

BATTERY E, 1ST ARTILLERY AT
WOUNDED KNEE--DECEMBER, 1890

by

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By 1889 the Indian wars of the American West were mostly memories. Some of the first battles between the soldiers and the Indians, such as the Wagon Box fight and Custer's Washita, were more than twenty years in the past. However, one final chapter remained in the story of the conflict between the white man and the red man--the Sioux campaign of 1890. The "Battle" of Wounded Knee was the principle encounter of that winter campaign, and it was more of a tragic accident than a clash between two openly hostile antagonists. Wounded Knee, and the events which led to it, have been the subjects of many historical works. Unfortunately some of these treatments apply a liberal amount of fantasy to the basic facts. The actions of Captain Allyn Capron's Hotchkiss guns have been the subject of as much distortion as any other aspect of the tragedy at Wounded Knee. It is appropriate to clarify some of the distortions concerning the guns by relating the details of the battery and its performance on December 29, 1890.



Captain Allyn Capron, Commanding Battery E, 1st Artillery at
Wounded Knee. National Archives and Records Service, SC 80689

In the fall of 1889, eleven Sioux from the Dakota reservations journeyed to Nevada to investigate the story of an Indian Messiah. The Messiah, a Paiute named Wovoka, claimed to be a chosen messenger from God. His doctrine proclaimed the return of the buffalo and of long deceased Indians to a land devoid of the white man. The Sioux emissaries eagerly accepted this message and upon their return to the Dakotas spread it among their respective tribes. There was one significant modification to the Sioux version of the Messiah's doctrine. The inevitable demise of the white man would be a violent one, according to the Sioux, and not the peaceful withdrawal which Wovoka had described.¹

The intensity with which the Sioux adopted the Messiah movement, and the fervor with which they danced the Ghost Dance, alarmed the various Indian agents on the reservations. The coming Indian millennium and the inevitable disappearance of the whites made some of the Sioux less than receptive to the guidance of their white guardians. By the fall of 1890, Indian agents' control of the reservations was deteriorating. Soon Ghost Dancers were openly disregarding the agents' directives and defying the Indian police. In November the agent at the Cheyenne River agency reported that the Sioux were armed and that an outbreak was inevitable. Agent E. B. Reynolds reported similar information from the Rosebud agency.² However, tension appeared greatest at the Pine Ridge agency in southwest Dakota. This was unfortunate as agent D. F. Royer, a recent appointment of the new Republican administration, had been at the agency only a short time. Although he was inexperienced, Royer knew that the situation at Pine Ridge was quickly getting out of control. Special Indian Agent James Cooper, who had been sent to Pine Ridge to investigate the disturbance, concurred that an outbreak was a distinct probability.³

On November 14, 1890, the War Department, at the request of the Interior Department, was given the responsibility of preventing the Sioux from leaving the reservations.⁴ Within a week Army units began moving toward the Sioux reservations. The commander of the Military Division of the Missouri, Major General Nelson A. Miles, assumed control of the troops converging on the Dakotas. Miles planned to "anticipate the movement of the hostile Indians and arrest or overpower them in detail before they had time to concentrate in one large body..."⁵ For this purpose Miles had at his disposal almost half of the cavalry and infantry regiments in the Regular Army and two batteries of light artillery.

In the early morning hours of November 24, Capron's Light Battery E, 1st Artillery, along with most of the 7th Cavalry regiment, entrained at Fort Riley for Pine Ridge. The battery, three officers and forty-seven enlisted men, arrived in South Dakota three days later.⁶ In addition to Capron, the battery's officers were Second Lieutenant John L. Hayden and Second Lieutenant Harry L. Hawthorne. Hawthorne was an officer of the 2nd Artillery

