

Strategic Return of the Dull Knife Band of Cheyenne Indians Which Resulted in Their Death in 1879

BY E. A. BRININSTOOL

The primary cause of every Indian war in the United States was the greed of the white man for the lands occupied by the red man. In other words, the whole situation can be summed up in this brief sentence: "The white man wanted it!"

Such was the reason for the great Sioux war of 1876. The Indian war of that year was the result of the invasion of the Black Hills by white men in search for gold.

In 1874, Geo. Geo. A. Custer and the 7th Cavalry were sent into the Black Hills by the United States government to "spy out the land," and determine if it was all that it had been represented—a land of wonderful resources. The Black Hills, included in the treaty of 1868, were a veritable paradise for the Sioux Indians, and was a portion of country set aside by the government "through which no white man shall ever be permitted to pass or settle therein without the consent of the Indians."

Custer's report electrified the country. He had discovered gold in the Black Hills—and when gold is discovered what barrier can stem the human tide that will, by hook or crook, go where it is? By hundreds and thousands miners began pouring into the Black Hills. Troops were powerless to stop the rush for the newly-discovered diggings.

The Sioux remonstrated—and rightly. This was their own country—their home—which had been ceded to them by Uncle Sam himself—the great Father—and they wanted no white man to occupy any portion of it. They therefore appealed to the government to drive out the white invaders.

A feeble attempt was made by the Washington authorities to stop the mad rush. But the troops were powerless to prevent it. What, then, could the Sioux do but take the matter into their own hands? What man will not fight for his home and country?

The Indians banded and attempted to drive the miners out. Did Uncle Sam declare the Indians to be within their rights? Far from it! It was just "another Indian outbreak!"

Among the leading Indians who thus fought for their home and families, was Dull Knife, a Cheyenne chief whose magnificent generalship was never at any time overshadowed

by any of the noted army officers sent into the field against him. The Sioux and Cheyennes were allied by tribal inter-marriage. Dull Knife was a born fighter—a leader of men, keen, shrewd and diplomatic, with a brain that would have done credit to a Napoleon or a Washington.

The campaign of 1876 was a fizzle from start to finish, except the attack on Dull Knife's camp late that winter.

It began with a partial victory for Col. J. J. Reynolds on March 17th, when he attacked the village of Crazy Horse on Powder river; it continued, with a virtual "knock-out" for Gen. Crook in the battle of the Rosebud, June 17th, and ended in the total extermination of Custer and his immediate command, eight days later on the Little Big Horn, Montana. The only "ray of hope" throughout the whole spring and summer campaign was when Col. Anson Mills fought the forces of Crazy Horse at Slim Buttes, Dakota, September 9th.

To sum up the entire situation: the Indians had no wagon trains of supplies following in their wake, they had to live off the country through which they passed when on their forays, being entirely dependent on the game therein. The situation could, therefore, end in only one way: they were virtually starved out and compelled to surrender. The government grabbed the Black Hills, and all the territory which had been included in the treaty of 1868, and the red man was left holding the sack,—and, as usual, it was a mighty empty sack!

Sent to Indian Territory

With the capture of Dull Knife and the surrender of Crazy Horse, the last Indian war of any great consequence came to an end. It would be only sarcasm to speak of the Ghost Dance uprising of 1890 as a "war." That brief, pitiful affair was a massacre pure and simple, and the less said about it, the better—for Uncle Sam's reputation.

The government now had these thousands of surrendered hostile Indians on its hands. What was to be done with them?

Crazy Horse's band and those of the surrendered Sioux under Red Cloud and Red Leaf, were rounded up on a reservatoin near old Fort Robinson, Nebraska. At Camp Sheri-

dan, 40 miles northeast, were thousands of other Sioux under Spotted Tail. But "Old Spot" was a faithful ally now of the government, and it was due largely to his wise diplomacy and forceful management of his Indians that trouble was kept within bounds.

Dull Knife's band—which had inter-married with the Sioux—wanted to live on the same reservation; but the government would not permit it. Dull Knife, the disturber, the fighter, must be separated from the lately-surrendered hostile Sioux. It would never do to allow two such great Indian generals as Crazy Horse and Dull Knife to get together where

they might plan and scheme, so Dull Knife's Cheyennes were sent down into the Indian Territory, 600 miles away to the south.

