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### Calamitous Pursuit: The Fetterman Fight

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## Calamitous Pursuit: The Fetterman Fight

### Abstract

Since that fateful December day in which Captain William Fetterman, two civilians, and 78 officers and men were annihilated in the present-day state of Wyoming, culpability has rested entirely with that officer. The oft-reason for this disastrous result is that Fetterman was effectively a reckless officer that dismissed out-of-hand the martial capabilities of warriors from the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe tribes. This derogatory opinion therefore, led to his leading the task force placed under his command on December 21, 1866 into an ambush and wholesale death to every soldier and civilian.

### Keywords

Fetterman, Carrington, Fort Phil Kearny

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**Calamitous Pursuit: The Fetterman Fight**

by

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Abstract

Since that fateful December day in which Captain William Fetterman, two civilians and 78 officers and men were annihilated in the present-day state of Wyoming, culpability has rested entirely with that officer. The oft- reason for this disastrous result is that Fetterman was effectively a reckless officer that dismissed out-of-hand the martial capabilities of warriors from the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe tribes. This derogatory opinion therefore, led to his leading the task force placed under his command on December 21, 1866 into an ambush and wholesale death to every soldier and civilian.

Keywords: *Fetterman, Carrington, Fort Phil Kearny*

Conventional opinion for the better part of 150 years has been that Captain Willian Fetterman's conceit and outright dismissal of Native American martial capabilities are primarily responsible for him and the relief column he commanded being slain in what has become known as the Fetterman Fight (or Massacre). Yet this rather simple declaration discounts other factors for the annihilation of Fetterman and his 80 men. Contributing affects such as an apparent failure to obey orders, inexperienced troops insufficient in number, deficient munitions, supplies, and most notably, Indian warrior tactical proficiency as the more justifiable explanations for the disastrous result.

The Fetterman Fight occurred within the immediate vicinity of Fort Phil Kearny, one of a series of fortifications established by the U.S. Army astride the Bozeman Trail in what today is the state of Wyoming. These garrisons were to protect travel along the trail into the gold mines and settlements of modern Montana; a trail that cut through land home to many plains' Indian tribes. While federal authorities made tepid overtures of seeking Indian approval for trail access and fort emplacement, many tribal leaders, most notably Oglala Sioux Chief Red Cloud, believed the advances disingenuous and resolved to drive the whites from this region by force.<sup>1</sup>

The situation in and around Fort Phil Kearny then in the fall of 1866, the period of Captain Fetterman's arrival, was one of persistent encounters between Indian warriors and the U.S. Army, (and unfortunate civilians).<sup>2</sup> Captain Fetterman, an experienced officer, arrived at

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Carrington, *Ab-Sa-Ra-Ka: Land of Massacre*, (1879: repr., Digital Scanning Inc., 2001), 79.

<sup>2</sup> R.J. Smyth, "Personal Reminiscences of Fort Phil Kearney and the Wagon Box Fight." In *Indian Fights and Fighters*, by Cyrus Townsend Brady, (New York: McClure, Phillips, and Company, 1904. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/55275/55275-h/55275-h.htm>), 14.

Phil Kearny as a soldier of some renown based upon his Civil War record.<sup>3</sup> There cannot be extracted from the various primary sources, any characterization of Captain Fetterman as an over aggressive and imprudent officer with a propensity for being reckless in the face of an enemy. Fetterman was, however, inexperienced when it came to campaigning against the American Indians such as the Sioux, Arapahoe, and Cheyenne, to name a few.<sup>4</sup> How then, and more importantly, why, did the characterization of Fetterman as a brazen glory chaser become, for the most part, universally accepted?

The notion must be entertained that some present at Fort Phil Kearny during this period likely fashioned subsequent accounts to better position their actions, or lack thereof, for posterity. Most notably of course was the senior officer and commander at Fort Phil Kearny, Colonel Henry Carrington. In his official report of January 3, 1867, Carrington in recounting the events of that fateful day notes that Fetterman and cavalry commander, Lieutenant George Washington Grummond were given to seeking honor and therefore he, Carrington, carefully relayed his orders to them in that they were not pursue the Indian warriors past Lodge Trail Ridge and beyond sight of the fort.<sup>5</sup> Later in this report, Carrington adds, “fearing still that the spirit of ambition might override prudence”, he halts Fetterman at the main gate and reiterates his

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<sup>3</sup> Carrington, *Ab-Sa-Ra-Ka: Land of Massacre*, 245.