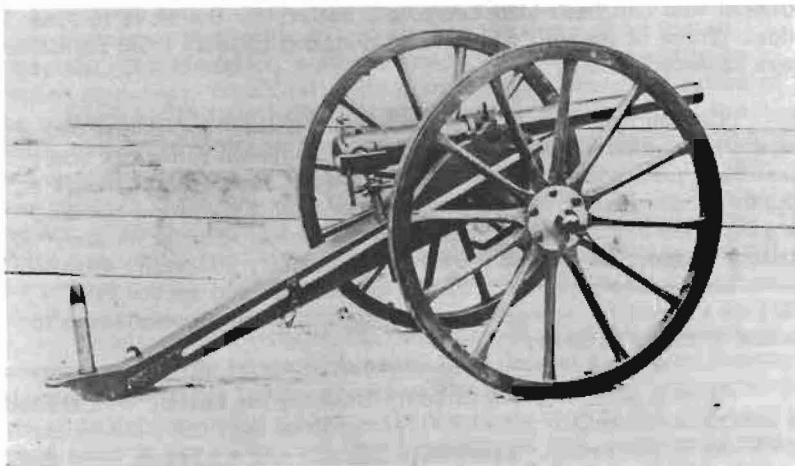
regiment who had been attached to the battery for the move to Pine Ridge. Three of the unit's regularly assigned officers were on either leave or detached duty.⁷

Capron had been in command of the battery for almost two years. He had been with the 1st Artillery regiment since his commissioning from West Point in 1867.⁸ One of the correspondents at Wounded Knee described him as having enough nerve for a hundred-ton gun. Hawthorne had a rather unusual background for an army artillery officer, for he had received his military education at the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis. He had served two years as a naval cadet engineer prior to accepting a commission in the 2nd Artillery in 1884.⁹

Shortly after arriving in South Dakota, the battery was issued six Hotchkiss mountain guns and was ready to take the field by the third week in December. Lieutenant Hayden and a platoon (two guns) of Battery E joined Major Guy Henry's battalion of the 9th Cavalry on Christmas Eve. Henry was to patrol the White Clay River from his camp at Harney Springs. Hayden's detachment would remain with the 9th until the end of the campaign.¹⁰ Three days later, Hawthorne with another platoon of the battery left Pine Ridge with Major Samuel Whitside's battalion of the 7th. It was this force which intercepted Big Foot's band of Miniconjou Sioux near Porcupine Butte on December 28. Whitside then escorted the band to a camp on Wounded Knee Creek about twelve miles northeast of the Pine Ridge agency. During the night the rest of the 7th under Colonel James Forsyth, and Capron's platoon arrived in Whitside's camp.¹¹

On the morning of December 29, the troopers of the 7th Cavalry were positioned around the Indian village to support the directed disarming of the warriors. Forsyth had summoned the braves to a council on the north side of the village and had formed them in a semi-circle. Initially, B and K troop had been placed between the council and the cavalry camp. However, the two troops were shifted to prevent movement between the council and the village.¹² Capron's and Hawthorne's platoons were located on a hill to the northwest (See map).

A discussion of the events which precipitated the clash between the two parties and a description of the cavalry's part of the battle is not within the scope of this paper. The actions both of the troops and of the Indians have been described, often with varying emphasis, in other accounts.¹³ Nevertheless, as the morning passed tension between the soldiers and the warriors increased. A single shot was sufficient to spark the following bloodshed. By the early afternoon the conflict had ended. Approximately two hundred Indians were killed and another one hundred were wounded. The soldiers suffered twenty-five killed and thirty-nine wounded.¹⁴



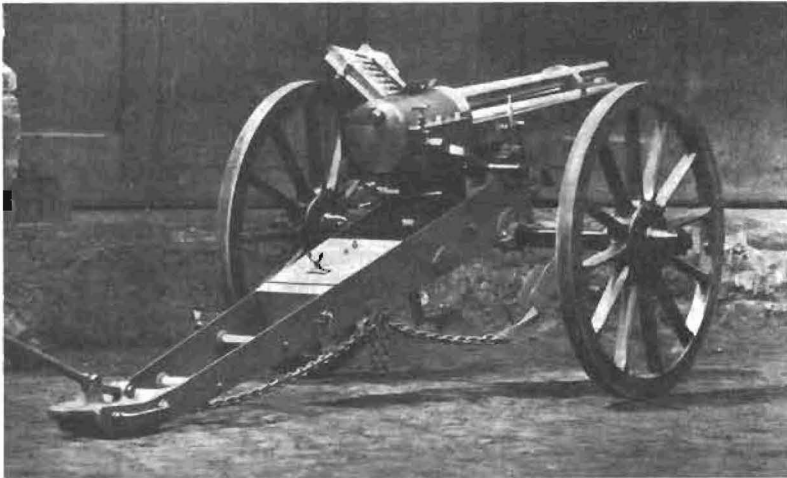
Hotchkiss 1.65" Mountain Gun- These were the guns Capron's battery used on the day of the battle. National Archives and Records Service, RG 156-AA-51 (A)

The responsibility for many of the casualties on both sides, and for the obliteration of the village has been placed on the four mountain guns of Battery E. Most accounts of the fight have described the guns on the hill as firing almost fifty rounds a minute. The destructiveness of this cannonade has varied with different works. One account stated that one-half of the Indian casualties were caused by the battery's first volley.¹⁵ Yet several technical factors raise doubts as to the validity of the rate of cannon fire and its destructiveness at Wounded Knee.