This was a climate to which these Indians were totally unaccustomed. It was much lower in altitude; it was enervating; sickness developed among them; fever broke out, and the Cheyennes began to die off like flies. Twenty-eight of their best fighting warriors died the first year, to say nothing of the mortality among the women and little children, which was very great.

Dull Knife and his sub-chiefs, Old Crow, Wild Hog and Little Wolf, pleaded in vain for relief. Why did the Great Father insist that they live in such an unhealthy spot? Why could they not return to the north among their friends and relatives? Dull Knife reiterated that his people would never again go on the warpath if their request would be granted. But for the sake of their little children and their wives, would not the government allow them to return to their own country where they had always lived?

But this pitiful plea of the Cheyennes was met by the government with a stern refusal. Dull Knife's people must content themselves where they were. They had caused Uncle Sam trouble enough, though only fighting for their homes and their land. The old and most decidedly-untrue adage that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian," seems to have been the feeling rampant in Uncle Sam's breast from time immemorial.

Hence it was that Dull Knife's band did what any red-blooded people would do—they decided to fight it out. And fight it out they did in a manner which has won for them a record which never was surpassed in any Indian campaign in United States warfare for sheer reckless bravery, keen strategy, boldness of execution and dashing generalship.

The trails they traveled over in their masterful retreat were red with blood, and many a ranch was left in ashes and plundered of its horses to aid in carrying this dauntless little army of Cheyenne fugitives to the goal they sought—asylum with Sitting Bull in Canada, before it was brought to bay and subdued.

Once determined to break away from the hated spot where they were held against their will, and dying by inches as it were, Dull Knife and his fighting chiefs lost no time in putting their plans into execution.

On the night of September 8th, 1878, the Cheyenne camp, pitched some little distance from Fort Reno, in a quiet valley did not present its usual activity of romping children, chattering squaws and lively young bucks—at least so thought the sentries who were posted where they could keep keen eyes on all the movements of Dull Knife and his people. But had these sentries passed among the tepees they would have observed an unusual stir and much excited whispering among the inmates.

The pony herd was quietly driven in, and after darkness had settled down, the animals were quickly packed, saddled and made ready as if for a journey of no small proportions. Tepee coverings were stripped, packed and loaded onto the travois, but the poles were left standing. This was to be a flight, and there would be no chance to pause and set up tepees. When everything was in readiness, old Dull Knife placed himself at the head of his devoted little band, and away they started northward. And the Cheyennes were miles away when the rising sun showed to the bewildered sentries nothing but an array of standing tepee poles, minus their coverings.

Now indeed there was "hell to pay!"

A couple of troops of cavalry were at once dispatched on Dull Knife's trail, with orders to round him up and bring him back to the reservation. Of course it would be an easy matter to capture this small band of erratic runaways—so thought the commanding officer at Fort Reno.

But this time he reckoned without his host. Dull Knife was again on the warpath, and the troops rode back to the post without having brought the daring chief to bay.

At once the commanding officer made the wires to Washington hot with messages. "We must have more troops if we bring Dull Knife in," seemed to be the burden of the complaint. This sending out more

troops was an easy matter, as the campaign of '76 had developed men who were now inured to all sorts of hardships incident to an Indian outbreak.

Two thousand of Uncle Sam's fighters responded; troops from all nearby posts were ordered out, and General Pope, who commanded the Department of Missouri, was in full charge of active operations against this little insignificant but desperate band of Cheyenne fugitives. On the 12th of September he wired Gen. Phil Sheridan as follows:

"The following dispositions have been made to intercept the Northern Cheyennes: One hundred mounted infantrymen leave by special train tomorrow for Fort Wallace to head

off the Indians if they cross the railroad east or west of that post. Two companies of infantry leave Fort Hays this evening to take post at two noted crossings of Indians on the Kansas-Pacific railroad between Hays and Wallace. One infantry company from Dodge is posted on the railroad west of that point. Two cavalry companies from Fort Reno are close on the Indians, and will be joined by the cavalry company from Camp Supply. Colonel Lewis will assume command of them as soon as they reach the vicinity of Dodge. The troops at Fort Lyon are ordered out to watch the country east and west of that post, and all are ordered to attack the Indians at once wherever found, unless they surrender, in which case they are to be dismounted and disarmed. Whatever precautions are possible should be taken on the line of the Platte!"