<sup>4</sup> Frances Carrington, *My Army Life and the Fort Phil Kearny Massacre with an Account of the Celebration of "Wyoming Opened"*, (1910. Reprint, Lariat Publications, 2019), 77.

<sup>5</sup> United States War Department, “Official Report of the Phil Kearney Massacre, 1867,” In “The Indian Question: An Address,” (Paper presented at the Geographical and Biological Sections of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, by Henry B. Carrington, 21-28. Bristol, 1875), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31175013952174&view=1up&seq=9>

order to not pass beyond the crest of Lodge Trail Ridge.<sup>6</sup> Carrington's less than favorable characterization is not echoed however in other communications associated with this debacle.

Dr. C.M. Hines, the army surgeon assigned to Fort Phil Kearny, in January following the fight submitted a report in which he portrays Fetterman as being as brave and fine an officer there was.<sup>7</sup> Hines states that Fetterman and his column's fate was due to a failure to follow orders, the only common cause across all primary sources. Whether that conjecture was or was not true, it does not in and of itself equate to recklessness resulting in Fetterman's column being decimated en masse. As it were, the only survivors of the Fetterman Fight that could account for Fetterman's final moments were the participating Indian warriors.

While interviewers and chroniclers who captured accounts from Sioux, Arapahoe, and Cheyenne warrior participants ensure to echo the conventional opinion of Fetterman's reckless character, the warriors battle accounts reveal something different.<sup>8</sup> For example White Bull, a Miniconjou warrior, noted that the soldiers conducted their approach in an unhurried, if not pragmatic fashion.<sup>9</sup> This is not the observation of a formation of soldiers commanded by an officer, or officers, not in grasp of their faculties, but apparently resolutely responding to the present situation. Surveys of other participating warrior accounts are similar in their

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Letter by Dr. C. M. Hines recounting the Fetterman Fight, incorporated into "Letter from the Secretary of the Interior to the 39<sup>th</sup> Congress", February 6, 1867, American Heritage Center Digital Collections, University of Wyoming.

<sup>8</sup> Walter S. Campbell, "Interview with Joseph White Bull, 1930," in *Eyewitness to the Fetterman Fight: Indian Views*, ed. John H. Monnett (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), 28-30.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

representation of the battle and, the performance of the soldiers. Therefore, the question remains, why shroud Fetterman, posthumously, with this characterization?

The commanding officer, Colonel Henry Carrington owing to his position and its inherent responsibility, it must be acknowledged had the most to lose both personally and professionally. As commander, he was ultimately responsible for everything good or bad associated with Fort Phil Kearny and its assigned soldiers. It is therefore understandable that in reading his report of the battle, he repeatedly points out matters and results beyond his control and therefore not his responsibility.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, he made certain to point out where he was right, (after the fact), in regards to situations resulting from his unfulfilled requests or unheeded recommendations.<sup>11</sup> Colonel Carrington had no stellar record from his service during the Civil War, he had in fact spent most of the war recruiting, a very different service record from that of Captain Fetterman. Carrington, his characterization of Fetterman, (to include Captain Brown and Lieutenant Grummond), as stated in his report is unsubstantiated, that his he offers no preceding encounters, beyond their disagreeing with his strategic and tactical operations, that lead him to feel such trepidation.<sup>12</sup>

In the years following the Fetterman Fight some of those closest to Carrington and present at Fort Phil Kearny began to present their own account of this misadventure. In these retellings they made certain to incorporate character assessments with Captain Fetterman being