With respect to the battery's volume of fire, the first point of doubt rests on the characteristics of the gun. The Hotchkiss gun, designed in the 1870s, had no true recoil system. Therefore, it did not have a mechanism which absorbed the recoil from firing and returned the gun to the initial firing position. This meant that every time the weapon was fired, the gun and carriage moved backward. Capron testified after the battle that his first targets were approximately three hundred yards from his position. At such a range the tube of the weapon would have been at zero degrees elevation or less.¹⁶ The recoil from firing and the resulting backward movement would be greatest when the tube was in this position. Firing the gun without returning it to a primary firing or aiming position would have resulted in the battery's gradual withdrawal from the field of battle. Repositioning the weapon, along with loading and sighting took time--too much time for the battery to achieve anything approaching fifty rounds a minute.

A second consideration which cast doubts on the high rate of fire concerns the amount of ammunition available at Wounded Knee.

Colonel Forsyth, overall commander of troops, estimated that the most intense part of the battle lasted twenty minutes.¹⁷ If the battery had fired fifty rounds a minute, it would have expended almost one thousand rounds in twenty minutes. There is no reason to assume that Capron carried this much ammunition with him to Wounded Knee. Evidence suggested that no wagons accompanied Capron and Forsyth when they left Pine Ridge on December 28.¹⁸ Capron's understanding of the battery's role in the coming operation would have reflected the attitude of the senior commander. As Forsyth did not anticipate trouble with Big Foot's band, it is doubtful that Capron would have carried more than the normal ammunition load, which was approximately four hundred rounds. Accepting four hundred shells as a reasonable amount of ammunition available to the battery, and the claimed rate of fire, the guns would have participated in only eight minutes of a battle which lasted more than an hour.



Hotchkiss 1.45" Revolving Cannon. Mooney might have mistaken the mountain gun for this revolving gun. This Hotchkiss gun could have fired fifty rounds a minute, but it was not at Wounded Knee. National Archives and Records Service, RG 156-AA-49A

A realistic estimate of the battery's volume of fire has been difficult to ascertain for there was no mention of the total number of rounds fired in any battle account. Many variables, such as the battery's state of training, the condition of the guns, and the location of the ammunition mules, would affect the volume of fire. It must also be remembered that cannons are limited in their rate of fire due to the heat generated with the weapon. Modern cannons are limited to ten rounds a minute for the first three minutes and three rounds a minute thereafter.¹⁹ A consistently high rate of fire can cause irreparable damage to the gun. If a reasonable volume of fire is needed to complete an accurate picture of the fighting at Wounded Knee, then a battery rate of fire of from twelve to twenty-

four rounds a minute can be used. Although this is speculative, it is based on data which can be analyzed instead of undocumented, unsubstantiated descriptions as found in most historical accounts.

The second major point of contention was the general accounts of the destructiveness of the guns at Wounded Knee. Aside from the obvious difference made by accepting a reasonable rate of fire, the caliber of the gun should be considered. Most accounts of the battle accurately describe the mountain gun as being of 1.65 inches in caliber and firing a shell weighing a little more than two pounds. However, the various authors have failed to give the reader any appreciation of the effectiveness of the shell. The bursting charge of the shell contained only 1.76 ounces of powder.²⁰ The impacting shell including the bursting charge weighed slightly more than one pound. The total explosive force of the shell would be less than that of a modern hand grenade.²¹ It is therefore difficult to accept that the first volley of the battery (four rounds) inflicted half of the total Indian casualties as has been claimed. It is not argued that the guns on the hill did not inflict casualties. It is argued that the guns did not obliterate the village and decimate the Indians as has been described in certain totally unobjective works.

