

Siege Trail



Big Hole National Battlefield



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

THE SIEGE AREA: The Siege Area on the ground ahead became important during the morning of August 9, 1877, when 163 soldiers of the U.S. 7th Infantry and 33 civilian volunteers endured a 36-hour siege as the final scene in the Battle of the Big Hole. The battle began with a dawn attack by the military force upon a camp of 800 Nez Perce men, women and children encamped in 89 tipis on the grassy bank across the river. The turning point of the battle occurred when the scattered Nez Perce warriors rallied to turn the tide of battle forcing the retreating military forces of Colonel John Gibbon to make a final stand here among the trees. The surviving soldiers were besieged for almost two days and suffered many casualties. Follow the trail and explore the military defensive positions. Recreate the struggle of the besieged men and the hostile feelings of the surrounding Nez Perce warriors.

Take the booklet to relate the events and the agony that occurred. Numbered paragraphs correspond with numbered posts along the trail. Follow the trail down the gulch between the sites of the military and Nez Perce positions, across Battle Gulch, through the Nez Perce sniping positions and then return to this point.

MARKER LEGEND

Markers designate known positions of participants.



FEATHER—NezPerce



BLUE HAT—Soldier



TAN HAT—Civilian Volunteer

1 NO-MAN'S LAND: The soldiers dug in on the knoll to the right. The Nez Perce had only 10 snipers on the high ground to the left, but the soldiers weren't sure how many were there. Although the snipers were out of accurate shooting range of the defense area, they effectively harassed the soldiers. One of the snipers up on higher ground was such an accurate shot at 150 yards that a soldier was detailed to flush him out. Finally wounded, the sniper returned to camp to help the others pack and leave. Chief

Lean Elk (who became the camp leader after this battle) and Band-of-Geese, the most honored warrior of the Looking Glass band, were fighting along with the other warriors on the low ground around this point.

2 THE COMBATANTS:

Only about 150 of Gibbon's men made it to the siege area. The northern defense line was loosely held, whereas the southern defenses were crowded with soldiers and volunteers because of the possibility of a charge by the Nez Perce.

Of approximately 800 Nez Perce encamped, only 125 were considered warriors. The siege was a Nez Perce group effort with each warrior doing what he thought best and staying as long as he felt needed. At no time did the Nez Perce fighters in the siege exceed 60 and toward the end of the siege only about a dozen remained. Most of the Nez Perce warriors were spread out on the south side of the military defenses.

3 RETREAT ROUTE:

Below the bend in trail, retreating soldiers and volunteers struggled up the bank as singles or in small

groups. Escaping from the overrun camp below a warrior fled to this position and harassed the first of Gibbon's men as they sought the shelter of the trees. Faced with a growing enemy force he soon moved to a more secure position.

Later, one Nez Perce chasing the last of the retreating troops caught up with a soldier just down the slope. They wrestled in hand-to-hand combat until another Nez Perce came along to kill the struggling soldier.

OVERLOOK: A spur trail of 50 yards is a side trip to an overlook of the battle ground. The first attack was upon the camp of 89 tipis across the river in the grassy area. Overwhelmed, the attackers retreated through the river, swamp and willows to this wooded area.

4 DEATH AND REVENGE:

Sgt. Edward Page, Co. L, 2nd Cavalry (on detached duty with Gibbon's Infantry unit), was mortally wounded while he and another soldier were defending the backslope below. A Nez Perce rode out of the willows and killed Page. His partner waited until the Nez Perce tried it again and killed him.

5**ARMY MEMORIAL:**

In 1883 the War Department placed this memorial here as a tribute to the men who fought in this battle. Big Hole is the only engagement of the Nez Perce War commemorated by an Army memorial. Of the military survivors of this battle, seven enlisted men were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. The surviving officers received Brevet (honorary) promotions.

6**EATING RAW HORSE MEAT:**

Four officers took horses into battle but only one, carrying wounded Lt. Woodruff, reached the siege area. The wounded horse was a hazard to the crowded men as it reared and thrashed about. It was killed. The men were hungry — even the few pieces of hardtack they carried had dissolved in their packs as they waded the river. Sgt. Lyones reported in his journal: "During the night some soldiers crawled to where the bloated horse lay. They cut off some of the flank, but being without salt or fire preferred to remain hungry." Others, famished and not so fussy ate the raw horse meat.

7**TRAGIC LOSS:**

Very early in the retreat, Col. Gibbon, Lt. English and another officer stood here directing the struggling men as they arrived to set up the defenses. The first of the Nez Perce shots hit Lt. English. Private Coon describes it.

"The Indians were getting up in the trees to pick us off. They were quite successful in this as they got about seven of us, including Lieutenant English before we found the sniper. He was finally located and dropped from his perch by Sergeant Abbot."

Lt. English, a young man, was in constant pain and thirsty from loss of blood throughout the siege. He was wounded across the wrist, the scalp, the ear and through the bowels. He died 11 days later at Deer Lodge.