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<sup>10</sup> United States War Department, "Official Report of the Phil Kearney Massacre, 1867," In "The Indian Question: An Address," (Paper presented at the Geographical and Biological Sections of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, by Henry B. Carrington, 21-28. Bristol, 1875), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31175013952174&view=1up&seq=9>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



first and foremost. Colonel Carrington's first wife Margaret accompanied him to Fort Phil Kearny and the journal she kept would, in 1879, be published as *Ab-Sa-Ra-Ka: Land of Massacre*. Found within this account is the earliest notation of Fetterman's now infamous claim that a company of regulars could defeat 1,000 warriors or a regiment capable of eliminating "the whole array of hostile tribes."<sup>13</sup> A rather remarkable assertion in and of itself, yet more troubling is the absence of corroborating evidence offered by Mrs. Carrington. While she qualifies the sentiment as being one the Fetterman apparently had voiced more than once it is a pronouncement difficult to verify.

Lieutenant Grummond's wife was also present at Fort Phil Kearny at this time and would later marry Colonel Carrington a few years after his first wife Margaret's passing. In 1910 she published a book recounting her experiences in and around Fort Phil Kearny at this time. Included was her version of the fight and unsurprisingly, a less than favorable impression of Fetterman, to a lesser degree Captain Brown, and even her then husband, Grummond.<sup>14</sup> She too claims that Fetterman alluded to relatively small numbers of U.S. Army soldiers being able to decisively defeat vastly large numbers of Indian warriors.<sup>15</sup> Yet her account suffers not only from a lack of corroborating statements, but also being eerily similar to Margaret Carrington's account.

Another secondary source that helped perpetuate, if not amplify, the portrayal of Fetterman in this vein is Cyrus Townsend Brady's *Indian Fights and Fighters*. Published in

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<sup>13</sup> Margaret Carrington, *Ab-Sa-Ra-Ka: Land of Massacre*, 170.

<sup>14</sup> Frances Carrington, *My Army Life and the Fort Phil Kearny Massacre*, 77-78.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

1904, this narrative reportedly became a book of some renown and according to John H. Monnett, it is within its pages where the most famous or infamous quotation affiliated with Fetterman is found.<sup>16</sup> “Give me eighty men and I will ride through the Sioux nation,” has become the assertion that authors have repeatedly used to demonstrate the blatantly xenophobic Fetterman and that this chauvinistic attitude must have been in some manner connected to Fetterman and his command’s demise.<sup>17</sup> Further investigation into the background of this narrative by Monnett revealed that Brady had spent a great deal of time with Henry Carrington and had become quite an admirer of the former Army officer.<sup>18</sup> This only serves to further question the validity of this characterization of Fetterman the man and what, if any, connection there was with the outcome.<sup>19</sup>

It cannot be ignored that as a result of this tragedy, Colonel Carrington faced considerable scrutiny, to include a special Presidential commission whose members were dispatched to interview participants and investigate the matter.<sup>20</sup> A result that should not have surprised Carrington considering that he had just suffered the most significant defeat of the U.S. Army by American Indian warriors in history. The commission in question, did not fully exonerate Carrington, nor did it hold him clearly responsible for the outcome, and there the effort to restore his reputation began.<sup>21</sup> It is clear in Dee Brown’s narrative, *The Fetterman Massacre: Fort Phil Kearny and the Battle of the Hundred Slain* that he believes Carrington an empathetic

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<sup>16</sup> John H. Monnett, ed., *Eyewitness to the Fetterman Fight: Indian Views*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), 71-72.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Dee Brown, *The Fetterman Massacre: Fort Phil Kearny and the Battle of the Hundred Slain*, (1970, repr., Open Road Media, 2012), 253-255.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

character and unfairly treated in the aftermath.<sup>22</sup> Yet it is Carrington's impression of Fetterman as over-zealous officer as provided in his official report and later expounded upon by his first and second wives that established the story line of this fight and has done so for a century and a half. But did Carrington truly believe Fetterman, and the other dead officers, to be the rambunctious lot as characterized?