An accurate picture of the battery's actions at Wounded Knee can be drawn. Such a view incorporates the testimony of the participants, Indian, soldier, and civilian, with a rational assessment of what the battery could and could not do. With the first volleys of fire between the Indians and the soldiers, the immediate area became enveloped in a haze of smoke and dust.²² Soon, both sides merged into a desperate struggle at close quarters. On the high ground to the northwest, Capron held his fire. He knew that shell fire at that moment would be fatal to friend as well as to foe. When the Indians broke through the line of K troop and the remnants of B and K troop withdrew to the cavalry camp, the battery began firing by platoon.²³

Capron opened fire with his two guns on a group of Indians fleeing southwest along the agency road. Hawthorne's guns engaged the warriors who had fled to the village and were firing at the cavalry from there.²⁴ As the fighting continued, the warriors, now mixed with the women and children, scattered to the west, south, and east. Consequently the distances between the battery and some of the fleeing clusters of Indians approached two thousand yards.

As Capron fired at any group of Indians firing at the cavalry, Hawthorne shelled the ravine south of the Indian village. The warriors who had taken refuge there were pouring a galling fire on the cavalry.²⁵ For the most part, this group was safe from the shells fired from the hill. Because of the extremely flat trajectory of the guns, few shells landed in the ravine. Those that did hit in the ravine spent most of their fragmentation on the far bank. It was necessary then to take a gun closer to the ravine. In the process

of moving one of his guns, Hawthorne was struck by a bullet which shattered his watch, driving parts of the mechanism into his body.²⁶ Command of the gun then fell to a twenty-one year old Corporal, Paul H. Weinert. With one of his men carrying the wounded Hawthorne to safety, Weinert and one other artilleryman maneuvered the gun into the mouth of the ravine. Although their clothes and the gun were riddled with bullets, the two artillerymen persisted and eventually the firing from the ravine ceased.²⁷

The main mission of the guns on that day was to fire at Indians who were firing at the cavalry and silence any pocket of resistance which could not be assailed by the cavalry.²⁸ In one instance an Indian had concealed himself in one of the tents north of the semi-circle. He managed to kill several cavalymen before his location was discovered. His fire was silenced by two direct hits on the tent by the mountain guns.²⁹ Even when the Hotchkiss guns ceased fire, sporadic firing continued between the cavalry and isolated Indians.

The battery's guns were effective in neutralizing some of the pockets of resistance, but it did so at the high price of casualties among the women and children. At the ranges the guns were firing, it was impossible to distinguish men from women in those groups firing at the cavalry. Even if the distinction could have been made, it would have been equally impossible to fire on the warriors without inadvertently hitting those around them.³⁰

By the early afternoon a tragic, somber silence prevailed at Wounded Knee. Stretcher-bearers criss-crossed the battlefield searching for those who were injured, Indian and white. The 7th, especially B and K troop, bore the brunt of the soldier casualties. Hawthorne was the only artilleryman seriously injured in the affray. Corporal Weinert and Private George Green miraculously had escaped injury amidst the flying lead in the ravine.

By the second week of January, 1891, the Sioux campaign of 1890, the last campaign of the Indian Wars, was over. After a grand review, held mostly for the benefit of General Miles, the regiments and separate units returned to their home posts. On January 24, Capron loaded his battery on a train at Rushville, Nebraska, for the return trip to Fort Riley. However, for Battery E the campaign in the Dakotas would have one final tragic consequence. Enroute to Kansas, the troop train on which the battery was riding collided with a passenger train. One sergeant was killed and another enlisted man was injured.³¹

Thus four days after Christmas, 1890, on a cold windswept field in South Dakota, Battery E, 1st Artillery opened fire in support of the 7th Cavalry. Any Indian who fired at the cavalry brought himself to the attention of the gunners on the bill. Minutes later he

received fire from the small Hotchkiss cannons. The battery did not sweep the field with a hurricane of fire coming at the rate of almost fifty rounds a minute. The guns did not obliterate everything which moved on the battle field. The nature of the gun and the shortage of ammunition precluded this. Because of the small size of the shell, approximately forty-two millimeters, it could not have wrecked the devastation attributed to it. The guns inflicted casualties, some of them unavoidable, on innocent women and children. For Capron's battery, Wounded Knee was not revenge. It was combat with an enemy often barely visible. For the men of the battery, Wounded Knee was neither a point of honor nor a point of shame.



