

LED ASTRAY: HOW COMMAND INFLUENCE CONTRIBUTED TO THE ATROCITIES  
OF THE US-DAKOTA WAR OF 1862-1865

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**Title**

Led Astray: How Command Influence Contributed to the Atrocities of the  
US-Dakota War of 1862-1865

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## **ABSTRACT**

During the US-Dakota War of 1862-1865, fighting and bloodshed targeted unarmed non-combatants on both sides. American memory has often fixated only on actions committed by Dakota peoples, Oceti Sakowin, that were deemed depraved. However, sane and level-headed US soldiers also killed and mutilated wounded warriors, as well as fired on women and children. The key elements that made disciplined American soldiers in the US-Dakota War commit atrocities against fallen enemies and noncombatants were the illegal and immoral actions passively permitted, acquiesced through slight penalties, and outright ordered by ranking army commanders prior to and during the campaigns. Commanders were able to influence their troops to behave differently than they did on Confederate battlefields, specifically by expanding the list of acceptable targets and actions their morality could and would accept.

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I must send heartfelt thanks and appreciation to Dr. Thomas Isern, my advisor for two years. I will be eternally grateful for your guiding hand, sage wisdom, and relentless but gentle persuasion to reach for excellence. I consider myself forever fortunate to be among the cohorts of grateful graduate students you took under your wing. Thank you is not enough, but thank you with all my heart.

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Ally. Thank you for staying by me during this challenging but rewarding period of our lives together. I will never be able to adequately express all of my profound gratitude. I love you to the moon and back again.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: MAKING MUTILATORS: HOW COMMAND INFLUENCE IN THE US-DAKOTA WAR 1862-1865 CREATED WARTIME ATROCITIES**

Commanding soldiers in battle has often been called a great honor. The military officers of the United States Army are taught that they are responsible for America's greatest resource: the people that serve, most of them young, impressionable, and open pages to be written on. Every leader over them, from a sergeant to general, makes a mark with their decisions and lessons, whether they realize it or not. With this in mind, allow this question: how far does a commander's responsibility stretch over their soldiers? Obviously there exists a line somewhere between an individual troop's ability to form conscious thoughts and act on them and the orders and influence of a military commander. The difficulty lies in determining exactly where that is and, furthermore, the level of accountability we as a society are willing to place on the shoulders of each respective party.

Through study of American Great Plains history and the US-Dakota War of 1862-1865, an observation in the behaviors of American soldiers that took part in the campaigns leads to a question. The academic literature produced on the US-Dakota War hints that this war, overshadowed by the American Civil War, is forgotten by subconscious will on the part of Americans. The gritty accounts of cannons lobbing explosive shells at fleeing women and children during the Battle of Killdeer Mountain were distasteful even for people of the time.<sup>1</sup> The most modern analysis of the battles where researchers walked the grounds as they consulted the primary sources has revealed new, telling insights, such as how junior volunteer commanders

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<sup>1</sup> Paul N. Beck, *Columns of Vengeance: Soldiers, Sioux, and the Punitive Expeditions 1863-1864* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 211, 248; Thomas D. Isern, Richard Rothaus, Dakota Goodhouse, and Aaron L. Barth, *Killdeer Mountain Battlefield Survey: ABPP Grant No. GA-2287-13-017* (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2018), 56.



allowed the women and children to escape at the Battle of Whitestone Hill.<sup>2</sup> Balancing these acts of mercy towards and heartbreaking murder of noncombatants, the subject of who committed these acts becomes the center of the question. Many inexperienced volunteers were mustered from Minnesota specifically for this campaign, but good portions of the units had previous service fighting Confederates in the Western Theater of the Civil War.<sup>3</sup> These men had fought a well-trained, disciplined enemy, just like they would see in the Dakota Territory, but never intentionally targeted noncombatants.<sup>4</sup> Yet, while U.S. soldiers were fighting a combined force of Lakota and Dakota peoples, firing on civilians, taking scalps, and beheading slain corpses occurred.<sup>5</sup> This duplicity of behavior must have had a powerful source because it was not just men of the same time period, but the exact same men who participated in both theaters of war and behaved night and day differently. The difference lay in their commanders' attitudes towards the enemy and the behaviors the command elements allowed and encouraged within their subordinates' ranks. The key elements that made disciplined American soldiers in the US-Dakota War commit atrocities against fallen enemies and noncombatants were the illegal and immoral actions passively permitted, acquiesced through slight penalties, and outright ordered by ranking army commanders prior to and during the campaigns.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas D. Isern, Richard Rothaus, Dakota Goodhouse, and Aaron L. Barth, *Battles and Forts of the Dakota War: ABPP Grant No. GA-2287-13-016* (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2018), 96-97.

