish that most of Big Foot's warriors had to have entered into the plot, though in so doing they probably doublecrossed their aging, ailing Chief.<sup>2</sup>

For what followed, as stated earlier, there is no excuse. To that I add that there is none either for the sower of the wind who reaps the whirlwind. From the view of the hostilities, their act may have seemed justified. From the view of the soldier, what the Sioux did and the way they did it was outright, unmitigated treachery. And treachery can drive any man to be somewhat more terrible than a ravening beast.

So, if the first Wounded Knee was a dishonored field, it was dishonored by both sides. It is more honest, more reasonable to think of it and remember it as a tortured field, the site of an epic tragedy that should

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not have happened. But that is not sufficient ground for permitting it to continue to torture a nation and it cannot justify calumny, distortion and myth-making.

The spreading belief that Wounded Knee was staged to even the score for Custer is much too weird for indignant reply. Unreason is not to be countered with reason. But we who have known war know also that a US regiment cannot carry hate and a lust for vengeance in its heart for 14 years. Thank God it cannot even do so for one week. We are not made that way. The American at arms cannot be primed by hate.

This does, however, seem to be an age of recrimination and self-recrimination in our country. We—that is to say some of us—seem to enjoy suffering from self-inflicted wounds. But the wisest of us is not wise enough to escape history. The professional soldier should not even try to do so.

#### EPILOGUE

This essay was submitted only as a sample of how one man's mind works. It was done in three hours without reference to books or clippings, depending solely on memory, in a possibly mistaken attempt to convince fellow officers that concentration is more blessed than scholarship. For such marginal errors as may seem to appear, there is therefore no apology. Any who feel inspired to challenge the main theme are invited to lay on. They will thereby provide examples of how other

minds work. But may we stick to tactics and what we know about men under fire, avoiding sentimental abstractions?

#### NOTES

1. On the following day, 30 December, the Garry Owen Regiment again left the Pine Ridge Agency and marched about eight miles where it was once more engaged by hostile Sioux. The Army losses in the skirmish were one enlisted man killed in action, one officer and six enlisted men wounded in action. These casualties are sometimes included in the first Wounded Knee figures, bringing about a discrepancy.

2. The Regimental accounts of both actions are noteworthy only because of their brevity. The Regimental History by Lieutenant Colonel Melbourne C. Chandler, USA, says this of the first Wounded Knee: "From statements of those who participated with the Regiment, it is known that as the troops moved with the intention of searching the warriors of Big Foot's band, a signal was given (from Yellow Bird, an old medicine man) and each warrior dropped his blanket which had previously been held up about his face, and opened fire. This was when most of the casualties occurred among the troops. After the first volley from the Indians, they dropped to the ground, hoping that the surrounding troops might fire into one another." I had reached the ineluctable conclusion that the battle had its genesis in a Sioux conspiracy and had written it in *Crimsoned Prairie* two years before reading Chandler. This is merely to note that I believe his account is substantially correct though it is wholly incongruent with the public impression of what happened on that field. ■