Sketch Map of the Wounded Knee Battlefield- This map was drawn shortly after the battle and was included in the annual report of the Secretary of War in 1891. National Archives and Records Service, 111-SC-87318

NOTES

¹Robert M. Utley, The Last Days of the Sioux Nation (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 73. Utley offers the best concise treatment of the Sioux during the Messiah movement. An excellent treatment of the entire Messiah movement is James Mooney's The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890. Mooney's discussion of the military activities is lacking. When Mooney portrayed the guns as firing almost fifty rounds a minute, he might have confused the 1.65 inch Hotchkiss mountain gun with the 1.45 inch Hotchkiss revolving cannon. He does refer to the guns on the hill as machine-guns.

²U.S. Congress, Senate, Armament of Certain Indians, Senate Exec. Doc. 9, 51st Cong., 2nd Sess., 1890, pp. 13, 16.

³Ibid., p. 29.

⁴Ibid., pp. 9, 19.

⁵U.S. Congress, House, Report of the Secretary of War-1891, House Exec. Doc. 1, part 2, 52nd Cong., 1st Sess., 1892, p. 145.

⁶National Archives and Records Service, Returns from Regular Army Artillery Regiments, June 1821-January 1901, Record Group 94, Microcopy 727, reel 8, Hereafter cited as Monthly Returns.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Francis B. Heitman, Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903), p. 281.

⁹Ibid., pp. 513-514.

¹⁰Alex W. Perry, "The Ninth United States Cavalry in the Sioux Campaign of 1890," Journal of the United States Cavalry Association IV (March 1891), pp. 37-40.

¹¹Testimony of Major Samuel Whitside, Report of Investigation into the Battle at Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota, Fought December 29th, 1890, February 4, 1891. As reprinted in U.S. Congress, Senate, Hearings before the Committee on the Judiciary on S. 1147 and S. 2900, 94th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1976. Hereafter cited as Wounded Knee Report.

¹²Ibid., p. 118.

¹³The most objective work is Utley's The Last Days of the Sioux Nation.

¹⁴Report of the Secretary of War- 1891, p. 170. The Surgeon-General placed the casualties at thirty killed and thirty-one wounded.

¹⁵Herbert Schell, History of South Dakota (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 323.

¹⁶Testimony of Captain Allyn Capron, Wounded Knee Report, p. 130. As the battery was located on a hill and firing down into a valley, minus elevation would have been required.

¹⁷Utley, The Last Days of the Sioux Nation, p. 197.

¹⁸Forsyth's disposition of troops would have not only been negligent but personally suicidal had he anticipated trouble with the Sioux. This is evident in the fact that Forsyth, six of his officers, scouts, and a few correspondents were virtually in the semi-circle of Indians. This area would become a death zone if trouble broke out.

¹⁹U.S. Department of the Army, Field Manual 6-50- The Field Artillery Cannon Battery (Washington: Department of the Army, 1976), Appendix A.

²⁰U.S. Congress, House, Report of the Secretary of War- 1880, Vol III- Ordnance, House Exec. Doc. 1, 46th Cong., 3rd Sess., 1881, pp. 132-133.

²¹The explosive charge in the shell was far more primitive than the material in modern munitions. A modern hand-grenade with an effective bursting radius of five meters would be the closest comparable modern munition to the Hotchkiss round.

²²Interviews with Joseph Horn Cloud and Louie Mousseau, as reprinted in Hearings on S. 1147 and S. 2900, pp. 104-105, and testimony of Frog, Wounded Knee Report, p. 135.

²³Testimony of Captain Allyn Capron, Wounded Knee Report, p. 130.

²⁴Testimony of Francis M.J. Craft, Wounded Knee Report, p. 137.

²⁵W.F. Beyer and O.F. Keydell, Deeds of Valor (Detroit: Perkiens-Keydel Co., 1906), p. 325.

²⁶Utley, The Last Days of the Sioux Nation, p. 222.

²⁷Fredric Remington, "The Sioux Outbreak in South Dakota," Harpers Weekly Vol XXXV (January 24, 1891), p. 61; Beyer and Keydel, Deeds of Valor, p. 325.

²⁸Harry L. Hawthorne, "The Sioux Campaign of 1890-1891," Journal of the Military Service Institute of the United States Vol. XIX, 1896, p. 186.

²⁹Frazier Arnold, "Ghost Dance and Wounded Knee," The Cavalry Journal Vol XLIII (May-June 1934), p. 20.

³⁰Testimony of Francis M.J. Craft, Wounded Knee Report, p. 137.

³¹Monthly Returns.