

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

HOW THE INDIANS FOUGHT: A NEW ERA IN SKIRMISH FIGHTING

BY A SURVIVOR OF THE BATTLE OF BIRCH COOLEY

In modern warfare, and especially in the World War, there is evidence that the individual soldier has gained a place of higher importance in actual battle than was ever before given him. It is true that great movements have been and always will be made by large bodies of troops advancing under a well-laid plan of battle and working under a definite military system. But the World War has developed the fact that in all hard-fought and doubtful campaigns, when each army is at times either gaining or losing ground, the work of the individual soldier has gained in importance. When military units are broken up and troops are scattered and beyond the control of their officers, then the soldier may for the time be forced to become a skirmish fighter or quit the field in utter defeat and perhaps in disgrace.

In the older days little importance was given to what even a large number of scattering troops might do, but under the new conditions the ability of the common soldier to become at once an effective skirmish fighter has proved of great importance. The object of this sketch is to show that a change of practice and of sentiment in regard to skirmish fighting has grown up, and that this change commenced during the uprising of the Indians in Minnesota in the year 1862 and notably at Birch Cooley, where it first gained recognition among military men.

The battle of Birch Cooley was fought on September 2 and 3, 1862, and our forces, including teamsters and some citizens, numbered about a hundred and fifty men. There were among

us a few men who knew something of frontier conditions and of the Indians in time of peace, but none of them had even a remote idea of what they would do when at war, either in the movement of their forces or in actual battle.

Our leaders made the fatal mistake of ignoring the strength and ability of the enemy. Nearly all our men were only raw recruits and were sent into the field unused to the handling of arms, with weapons that were strange to them, and with absolutely no target practice. For these adverse conditions no one was really at fault, for the battle occurred at a critical time in the Civil War when every real soldier and most of the weapons and supplies had been sent to the South.

But the most dangerous condition for us was one that should not have existed — our officers and men, high and low, believed that the Indians would not fight against the white soldiers. We considered them only a disorderly mob and thought that, like a police force in the time of a riot, we could stand against them regardless of their numbers. And so we were sent on this expedition into the field of the enemy, most of us on foot, to bury those who had been killed in the massacre. We had one full company of infantry, newly enlisted and numbering nearly a hundred men, with twenty teams and wagons. Our only mounted men were our leading officers, a few scouts, mostly half-breeds, and a squad of twenty cavalymen enlisted about ten days before, all from civil life. It is always dangerous to send a small, slow-moving force into a hostile field; and in this case the forces of the enemy were mostly well mounted and able at the first alarm to send their couriers to every village on the reservation, so that in a few hours they could bring against us a force far larger than our own.

In further proof that our officers did not realize the possible danger of an attack, it may be said that on the evening before the battle we were assured that there were no Indians near and that we were as safe as if we were in our own homes; this was

at the close of our second day after we had buried about eighty bodies. On our whole trip we were told nothing of Indian warfare, not even that in case of a heavy volley we should all lie flat to the ground to avoid the bullets. We thought that a soldier's duty in battle was to stand up in the ranks, as battles had always been pictured to us, and shoot at an enemy also in ranks and in plain sight. To our minds anything different from this would not be a battle. We had, however, all heard that in battle the Indians would conceal themselves behind trees, logs, and rocks, and in thickets, but that they could take a similar advantage on open ground was never mentioned and never came to our minds. No one seemed to think that even if we met them they would do more than fire a few shots at long range and then make their escape.

On the evening of our second day out we camped on the prairie near a narrow valley known as Birch Cooley and made our corral in a place that in my view today, in spite of what has gone into written history, could not have been better selected; but no earthworks were made and no precautions taken, except the placing of ten sentries a short distance outside the corral. This camp was made on Monday evening, September 1, 1862, and at daybreak the next morning the battle commenced, absolutely without warning. The enemy had approached us in the grass and at the first alarm was within short firing distance of our tents.