The Department of the Platte meantime was not idle. Troops of the Fourth, Ninth and Fourteenth Infantry were rushed to Sidney, Nebraska, over the Union Pacific, at which point a special train kept steam up night and day to rush troops either east or west as needed. These troops were under the immediate command of Major T. T. Thornburg, who later was killed in the Ute war.

But in spite of all this unworried activity, old Dull Knife and his little army kept going straight ahead, like a bull going through a brush fence, and meeting with little opposition. Day and night he urged his followers on, pausing only long enough to clean out an occasional ranch for supplies and fresh horses. Fifty, sixty, seventy miles daily did his devoted band travel, although impeded with scores of little children

and old and infirm people. It was a thousand miles to Sitting Bull, away in Canada to the north. It would require a brave heart and the brain of a born general to lead his followers through the cordon of troops which were being hastily thrown around him—but on he went, nevertheless!

Dull Knife's Generalship

It was about a week after Dull Knife's unannounced departure before he encountered any real opposition. But he could not possibly hope to forever evade the troops which were on his trail from every point of the compass. Two companies of the Fourth Cavalry finally contested his right of way three miles from Dodge City, Kansas. There was some sharp skirmishing on both sides, and while a number of wounded were reported, Dull Knife was too much for the troops. He succeeded in compelling them to fall back and give him free passage—and on he again went in full flight, leading a devoted little band, whose fighting warriors were showing the world what constituted the real Spartan spirit.

The Kansas-Pacific railroad was crossed without any opposition. The expected check at this point failed to materialize, and the undaunted Cheyennes boldly continued on north where the troops along the line of the Union Pacific were waiting for them. "Just show us them Injuns and we'll show you some prisoners," laughed many of the dough-boys.

But even here, General George Crook, probably the most successful Indian fighter the United States ever produced, though backed by troops from Fort Robinson and elsewhere, was fast finding it out that he was battling no ordinary man, but a chief of a band of desperate savages whose reckless bravery and undaunted courage could but command his own admiration and respect.

And while Crook was waiting and watching, wondering where the lightning would strike next, Dull Knife encountered the Nineteenth Infantry under Colonel W. H. Lewis, on Famine Woman's Fork, not far from old Fort Wallace. Here the chief again demonstrated his wonderful generalship in a battle which lasted some two hours, in which Colonel Lewis was killed and three soldiers wounded, while Dull Knife's loss was one killed and seventeen ponies captured by Lewis' force. But the determined chieftain never faltered. On he went, every day bringing him nearer his goal—the Canadian border.

At about this point in the retreat, Dull Knife must have divided his forces, as two separate engagements were fought a few days after the battle with Lewis' force. In one of these skirmishes, six soldiers were killed and one officer wounded. The other fight was a desperate one between some ranchmen and the Indians, in which eighteen of the settlers were killed and five badly wounded. The Indian loss was not given.

Dull Knife was indeed proving himself to be a foeman worthy his steel. Nowhere in all the annals of Indian warfare is there another such instance of as great leadership and fighting ability as was displayed by this little band of desperate warriors. The nearest approach to it is the retreat of Chief Joseph and his Nez Perces—but Joseph's fighting force was more than double that of Dull Knife, nor was he contested by as great a body of troops as was arrayed against this great Cheyenne chief.

About the 4th of October the inhabitants of the little town of Ogallala, Nebraska, were electrified to learn that Dull Knife's band had forded the South Platte river not over a half mile from town and had crossed the Union Pacific right of way!

Bold? Audacious? We'll say it was!

Dull Knife was evidently not going into hiding to escape anything or anybody!

Major Thornburg, at Sidney, was notified by wire, and the special train at that point was brought into service. Troops were rushed to Ogallala that afternoon, whence they at once took Dull Knife's trail. General Crook also ordered out five troops of the Third Cavalry from Fort Robinson to aid as a check against this uncanny old fighting chief, who was fast demonstrating that a red man may possess as many ounces of brains as his white brother, and quite often a superior brand of fighting genius and military generalship.

Not yet satisfied with all this array of seasoned troops against Dull Knife, Crook also ordered into the field ten troops of the Seventh Cavalry—Custer's old regiment—from Fort Meade, Dakota.

And yet Dull Knife advanced! It began to look as if this doughty warrior would yet outgeneral all the great military leaders of the United States army. Who can help but admire the wonderful qualities—the genius, the skill and leadership of such a man, even though nothing but

an "untutored savage?"

