

4e – Wounded Knee

The Wounded Knee Massacre was the last major armed conflict between the Lakota Sioux and the United States, subsequently described as a "massacre" by General Nelson A. Miles in a letter to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs.

On December 29, 1890, five hundred troops of the U.S. 7th Cavalry, supported by four Hotchkiss guns (a lightweight rapid fire machine gun), surrounded an encampment of Minneconjou Lakota with orders to escort them back to the railroad for transport to Omaha, Nebraska. The commander of the 7th had been ordered to disarm the Lakota before proceeding. Different versions of what happened next exist, but historians commonly believe of how at the end of the disarmament, there was confusion that started the massacre. Quite possibly an accidental misfiring of a weapon being given up, or a scuffle. However, a gunshot rang out, and the unarmed Indians surrounded by the 7th Cavalry regiment were fired upon with extreme prejudice. The twenty-five troopers amongst the one hundred and fifty-three Sioux that were in the process of disarming them were also fired upon, and were killed in end result; including sixty-two women and small children. All 25 troopers were killed by friendly fire as their own men fired upon everyone. It was a massacre. Around one hundred and fifty Lakota fled the chaos, of which an unknown number are later believed to have died from exposure.

Years later, the last known survivor, named Beard, spoke through an interpreter, who both summarized and quoted him directly:

"The struggle for the gun was short, the muzzle pointed upward toward the east and the gun discharged. In an instant a volley followed as one shot, and the people began falling. He saw everybody was rolling and kicking on the ground. He looked southeastward and he did not know what he was going to do. He had only one knife. He looked eastward and saw the soldiers were firing on Indians and stepping backwards and firing. His thought was to rush on the soldiers and take a gun from one of them. He rushed toward on the west to get a gun. While he was running, he could see nothing for the smoke; through the rifts he could see the brass buttons of the uniforms; he rushed up to a soldier whose gun rested over [Beard]'s shoulder and was discharged when the muzzle was near his ear, and it deafened him for a while. Then he grabbed the gun and wrenched it away from the soldier. When he got the gun, he drew his knife and stabbed the soldier in the breast...While [he] was on this soldier, some other soldiers were shooting at him, but missed him and killed soldiers on the other side. When he got up he ran right through the soldiers toward the ravine, and he was the last Indian to go into the ravine. The soldiers were shooting at him from nearly all directions, and they shot him down...[Beard] tried to get to the ravine and succeeded in getting on his feet...Right on the edge of the ravine on the south side were soldiers shooting at the Indians who were running down into the ravine, the soldiers' shots sounded like fire crackers and hail in a storm; a great many Indians were killed and wounded down there...

"When he went to the bottom of the ravine, he saw many little children lying dead in the ravine. He was now pretty weak from his wounds. Now when he saw all those little infants lying there dead in their blood, his feeling was that even if he ate one of the soldiers, it would not appease his anger..."