Extrapolated from Carrington's official report is his acknowledgement of having gained an appreciation for the tenacity of the Indian warriors following the December 6, 1866 skirmish in which one of Carrington's Lieutenants was killed.<sup>23</sup> He was not the only officer who admittedly came away from that day with a new found respect for these fighters, so too did Captain Fetterman.<sup>24</sup> This newfound sentiment on the part of Fetterman is echoed in both Margaret and Frances Carrington's later accounts and secondary sources such as Brown and Shannon Smith's *Give Me Eighty Men: Women and the Myth of the Fetterman Fight*.<sup>25</sup> What does it mean if it is true? Did Fetterman based upon his first combat experience with Indian warriors now believe that subsequent operations would require pragmatism and prudence?

If Carrington thought Fetterman to have learned his lesson from the December 6<sup>th</sup> engagement, why then note in his report the two contradicting characterizations? Could it not be on December 21<sup>st</sup> that Fetterman and the relief column were simply outnumbered and outmaneuvered? Another point of consideration, if in fact Carrington did believe that Fetterman

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> United States War Department, "Official Report of the Phil Kearney Massacre, 1867," In "The Indian Question: An Address," (Paper presented at the Geographical and Biological Sections of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, by Henry B. Carrington, 21-28. Bristol, 1875), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31175013952174&view=1up&seq=9>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Shannon Smith, *Give Me Eighty Men: Women and the Myth of the Fetterman Fight*,

to be overly ambitious, why assign him command of the relief column at all? Carrington reported that he had in fact initially assigned another officer to lead this effort, not Fetterman.<sup>26</sup> The officer who Carrington had initially assigned to command this effort had in fact successfully completed a similar type mission only days earlier.<sup>27</sup> Fetterman, senior to this officer, solicited Carrington for the responsibility of commanding the relief force and Carrington, despite his later reported misgivings, relented to the former's request.<sup>28</sup> Carrington, as the commanding officer certainly did not have to yield to this request, despite author Cyrus Townsend Brady's curious assertion that Carrington in fact, "could scarcely have refused".<sup>29</sup> Whether or not the outcome of this day's events would have been different had Carrington left another in command is conjecture, yet the decision itself reveals a contradiction within the explanation, beginning with Colonel Carrington's report and subsequent first person accounts that continue to dominate the accepted version of this event.

Fetterman in his effort to relieve the wood cutters obviously fell victim to a well planned and executed ambush by the Sioux, Arapahoe, and Cheyenne warriors that day. Did he follow Carrington's orders explicitly? Carrington, according to his report and repeated in various other first-person accounts, ordered Fetterman to, "Support the wood train, relieve it, and report to me. Do not engage or pursue Indians at its expense: under no circumstances pursue over the Ridge, namely, Lodge Trail Ridge".<sup>30</sup> Found within the second clause of this order is a more plausible

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<sup>26</sup> United States War Department, "Official Report of the Phil Kearney Massacre, 1867, 22.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Cyrus Townsend Brady, *Indian Fights and Fighters*, (New York: McClure, Phillips, and Company, 1904. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/55275/55275-h/55275-h.htm#>), 26.

<sup>30</sup> United States War Department, "Official Report of the Phil Kearney Massacre, 1867, 22.

and objective reason for the outcome of this fight. The remains of Fetterman and the balance of the relief column, 81 men in all, were all found north and west of the Lodge Trail Ridge.

Carrington and those in the fort who later published accounts all report that the relief column did in fact proceed beyond the summit, contrary to his, (Carrington's) reported order.<sup>31</sup> Fetterman's apparent disobedience however does not equate to him being arrogant and contemptuous of Indian martial capability.

Other factors that should be considered as having varying levels of impact on the fight that day include, insufficient numbers of troops, relative inexperience of most of those soldiers, and outdated munitions or weapons with an inadequate supply of ammunition.<sup>32</sup> Shannon Smith in her 2008 work, *Give Me Eighty Men: Women and the Myth of the Fetterman Fight*, provides numerous quotes from Carrington's many pieces of correspondence in which he makes repeated reference to such matters and the likely negative operational outcomes should his pleas go unheeded.<sup>33</sup> While such inadequacies had not previously resulted in such a complete and large scale slaughter, it should be considered that on the day of the Fetterman Fight, that these extenuating circumstances, combined with the culminating battle as planned by Oglala Chief Red Cloud, did result in disaster for the U.S. Army.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Letter by Dr. C. M. Hines recounting the Fetterman Fight, incorporated into "Letter from the Secretary of the Interior to the 39<sup>th</sup> Congress", February 6, 1867, American Heritage Center Digital Collections, University of Wyoming.