Thornburg's Hopeless Quest

Thornburg's command, advancing on the trail of Dull Knife, shortly found himself hopelessly lost in the great sand hills of that portion of Nebraska in which he was operating. His scouts reported that the Indians appeared to have scattered, as the trails led in every direction, and Thornburg reported that it seemed an apparently hopeless task to go further, as the traveling was terrible, his forces were fast playing out, and no wagon train of supplies could hope to follow him through sand more than ankle deep. Moreover, no water was available in that section, aside from a few alkali lakes. Without water and plenty of supplies, he could not possibly hope to overtake the Cheyenne fugitives. It appeared that Thornburg was up against a hopeless proposition.

And even Dull Knife himself, with his sub-chiefs, Wild Hog, Little Wolf and Old Crow, must have realized that the end was inevitable, and that capture was certain before many days. It developed later that the chiefs had held a council, after finding themselves corraled in the Nebraska sand hills, and it was decided that the only thing to do was to break up into small parties and each take "pot luck."

But before this was done, a raid was made on a trader's store at old Red Cloud Agency. Here supplies were seized, and, best of all, many fresh horses were captured in the corral to replace their own worn-out mounts.

Shortly after, it was reported that the main camp of the Cheyennes was ensconced on Crow Butte, a high and rather lonely eminence which commanded a view of the country for many miles around.

Upon receipt of this information, four troops of cavalry were dispatched to surround the location, as it was thought certain that there could be no possible chance for the Cheyennes to get through this cordon of troops.

But these Cheyennes were brave to recklessness, ready to take any sort of a chance to escape their pursuers. Little Wolf, led his own band, and eluded the pickets posted by the cavalry, and when daylight came, the troop commander discovered that his bird had flown.

It later developed that at the council held between the Cheyenne chiefs, it was decided that Little Wolf should gather together the more able-bodied of the fighting strength of the band, and attempt to break through and join Sitting Bull in

Canada, while Dull Knife and the others were to rest for a time and try to reach the border by easier stages. Strange as it may seem, Little Wolf actually succeeded in dodging every pursuer and making junction with Sitting Bull without the further loss of a single warrior.

Little Wolf, we salute you!

This left Dull Knife and the rest of the Cheyennes penned up in the Nebraska sand hills alone, with the best of the fighting strength of the band gone. But the fighting spirit of the others was by no means broken, even though they must have realized that their case was hopeless. There they were in a veritable desert. There were no ranches in that section where they might hope to make a raid for more horses and supplies; yet there was not, at this time, any thought of surrender.

At this junction Dull Knife decided to send a runner through to Red Cloud, the great war chief of the Ogallala Sioux, who was encamped on White Clay creek, at which point he had been placed after his surrender. Dull Knife would make an appeal for aid. The Sioux and Cheyennes had inter-married, were allies in their wars against the whites, and it was thought certain that Red Cloud would welcome the fugitives.

Red Cloud's Sympathy

But Red Cloud could do nothing. He sent back word that his fighting days were over; that he had come to realize the power of the white man, and that Dull Knife and his followers might as well surrender one time as another—the end was inevitable. They must bow to the will of the Great Father. Red Cloud returned by the courier the sympathy of himself and his people.

"Say to Dull Knife," the chief explained, "that he had best submit to the Washington authorities. The whites are too numerous; they are as the leaves of the forest. What chance have we against so many? Our case is hopeless."

Dull Knife's disappointment was bitter. This was the "last straw." A week passed without the troops being able to discover the whereabouts of the Cheyennes. The Indians themselves were laying low and resting. They were getting ready for a last desperate dash.

After some days had passed a scouting party was sent out from Fort Robinson. Captain Johnson, the troop commander, after two days of weary riding, located a little band of the Indians—about sixty in number. It must have been a complete surprise for the Indians, for before

they could comprehend the situation Johnson had them completely surrounded, and a command for their surrender was made.

Says one account of the condition of the Cheyennes:

"In rags, nearly out of ammunition, famished and worn, with scarcely a horse left that could raise a trot; no longer able to either fight or fly; suffering from the extreme cold; disheartened by Red Cloud's refusal to receive and shelter them, the splendid old war chief, Dull Knife, and his men, were forced to bow to the inevitable and surrender."