8**NO TIME FOR THE WOUNDED:**

The Nez Perce harassment kept the situation tense; no one could be spared to help the wounded. But soldiers here were wounded. The first soldier, severely shot through the chest, continued to dig a rifle pit behind a fallen tree.

Elsewhere, Private Lorenzo D. Brown earned a Medal of Honor because, as the citation states, "Severely wounded in the right shoulder he continued to do duty in a most courageous manner." The other soldier died a lingering death. Sgt. Loynes referred to a similar situation, "A drummer . . . lay mortally wounded at my feet moaning from pain and crying for water until he died near dawn." At the end of the battle, more than 40 wounded were within the defenses, each in agony and moaning and crying. There was the stench of death — rotting bodies, a rotting horse carcass, and the inevitable flies attracted to the bloody wounds of the living.

9

DISPATCH FOR AID: Help was

needed badly. When darkness fell the first day, Colonel Gibbon sent three messengers for help. One went west to the concealed wagons 5 miles back and then on to General Howard's command. The two others went to Deer Lodge, 75 miles to the north. Civilian William "Billy" Edwards was the first to volunteer. With money, stout boots and a rifle Edwards walked 45 miles and then borrowed a horse. He arrived at Deer Lodge 34 hours later. Soon after the soldier messenger also arrived at Deer Lodge and telegrams were sent. Wagon loads of medical aid started from Deer Lodge and Butte.



10 COMMAND POST: COLONEL GIBBON,

Colonel John Gibbon, commanding, occupied a trench here with two soldiers. The old "war horse" celebrated his 30th year of service crouched in these pits wounded in the leg. Gibbon was a solid commander with initiative and a Civil War Veteran who earned four Brevet promotions. But consider his condition now. His command is surrounded, with wounded lying in agony and ammunition running low. Food and water gone. The Nez Perce were enraged, as Gibbon wrote later, "Few of us will forget the wail . . . which came from the camp . . . when the Indians recognized their slaughtered warriors, women and children." In all, the Nez Perce lost 30 warriors, and also 40 women, children and old men. This was a tough spot for a commander.

11 DIGGING - PITS AND DEATH:

During the retreat this soldier had his left leg broken by a bullet. Colonel Gibbon got off his horse, put the wounded man on it but traveled only a short distance before more shots killed the horse and again wounded the man. The soldier was carried here where he finally died.



Two of the six companies of the 7th Infantry were equipped with the experimental trowel shaped bayonets. Generally a failure, the trowel bayonet was valuable here. Civilians used hunting knives and tin cups while soldiers often broke an empty canteen into two halves to scoop and dig. Sgt. Loynes remembered, "One man would scrape up the dirt, while every second man would continue to fire."

12 FRONTIER COMEDY:

The volunteers came from all walks of life, and were not really disciplined under fire. Each man reacted differently to the stresses of the situation. Four volunteers held this large pit, one man was wounded. After a sniper barrage, "Dutch" Fred Heidt yelled, "By Golly! I'm all shot to pieces." His "injuries" consisted of many holes in his loose clothes. During the

night "Dutch" Fred and six other civilians fled. Dutch was lost in the mountains for nearly two weeks. Whenever asked what he ate during that time, Fred always answered, "Fried Elk tracks!"

13 A CLUSTER OF SOLDIERS AND CARE FOR THE WOUNDED:

A number of soldiers defended this corner. The first one was shot and killed instantly. Another died while digging this rifle pit after being shot through the back. One or more of the remaining soldiers were wounded and given medical treatment.

Medical knowledge was poor even in the 1870's. Chloroform and ether for anesthesia were rare in the hospitals and even the aspirin was unknown. In battle the wounded were lucky to bind the wound to stop bleeding. Soldier lore might include spitting tobacco juice into the wounds. Another treatment was used in this corner of the defenses.

A common medical practice was to sear the wound. Excavation here uncovered two unfired .45 rifle cartridges with cases split lengthwise for the black powder. The wounds were cauterized by burning the black powder poured into the wound. The fire singed the wound and stopped the bleeding.

14 DEFENSE BY SOLDIERS AND CIVILIANS:

The pits along the southern defenses were located according to the fallen trees available at the time. Rarely were the pits deep and long enough to be called trenches. This side was crowded with soldiers and most of the volunteers. The first pit was held by "Captain" J. B. Catlin, leader of the volunteers, and some soldiers. The next pit was held by five volunteers.

FROM THIS FORK IN THE TRAIL THE ROUTE CONTINUES TO THE BANK JUST AHEAD. THEN THE ROUTE RETURNS HERE TO CONTINUE ACROSS BATTLE GULCH.

15 CROWDED PITS:

The nearest pits to the left of the trail were held by soldiers. The two pits set back from the trail each held two civilians. This whole group of fighters were kept very busy firing as shown by the many spent cartridge shells unearthed here. A continuing harassment by the Nez Perce came from two trees out in the swamp in

front of the mouth of Battle Gulch. A couple of Nez Perce climbed up into nearby trees to fire deadly shots down on the defense lines. It took the defenders some time to spot these snipers and many shots to finally kill them.

