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BATTLE OF WHITE BIRD

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Before the Idaho gold rush, a Nez Perce Indian treaty, reserving almost all of the traditional Nez Perce lands for exclusive use of the Indians, went into effect in 1859. Gold discoveries at Pierce in 1860 left the agreement out of date before the Indians began to realize any treaty benefits to speak of. The gold rush brought ten thousand and more miners to the Nez Perce reservation by 1862, and all attempts by the United States Government and the United States Army to keep whites off the reservation were doomed to failure. So the United States decided that a new treaty, reducing the reservation to about one-tenth of its original size, would have to be concluded with the reluctant Indians. The smaller reservation preserved some of the best Indian lands, and favored those Nez Perce bands which had been most affected by the work of missionaries who had come as early as 1836. Indian farms, started with the help of missionaries, were found on the smaller reservation. The bands which depended less upon farming and more upon hunting fared poorly under the new treaty proposal: to conform to white wishes, they would have to give up their old way of life and become farmers on the smaller reservation. This drastic change proved unacceptable. Of those whose lands were excluded from the small reservation, only Timothy agreed to the new treaty.

Friction between non-treaty Indians and settlers on the non-treaty Indian lands--particularly along the Lower Salmon in White Bird's country and around Wallowa in Joseph's country--erupted fairly often during the decade after the United States ratified the new treaty in 1867. By 1876, reservation officials, stock raisers, and settlers had put considerable pressure upon army generals to get them to force the non-treaty bands to move to the reduced reservation. A council at Fort Lapwai between General O. O. Howard and some of the non-treaty Indians late in 1876 showed that none of the Indians would move without being forced to.

Threats of military pressure, designed to make the Indians move, left the non-treaty bands more restless than ever in the spring of 1877. White Bird's band, which already had experienced a lot of trouble with the whites, menaced the settlers along Salmon River sufficiently so that by May 7, 1877, they appealed for military protection:

We are sorely annoyed by the presence of a lawless band of Nez Perce Indians, numbering about two hundred. They tear down our fences, burn our rails, steal our cattle and horses, ride in the vicinity of our dwellings, yelling, firing pistols, menacing and frightening our women and children and otherwise disturbing our homes

Responding to Army demands, White Bird's people moved up to Camas Prairie near Tolo Lake not far from the reservation boundary, where other non-treaty Indians were congregating late that spring. Joseph's band from Wallowa joined them June 2. Practically none of the Indians wanted to give up their land and their freedom, but no other course seemed practical. Many of the Indians--the younger ones especially--engaged in war-like demonstration, and the white settlers of the area voiced concern that trouble would break out before the non-treaty bands ever got settled on the reservation. White Bird's group showed the most dissatisfaction. Shortly before the military deadline for removal to the reservation, some of White Bird's young men set out to avenge old wrongs. Raids along the Lower Salmon led to the shooting of a number of settlers there, June 13-15. While the survivors were preparing defenses at Slate Creek, news of the outbreak reached the army at Fort Lapwai. Hostilities had spread to Camas Prairie, and Captain David Perry rushed from Fort Lapwai to Mt. Idaho with two companies of cavalry. About ninety-five officers and men comprised this force.

Impressed with the need to cut off the non-treaty bands before they had a chance to cross the Salmon to relative safety, Perry set out for Mt. Idaho the evening of June 16. About a dozen Mt. Idaho volunteers and a few Nez Perce scouts accompanied him. That night his weary force camped at the top of the ridge above White Bird, resting briefly until daylight. As he approached White Bird Creek early in the morning, Perry's command ran into serious trouble. Indians had come from their camp along White Bird Creek up the hill next to the stream. There they met the army at White Bird battleground. Perry lost his trumpeter, who was just beginning to blow the call "enemy in sight," right at the beginning of the fight. The second company's trumpeter also was an early casualty. Somehow the only substitute bugler mislaid his trumpet on the way to the battle. That meant that Perry had no effective way to give commands, and his forces soon became disorganized. The Mt. Idaho volunteers scouted on down to White Bird Creek at the start of the battle. When they met Indian resistance, they disregarded their commander, George M. Shearer, and retired up the hill. Soon the Indians were beginning to surround the army, and Perry's men began to give way.

Perry hoped to hold a low ridge not far from White Bird Creek. But aside from a protected rocky point occupied by Sergeant Michael McCarthy and six men, his forces were exposed to devastating attack. Some of his men, many of whom never had engaged in any kind of battle before, panicked and galloped off. Perry had no choice but to organize a retreat as orderly as possible. Several attempts were made to hold defensible positions along the route up White Bird Hill. Indian pressure from nearby ridges forced the army to retire from each new position. Finally Perry and some of his command climbed to the top of the steep west wall, while the rest followed the Mt. Idaho trail up a ravine to Camas Prairie. The Indians never managed to cut off the army altogether, but they emerged from the clash without loss of a warrior. Perry lost a third of his force. Instead of rounding up the Indians, he had rushed into a disaster.

From White Bird the non-treaty bands proceeded up Salmon River and crossed to the west side. General O. O. Howard set off in pursuit. Crossing Salmon River after the Indians, he spent a week cut off from them in the rough terrain between the Salmon and

the Snake after the Nez Perce returned to Camas Prairie. The Indians did not know exactly what to do after their triumph at White Bird: some had hoped to avoid trouble by having Vicious Weasel and six emissaries work out a peaceful solution with Perry when the army approached their camp, but that had been impossible. They still could not figure out how to end the war after the opening clash had ended. From their initial success, however, they decided that the army could not do much against them. Howard, though, found out right at the beginning that he was going to have a real problem getting the non-treaty Nez Perce settled down somewhere, and the battle of White Bird proved to be only the opening fight in a summer long campaign that took him 1,500 miles across Idaho and Montana before the war finally ended early in October.

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