Johnson congratulated himself that he was the lucky troop commander who had captured the Cheyennes. With this band, consisting of about 149 men, women and children, he started back for Fort Robinson. The weather was bitter cold, and therefore no uneasiness was felt that the prisoners might attempt another break before the post was reached.

The first night out, the command encamped on Chadron Creek. Dull Knife's followers were told to make themselves as comfortable as the circumstances would permit for the night.

But instead of doing this, the Cheyennes had determined on another desperate move. They did not spend the night in constructing brush tepees for their comfort. They put in the time digging rifle pits and making ready for another skirmish when daylight came.

Dawn ushered in a strange scene. The Cheyennes had improved the time so effectually that when the troops started to round them up, preparatory to resuming the march, they were greeted with a heavy volley. Brave old Dull Knife was not yet conquered!

Here was a peculiar situation indeed! Johnson was puzzled. He did not want another brush with the Indians unless it was positively necessary; but the affair demanded stern action, and he sent to Fort Robinson and had a field gun drawn out to his location. With this, the plucky savages were shelled until it became a case of total extermination or surrender. For the sake of the women and children, Dull Knife capitulated.

Strategy of Dull Knife

But the wily chief did one cunning thing before he surrendered. There were many good rifles among the warriors. These were taken apart and skillfully concealed by the squaws underneath their clothing. Only a few old and worthless guns were turned over to Capt. Johnson, and that functionary made no at-

tempt to search his prisoners!

Then the march for Fort Robinson was again resumed. The command reached the post with no further trouble from the Cheyennes. Here Dull Knife and his people were imprisoned in an old log barracks building, which had neither bolts nor bars, and only a small guard was detailed to watch the Cheyennes. Now that Dull Knife had surrendered, it was supposed the trouble was all over. The Indian Bureau would, of course, demand that the Cheyennes be returned to the Indian Territory, but until this was absolutely determined, Dull Knife's band would be kept prisoners at Fort Robinson.

But the Cheyennes, after they had been imprisoned, stealthily took up a small section of the flooring of the old barracks building, and hid the rifles underneath. It was a most fatal error for the commander of Fort Robinson when he failed to have the prisoners searched for firearms.

Thus matters continued, from the capture of the band in late October, until January, 1879.

But prior to the latter date, a council was held in their prison by the Cheyennes. Several of the leading chiefs of the Sioux tribe came over to attend it. The Sioux were very anxious that Dull Knife's people be settled on the same reservation with them. But the fighting qualities of the Cheyennes had been so demonstrated during the previous few months, that an alliance with the powerful Sioux nation was looked upon as an unwise procedure. Should these two nations be united and again take to the warpath it would mean a most bloody conflict.

Dull Knife's one desire at the council was that he and his people be allowed to end their days in the north, where they had always lived, instead of being returned to the south, where there was neither game nor proper climatic conditions for these Indians. While Dull Knife presented this in the form of a request, it really came in the nature of a demand. In his concluding words the chief said:

"Tell the Great Father that if he lets us stay here, Dull Knife's people will harm no one. Tell him if he tries to send us back, we will butcher each other with our own knives."

As he stood facing the council, clad only in bits of frayed, worn canvas for moccasins and a ragged, tattered blanket about his shoulders, Dull Knife, must have presented a most pitiful spectacle; yet, in spite of his impoverished condition, the

great chief maintained his dignity, determined to gain for his people all that was possible.

The Sioux chiefs who were present said they hoped the Great Father would allow the Cheyennes to come and live with them—that what they had they would gladly share with their unfortunate and suffering allies.

"But," added Chief Red Cloud, "you must do what the authorities direct. You cannot resist, nor can we. Listen to me, and do without complaint what the Great Father tells you."

The council ended in bitter disappointment for the Cheyennes. The government representatives, Captains Vroom and Wessells—the latter being post commander at Fort Robinson at that particular time—said they would do all in their power for the Cheyennes, but that it rested with the Washington authorities what final disposition would be made of the Indians.

Inhuman Treatment

When the matter was taken up by the Washington authorities they decided it would be unwise for the Cheyennes to be allowed to unite with the Sioux, and it was ordered that Dull Knife and his people be sent back to the Indian Territory—the sooner the better.

This was early in January, 1879. The weather was at zero and bitter cold prevailed. These Indians had not been provided with clothing of any sort since they were captured. They were dressed in the same old tattered garments in which they had been taken—which was barely enough to cover their nakedness; say nothing of making them comfortable!