The purpose of this article is not to give a description of the battle itself, but to show the manner in which the Indians fought against us. Such Indians as were in plain sight were always beyond the reach of our guns, but early in the battle — in fact as soon as our men returned their first fire — they lay flat to the ground, concealing themselves as best they could in the grass. Each wore a turban of grass strapped around the head, so made as to conceal the head and face and as much of the shoulders as possible. They approached crawling in the

grass, not as a baby creeps, but with knees spread far apart and the body pressed against the ground. In this manner they approached us much faster than one would think possible and with little danger from our guns. We learned that we must lie close to the ground, but this was at a terrible cost in killed and wounded.

It is well known that the Sioux Indians had never fought against white men before the outbreak of 1862, and the reader might ask how it could be that they were so much better prepared than we. In such fighting as they had done against the Chippewa the conditions were entirely different from those of any campaign against the whites. How could it be that our superior weapons and our organization of troops, even defective as the latter was at first, would not more than make up for what skill the Indian had acquired in his life as a hunter in time of peace; and how in the short space of two weeks could he acquire such wonderful efficiency as a warrior? To account for this we must ask the reader to admit the truth of some conditions that are impossible of direct proof but that are true beyond question because they are self-evident.

In order to understand the Indians who were fighting against us, let us in our minds go back a hundred and fifty, or perhaps two hundred years, before our battle. This takes us back to a time before horses had found their way north from Mexico. The Indian then had to hunt the larger animals on foot, and, on the prairies and western plains, mostly on open ground. His bow and arrow, although powerful at short range, were not effective at any considerable distance. The buffalo and the elk, the antelope and the deer, roamed the country in countless numbers, and the demands of hunger could not be disobeyed. The Indian had to approach within the range of his arrow, unseen by the standing buffalo or elk. In making this approach he was forced to use his patience and skill in concealing himself against the sight, the smell, the hearing, and the natural caution of the animal. He had to

consider the direction of the wind and of the light and to make allowance for the nature and habits of the game. He was obliged to wear a head-dress of grass and to take advantage of every bunch of weeds growing by a badger hole and every tuft of grass or mound of earth that would help to conceal him. He had to consider the slope of the ground, the height of the grass, and all the little things that only the savage hunter could see. If the animal grew suspicious the hunter might lie for an hour without making a movement till the beast altered his gaze or commenced feeding. In this way only could he approach his game on open ground, and this he was forced to do to provide food and clothing for himself and his people. It is a matter of common knowledge that in the early days, when great buffalo hunts were made on horseback, the Indian continued hunting much of the standing game in this manner; and it is self-evident that this skill had come down with him from before the age of horses.

And so it is easy to see that every Indian who fought against us at Birch Cooley had from boyhood and from tradition been in training for the conditions that prevailed at this battle. There is some evidence that at New Ulm and at Fort Ridgely this manner of approach was practiced by some of the Indians, but it was not given general attention among the whites by either officers or men; but after Birch Cooley it was never forgotten and was practiced by the natives in all battles where conditions favored it. Before this campaign all Indian battles, except the horseback raids against emigrant trains crossing the plains, had been fought in the timber country of the East and South under conditions not in the least like the campaigns of 1862 and later.

This manner of fighting earned for the Sioux the name of being the best skirmish fighters in the world. After the campaigns of 1862 and 1863 the war department revised its old tactics so that skirmish drill demanded the practice by both officers and men of firing from a prone position and advancing

and retreating under fire without rising from the ground. The result was in evidence in the World War, modified of course by the conditions of the time, and it was an important factor at Chateau Thierry and other hard battles. In these battles the American skirmishers, when compelled to retreat under fire, practiced the zigzag run,— just as the Indians did when they were crowded,— making a short rush, usually at an angle with their course, and then falling to the ground to avoid the aim of the enemy, then running again at a different angle.

The Sibley tent, which has taken a permanent place in American army equipment, should also be credited to the Sioux Indian, since it is a development of the tepee. This was brought out before the Civil War by C. C. Sibley, an officer who afterwards served in the Confederate army.

And now it would seem clear that to the Sioux Indian we owe not only the Sibley tent, but the elements of the skirmish drill that is in use today and bids fair to stay with us until there comes a radical change in modern warfare which will render it of no value.

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