<sup>32</sup> United States War Department, "Official Report of the Phil Kearney Massacre, 1867, 21; Margaret Carrington, *Ab-Sa-Ra-Ka: Land of Massacre*, 41; Smith, *Give Me Eighty Men*, 123.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, *Give Me Eighty Men*, 35.

<sup>34</sup> Addison E. Sheldon, "The Sheldon Interview with American Horse, 1903," in *Eyewitness to the Fetterman Fight: Indian Views*, ed. John H. Monnett (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), 61-63.

Fetterman did not pass through the main gate of Fort Phil Kearny that December morning with the stated purpose of initiating a full-scale battle with the warriors of allied Plains Indian tribes. Yet 81 officers, soldiers, and civilians found themselves completely overwhelmed that day by an immense number of Sioux, Arapahoe, and Cheyenne warriors. Indian accounts place the number of participating warriors at approximately 1,000 warriors, a ratio of over 12 warriors to every one soldier.<sup>35</sup> The scene therefore is now established, inexperienced soldiers, few were well-armed and under the command of an officer who apparently disobeyed his reported orders to not progress beyond sight of the fort foretold of disaster.

Captain William Fetterman since the fight or massacre that bears his name, has been for the most part characterized as being reckless and bigoted, traits or flaws that resulted in not only his death, but 80 others. However, further examination of the accounts, especially the early primary accounts, result in the question that was this in fact an accurate depiction? The fact that Fetterman perished on December 21, 1866 and did not have the opportunity to explain his actions that day obviously has made the work of detractors less troublesome. Colonel Henry Carrington, unlike Fetterman, was not a combat veteran and as an officer apparently seeking not only to sustain his career but ascend to positions of greater rank and prestige, had in fact a great deal to lose from being the commander who suffered, at that time, the most significant defeat of the U.S. Army by Indian warriors.

The empirical evidence is that Colonel Henry Carrington is that in the years following the fight seized the opportunity to ensure that his version of Captain Fetterman and the reasons for

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

the outcome would become the dominant one into perpetuity. That William Fetterman and his relief force were slaughtered, while both U.S. Army, (soldiers and civilian) and Indian accounts present details indicating that Fetterman did in fact, disobey his orders and met his end. Such indication however does not definitively demonstrate that Fetterman pursued the warrior decoys because he was a bigot and reckless. Carrington's explanation for dispatching only 79 soldiers (two of the relief party were civilians) is certainly understandable based upon his argument that he had to consider the security of the fort and with an insufficient number of combat ready soldiers could spare no more for what he contends was to simply cover the wagon train's movement back to the fort.<sup>36</sup>

In the end, Colonel Carrington had justifiable explanations for the circumstances and shortcomings that more directly led to the catastrophe of Captain Fetterman's relief column that day. Conversely there is not, beyond the initial subjective comments of Carrington and followed by similar comments made by those closest to him, verifiable and independent evidence that validates the conventional view of Fetterman's attitude and zeal being the central, or any, reason for that disastrous fight. Ultimately, it must be acknowledged that there was one, very pointed cause for the eventual outcome that surpasses all others, the Sioux, Arapahoe, and Cheyenne warriors. What opinion or regard others may have had of them was irrelevant and did not lead to defeats. This was a conglomeration of tribes that had made it very much known that they had

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<sup>36</sup> United States War Department, "Official Report of the Phil Kearney Massacre, 1867, 22.

every intention to resist by force, the intrusion into their homeland.<sup>37</sup> That, in the end had more to do with the demise of Fetterman and 80 others than did anything else.

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<sup>37</sup> Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, (1970. Reprint, New York: Picador, Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 129.



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