On January 5th, while the temperature stood at several degrees below zero, word came from Washington to immediately prepare to march the Cheyennes back to the Indian Territory—a distance of 600 miles. This, mind you, while there was from six to eight inches of snow on the ground, and these miserable people were walking about with their feet practically on the ground!

Right at this point, a letter which Captain Wessells wrote to a friend of the author in 1924, is interesting. He says:

"Dear Colonel: I went to Camp Robinson where Colonel Carlton was in command of the Cheyenne prisoners in an empty barracks building. In a few days Col. Carlton left, and turned over the post to me. I assumed that when the Indians were captured they had been disarmed, but it was not so. They had hidden

their weapons, or some of them. An order came to send them to the Indian Territory. I told them of it, and said I would do all I could to make their journey comfortable. But they said that the country where they were was their home, and that they would die before they would leave it. They then barricaded the building from the inside. To prevent their escape, I increased the guard around the building, but that night they broke out, using their rifles in doing so. Their fuel and food were not cut off until they had refused to surrender.

"All the right was on their side."

When Captain Wessells received the order to return the Cheyennes to the Indian Territory, he sent for Dull Knife, Old Crow and Wild Hog. A council was held, and the Indians were made acquainted with the order. Captain Wessells assured them that he could do nothing but obey and carry out his orders, but that he would make them as comfortable as possible during the trip.

Dull Knife's Defiance

Then grand old Dull Knife stepped into the center of the council ring. His face fairly blazed with wrath, his voice trembled with emotion, and his eyes glittered like those of a hunted wild beast brought to bay. Earnestly he spoke, in substance as follows:

"Dull Knife and his people want to do what the Great Father directs. We realize that we are helpless. But we are in no condition to march 600 miles back to the Indian Territory in such weather as this. Our old people will suffer greatly; our little children will freeze to death. And those of us who do reach the southern country will soon fall victims to fevers that have already depleted our numbers. Does the Great Father desire us to die? If so, we will die right here! We will not go back to the Indian Territory, and neither will we leave the building where we are confined."

Nobody knew better than did Captain Wessells—just as he has stated in his letter—that "all the right was on the side of the Indians." It was a most awkward position in which he found himself. Nevertheless, his hands were tied. The Cheyennes must go back to the Indian Territory—peaceably if they would, forcibly if they must.

But Dull Knife maintained a most defiant attitude and refused to agree to the order. Wild Hog and Old Crow, grim old warriors, seconded their chief.

And then came a most cruel and inhuman order.

Turning to the interpreter, Captain Wessells said:

"Tell the chiefs that unless they consent to go peaceably, their food, water and fuel will be cut off until they agree to the terms which the Washington authorities have sent me."

But the chiefs remained stoically silent. They could die but once, and die they would before they would go back to the south.

Doubtless Wessells did not take their decision seriously. The chiefs were returned to their prison. Not for an instant would any of the others consent to surrender. They even refused to allow their little children to be removed and fed, although Captain Wessells proposed this to Dull Knife. The chief replied that all would die together.

And then came days of anxious waiting, while these poor, miserable, outrageously-treated wards of the United States government sat and shivered in their icy barracks, with neither a morsel of food or a sip of water or a fire. Their little ones wailed and sobbed themselves to sleep; the death songs of the warriors were daily chanted, and while the devoted little band daily weakened, their fighting spirit remained unconquered.

How would it end?

Five days passed. Then Captain Wessells again determined to question the chiefs. Dull Knife refused to appear—in fact, his people refused to allow him to leave the prison, fearing physical violence would be done him. Wild Hog and Old Crow alone came before Captain Wessells.

"Are you ready to come out and go peaceably to the south?" he questioned.

"We will die first," was the firm, decisive answer of Wild Hog.

"Seize and iron them," ordered the commander to the guards.

This was finally accomplished but not before Wild Hog had managed to inflict a serious stab wound on one of the soldiers.

The chiefs, not being returned to their prison, great excitement at once broke out among the Cheyennes. Now indeed it would be a fight to the death!

Quickly the Indians barricaded all the windows and doors, making ready for a desperate resistance. Their concealed weapons were brought from underneath the flooring and loaded, in expectation of an immediate attack.

Captain Wessells likewise anticipated that the Cheyennes would make a break and give battle to the troops right there and then. However, no move was made on either side. Each was watching to see what the other would do.