16 REAR DEFENSES:

The 20-foot back-slope of this bank made a great defense for the soldiers at this location. The steep bank to their rear required only a minimal defense. A civilian volunteer was behind several logs just around the bend in the trail. The next rifle pit was just beyond the end of the trail. Two more pits were located between here and the stone monument.

PLEASE RETURN TO THE FORK IN THE TRAIL.

17 BATTLE GULCH—A DEFENSE WEAKNESS:

Battle Gulch proved to be the weakest point of the military defenses. Look down the gulch to the open area and notice the willows and pines used to good advantage by the Nez Perce snipers. One lone civilian had an outpost position just back from the mouth of the gulch on top of the bank.

18**FIVE WOUNDS****DIES:** Five Wounds

and Rainbow were combat comrades as their fathers had been. Each vowed that if one died in battle so would the other. Rainbow was dead in the camp below. Not long after the soldiers set up the defenses Five Wounds charged up the gulch and was killed. Without a doubt, the military had to protect the gulch approach.

19**BREASTWORK:**

After the charge of Five Wounds, two additional outpost positions were set up in the gulch. Across the gulch and also on this bank, two curved rows of rocks were set up for positions. One soldier guarded this side but he was killed. Across the gulch several soldiers and a volunteer held out for the rest of the siege.

The wounded needed water badly. Therefore on the first night three soldiers, Privates Charlie Hines, Ed Walsh, and Homer Coon slipped down the gulch to fill four canteens each. It seemed like an eternity. Coon remembers, "As thirsty as I was, I actually forgot in my excitement to get a drink for myself."

**RETURN TO THE TRAIL
JUNCTION AND CROSS
BATTLE GULCH.**

The two markers up the gulch are for civilians mortally wounded by the snipers in the trees.

20**PROSPECTOR'S
HOLE:**

During the 1860's Luther Johnson prospected this area for gold but found nothing. Now Johnson and another volunteer defended themselves from this prospect hole which he had dug years earlier.

21**FIRE SCARES THE
MILITARY:**

Many Nez Perce warriors were spread out on this side of the military defenses. Several left about 11:00 A.M. the first day to capture the Mountain Howitzer and the 2,000 rounds of rifle ammunition up the hill. Three of the remaining warriors were very close to the military defenses and a stones throw from the prospectors hole. On the afternoon of the first day these three set fire to the grass and hoped for a forest fire. One soldier thought it was an attempt to burn them out, another thought the smoke and fire was covering for an Indian charge. Neither happened — the fire went out.

22**CHIEF JOSEPH'S
WARRIORS:**

To the trained military eye, these Nez Perce positions were safe but effective. Several of Joseph's warriors fought here next to Ollokot, Joseph's brother and war leader of his band. Warriors from other bands chose more daring and less protected positions, like those marked on both sides of the remaining trail ahead.

23**NEZ PERCE
DRAMA:**

A Nez Perce drama unfolded when Red Mocassin Tops was killed in a highly exposed location at the far side of this group of positions. He wore a wolfskin cape which had special spiritual powers.

To the Nez Perce, recovery of the cape was a test and show of personal bravery. At least eight warriors made attempts to recover the body and the cape. They were eventually successful, but it cost the Nez Perce several more casualties.

24**TARGET POSITIONS:**

A rock, a tree stump, a boulder and the bed of Battle Gulch were Nez Perce positions. All four were chosen as prime targets by the defenders in the military lines. None were hit, however three Nez Perce further back were each wounded by shots passing over the four target positions. The large rock here sheltered a Nez Perce who chanted throughout



the day and night, calling on his spiritual power for success. It unnerved the soldiers and volunteers and thus drew considerable fire.

25 THE HOWITZER:

ALONG THE RETURN TRAIL TO THE PARKING LOT, A SHORT HALF MILE ROUND TRIP SPUR TRAIL UP THE HILL GOES TO THE HOWITZER CAPTURE SITE. IT IS A STEEP TRAIL THAT GOES UP THE WOODED HILLSIDE.

The Howitzer Capture Site also offers a panoramic view of the Big Hole basin and the surrounding mountains. The original howitzer is now on display at the Visitor Center.

Six soldiers brought the clumsy Mountain Howitzer over the rough terrain from Gibbon's base camp five miles to the west. Arriving after Gibbon's forces were pinned down, they were attacked and routed by the Nez Perce. The warriors captured and dismantled the "Gun on Wheels" but more importantly they also secured a pack mule loaded with 2,000 rounds of rifle ammunition.

The re-creation of events here are based upon records left by the participants — Nez Perce, soldiers and civilians. Their accounts dwell on the fear, frustration, pain and tragedy of the battle. The soldiers proved their gallantry and bravery amidst hardships and death. The Nez Perce fought tenaciously to defend their way of life and their families. This conflict of two cultures resulted in one more tragic episode in the westward expansion of the nation.

Be sure to take advantage of the additional programs and exhibits at the Visitor Center before you leave.

Illustrations by Robert Auth.

Published by
GLACIER NATURAL
HISTORY ASSOCIATION

In cooperation with
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

