

The Old West

Red Cloud's War: The Fetterman Massacre

By *FREDERICK J. CHIAVENTONE*

Col. Henry Beebe Carrington was not a professional soldier by training. A Yale-educated and successful lawyer, Carrington rose to the rank of brigadier general of volunteers during the Civil War but spent the bulk of his service as a recruiting officer and military governor.



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Courtesy First Infantry Division Museum at Cantigny,
Illinois
The Fetterman Massacre by H. Charles McBarron

Carrington found that he liked Army life and at war's end was awarded the permanent rank of colonel in the Regular Army and command of the 18th Infantry Regiment. In the winter of 1865-6, he and his family were assigned to Fort Stephen Watts Kearny in Nebraska, and it was there that the fiery Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman informed Carrington that he and the 18th Infantry were to establish three new forts along the recently opened Bozeman Trail that cut through the Powder River area in present-day Wyoming. This route would make it easier for Americans moving west to reach the gold and silver fields and settlements in Oregon. It seemed like a great adventure. Sherman even urged Carrington's beautiful, brilliant wife, Margaret, and her companions to keep journals of the trip and of their adventures in the West.

It was Carrington's misfortune that he and the 18th Regiment were to arrive at Fort Laramie at the height of delicate negotiations between the United States government and the indigenous tribes. One outspoken leader, the Oglala Lakota warrior Red Cloud, was particularly upset: "Great Father sends us presents and wants new road. But White Chief goes with soldiers to steal road before Indian says yes or no!" Red

Cloud's closest friend and ally, Young-Man-Afraid-of-His-Horses, shouted, "In two moons you will not have a hoof left!" and the pair stormed out of the meetings followed by a crowd of angry warriors. Red Cloud's War had begun.

Carrington was shocked but determined to carry out his mission. He went north to establish forts Reno, Phil Kearny, and C.F. Smith along a route that roughly parallels where today's Interstate 90 runs north toward the Little Bighorn. While there were insufficient trees on the site selected for Fort Phil Kearny, a few miles away the slopes of the Big Horns were covered with thick pine forests. Two lumber camps set up there handily provided all the needed construction materials. Almost the stereotype of the frontier fort, Fort Phil Kearny was beautifully laid out, carefully constructed, and surrounded by a sturdy wooden palisade of sharpened logs. The setting was nothing short of idyllic — nestled in the foothills of the Big Horn Mountains and along Piney Creek. The intelligent and romantic Margaret Carrington described her new home with breathtaking enthusiasm. But the palisade was there for good reason, and within weeks of the colonel's wife's arrival, Fort Phil Kearny would be described by the War Department as "the single most dangerous post in the country."

The threats uttered by Red Cloud and Young-Man-Afraid-of-His-Horses were serious and deadly: The combined warriors of the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho did their utmost to make life along the Bozeman Trail untenable for white men. Animals were run off, woodcutters attacked, couriers ambushed and slaughtered, patrols cut off and assaulted, and small parties of emigrants and gold miners butchered. The tiny plot of ground set aside for a post cemetery began to fill with the horribly mutilated casualties of Red Cloud's War. Margaret Carrington and her fellow Army wives began feeling the strain of being isolated and besieged.

When Capt. William Judd Fetterman arrived in November of 1866, the garrison at Fort Phil Kearny was almost at the end of its rope. Fetterman, a much-decorated hero of the Civil War who had held the brevet rank of lieutenant colonel of volunteers, was angered and frustrated by the situation he found there. How dare a few Indians hold the U.S. government at bay? Was this not the same Army that had crushed the rebellious Southern states? Much of Fetterman's ire was directed at his commander, whom he deemed timid and overly cautious. As the Lakota and Cheyenne continued to whittle away at Carrington's force and strip the post of virtually all of its livestock, Fetterman became increasingly restive and pugnacious. To the utter disdain of the command's veteran scout — the legendary mountain man Jim Bridger — Fetterman loudly derided the enemy as simple savages and boasted, "With 80 men I could ride through the Sioux Nation!" These were fateful words.

In December of 1866 as the temperatures began to drop precipitously, flurries of wind-driven snow urged Carrington and his command to greater efforts to stockpile wood for the coming harsh winter. By the 21st of December, the last load of firewood was scheduled to be moved the few miles from the Big Horn "pineries" to Fort Phil Kearny. As the ponderous wagons of the wood train trundled down the slopes, a host of Sioux and Cheyenne warriors attacked. Red Cloud knew precisely what he was doing. The wood train was not important — except to bait a trap for the soldiers. Carrington quickly dispatched a relief party consisting mostly of infantry but reinforced by Company C of the 2nd Cavalry. At the last minute, Capt. Fetterman stepped forward to claim seniority and take command of the relief party. Col. Carrington assented but, fearful of an ambush, warned Fetterman not to be lured over Lodge Trail Ridge and thus out of supporting distance from the rest of the command.

Fetterman rushed off to assist the wood trains, and it appears that he hoped to cut off the attacking warriors. It was just what Red Cloud wanted him to do. The attacking Indians fled in front of the relief party drawing them farther and farther from the fort. As the command hesitated on the icy backbone of Lodge Trail Ridge, a daring young warrior turned back to taunt and badger the soldiers. His flamboyance did the trick and lured Fetterman's command, which plunged down the far side in pursuit. Within minutes the snowy, wind-swept slopes were alive with hundreds of Lakota and Cheyenne warriors. The ensuing fight was short and incredibly brutal. Before Col. Carrington could assemble a relief force from the fort, Capt. Fetterman lay dead with his entire command — exactly 80 men — and most butchered beyond recognition.

As the siege dragged on, the soldiers at Fort Phil Kearny became increasingly isolated and desperate. Red Cloud continued his war, exerting his formidable personality to maintain the fragile alliance of tribes while at the same time keeping the Army besieged and using every opportunity to harass and ambush the troops. In August of the following year, he launched what he hoped would be a devastating assault on a small woodcutting party. What he couldn't have anticipated was that these 31 men were armed with the new breech-loading rifles. The Indian attackers died by the score. But Red Cloud had made his point

and the United States government decided to negotiate for peace.

In 1868 the Bozeman Trail, deemed by Congress to be more trouble than it was worth, was officially closed. The forts were abandoned. Red Cloud had won his war. It was the first and only time in history when the United States government would cede every point to a victorious Indian leader. The treaty would not last very long — warfare would again disrupt the region. Ten years later, the young brave who had lured Fetterman's command across Lodge Trail Ridge to its doom would distinguish himself again at the Little Bighorn. The young man's name was Crazy Horse.

TODAY

Today Fort Phil Kearny sits two miles west of Exit 44 from Interstate 90 about midway between Buffalo and Sheridan, Wyoming. A visitors center displays artifacts from the original fort and tells the story of Red Cloud's War. Outside you can walk around the grounds where one of the most desperate episodes of American history played out. A portion of the palisade, with portholes looking out at the Big Horn Mountains, has been restored to give the visitor a sense of what the soldiers there experienced. www.philkearny.vcn.com. For accommodations try the historic Wagon Box Inn in nearby Story, Wyoming. Established in 1907, this great old restaurant features beautiful guest cabins nestled in the lush foothills of the Big Horn Mountains. www.wagonbox.com.

— *F.J.C.*