The Cheyenne Outbreak

Another serious mistake was made that night by the post commander. No additional guards were placed around the prison. Wessells did not believe there was any danger; but the other officers at the post were not so sure. They remained awake and alert, confidently assuring each other that "there would be hell to pay before morning."

And indeed there was!

Shortly after 10 o'clock, when all the lights had been extinguished, the Cheyennes started their last desperate dash for liberty or death. Nobody realized that they had about twenty-five loaded rifles in their prison.

One of the sentries approached a window and looked inside to see how the prisoners were doing. Bang! went a rifle and the sentry dropped dead. The slayer at once jumped through the window and secured the sentry's weapon. At the same time two or three other Indians opened one of the back doors, where they encountered three more guards. These were quickly shot down by the Cheyennes.

And now the little band poured forth from their prison. While the women, children and aged people started southwest through the snow, the fighting warriors poured a deadly fire into the ranks of the troopers who had come rushing out at the first rifle shot. This served as a decided check for a brief time.

But the soldiers quickly rallied, and under their officers started on the trail of the fleeing savages, shooting them down like rabbits wherever and whenever the opportunity presented itself. No quarter was asked by the Cheyennes. In the dim moonlight the bucks could not be told from the squaws, and the slaughter was indiscriminate. The Indians were making for the steep hills where they could not well be pursued by cavalry, heading for a high divide between Soldier Creek and White River.

The Cheyennes realized that this was their last chance to give battle to their hated enemies. Encumbered by their women, little children and decrepit old people, it was a hopeless fight. Had the bucks been alone, there would have been a dif-

ferent story to tell; but they would not leave their relatives and friends to again be captured; they would protect them to the last! No more desperate defense was ever recorded in history than that gallant fight in the Nebraska sand hills by these frenzied, starved, half-clad, frozen fugitives.

The fighting was severe, the slaughter terrible.

When daylight came and the dead and wounded Indians had been gathered, the post hospital was filled with groaning, moaning humanity, while some thirty dead bodies—men, women and little children—lay frozen stiff outside, in a row, on the ground.

Hopeless But Desperate Defense

But the fighting was not yet over. Many of the fugitives managed to escape into the hills. Not a halt did they make for seventeen miles after leaving the post, save to stand off the troops and cover the retreat of those of their women and children who were yet left alive.

For many days the hunt was continued, with daily skirmishes and some losses among the troops. From January 5th to the 21st the fighting continued, the Cheyennes constantly retreating, but keeping themselves well in hand.

Finally the end came. It had to come. The Cheyennes were now nearly out of ammunition. They had no food; they were famished, gaunt, in rags, with frozen feet and hands. What could they do but die? Surrender they would not!

Some forty-odd miles from Fort Robinson the remnant of these fighting Cheyennes entrenched themselves in a little gully. Here they lay, awaiting the approach of the troops. This was to be the last stand!

With the advance of the troops a demand for the surrender of the Indians was made. A volley from their ranks was the reply. The troops were ordered to charge the gully. They rushed forward to its very edge, emptying their carbines into the huddled humanity below and then springing back. This continued until all but three of the fighting warriors had been shot down. These three, shouting high their death chant, sprang out of the gully and with knives in their hands charged the troops!

Can you imagine the scene? Three charging three hundred! Braver martyrs never died for a cause which they believed was just and right.

These three warriors were, of

course, immediately riddled with bullets before they could get within hand-to-hand fighting distance of the troops.

It was indeed a charnel-house which presented itself to the horrified gaze of the troopers after the fighting had ceased.

Twenty-two dead bodies were removed from the gully; nine badly wounded, but alive, were carried out.

But Dull Knife himself was not at the last stand. On the night of the 5th he managed to elude his pursuers, and this wonderful old fighting man reached the border and joined Sitting Bull. When the latter was brought back to the United States, Dull Knife was with him, and he lived with the Sioux until death in natural form overtook him in 1883.

When the real history of our Indian wars shall be written as it should be written, and the wrongs and injustice of the red man truthfully told, the grievances of the Cheyennes will be told by a better pen than mine; but no more gallant fighting spirit ever was exhibited on any battlefield in all the world's history than that shown by these devoted Cheyennes of brave old Dull Knife's band, in their last desperate fight for their rights.

*Taken from
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