<sup>3</sup> Micheal Clodfelter, *The Dakota War: The United States Army Versus the Sioux, 1862-1865* (McFarland & Company, Inc., 1998), 122-123, 158; Kurt D. Bergemann, *Brackett's Battalion: Minnesota Cavalry in the Civil War and Dakota War* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2004), 6-11; William Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign," *National Tribune*, October 05, 1899, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 211; Isern et al., *Killdeer Mountain Battlefield Survey*, 56.

<sup>5</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 211; Isern et al., *Killdeer Mountain Battlefield Survey*, 56, 58, 65-66; Seeger, William, "Sully's Sioux Campaign," *National Tribune*, October 12, 1899, 7; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 160-161.

EuroAmericans have traded with, interacted with, made formal agreements with, and eventually lived near Indigenous American tribes living in the vicinity of the Red River and Missouri River since French explorer François La Vérendrye laid imperial claim in 1743.<sup>6</sup> It is important to remember that this region was not static and awaiting EuroAmerican settlers' developments, but full of people that hunted, fished, traded, moved around, and made war with each other. The Dakota people, who were and are among the most famous of all the Indigenous people groups to inhabit the North American continent, responded to this environment by expanding their borders west and north from modern southwestern Minnesota as other tribes, like the Arikaras, moved away due to disease epidemics and war.<sup>7</sup> By the 1850s, the Dakota people had spread successfully enough that three dialects were noticeable, the Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota, and bands of people were identifiable in each. For example, the Santee Dakota in Minnesota had four bands, including the Wahpeton, Wapekute, Mdewakanton, and Sisseton bands.<sup>8</sup> Acknowledging this diversity and agency is significantly important in studying the US-Dakota War because we may grasp how grand of scope the task was to "punish the murderous Sioux for their depredations of two years ago."<sup>9</sup> The actions of one Dakota band did not necessarily speak for the desires of all the Dakota people and some, such as the Hunkpapa Lakota who fought at the Battle of Killdeer Mountain, were not even in Minnesota during the

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<sup>6</sup> Molly P. Rozum, *Grasslands Grown: Creating Place on the U.S. Northern Plains and Canadian Prairies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Doreen Chaky, *Terrible Justice: Sioux Chiefs and U.S. Soldiers on the Upper Missouri, 1854-1868* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 21-23.

<sup>8</sup> The name 'Sioux,' which is popularly associated with the entirety of the Dakota nations, is not necessarily considered an insulting term. However, its origin does trace back to how enemy Indigenous peoples described the Dakota to EuroAmerican explorers and, therefore, not a name the Dakota, Lakota, or Nakota called themselves. Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 4-5; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 22; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 17-19.

<sup>9</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"

1862 fighting.<sup>10</sup> This will be an important point in discerning the intent of Brigadier General Alfred Sully and the American forces invading the Dakota Territory as distinguishing which parties were truly at fault seems to fall to the wayside.

Minnesota was not the first scene of violence between United States (U.S.) citizens and the Dakota people groups. The 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie, in Wyoming, was intended by the U.S. government to allow peaceful passage of EuroAmerican settlers, the building of army forts in the region, and annuities to various Indigenous nations in return.<sup>11</sup> Contrary to the independent nature of Dakota nations and the practice of councils for making decisions, the U.S. representatives insisted that one Brulé Lakota chief Conquering Bear speak for all Dakota people.<sup>12</sup> In 1854, a hot-headed Second Lieutenant John L. Grattan was ordered to go settle a dispute over a slaughtered cow, but instead escalated the situation to where his men shot this same Conquering Bear and in return were all killed, thirty soldiers total, by the Brulé camp.<sup>13</sup> This act confused and fired the western Lakota people since a man they highly esteemed, and they believed was esteemed by EuroAmericans, was so senselessly killed. A reprisal attack by General William S. Harney at Blue Water Creek intensified the matter further and formal armed conflict would exist between the Dakota peoples and U.S. citizens until the Wounded Knee massacre at Pine Ridge in 1890.<sup>14</sup>

What was known then as the Grattan Massacre laid seedlings of fear in the hearts of U.S. settlers. The raids of Inkpaduta in March 1857 at Spirit Lake, Iowa and Springfield, Minnesota

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<sup>10</sup> Isern et al., *Killdeer Mountain Battlefield Survey*, 35-36; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 27.

<sup>11</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 8; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 26-27.

<sup>12</sup> Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 8-9; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 30-33; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 19-20.

<sup>14</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 8; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 35-40; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 19-20.

left behind around forty murdered settlers, blossoming that fear into full panic.<sup>15</sup> On the Santee Dakota side in Minnesota, government annuities were late, their people were starving, and years of unfair dealings with traders had increased feelings of distrust and anger. Thus, pressures boiling for both Santee Dakota and U.S. settlers, an incident over eggs near Acton Township in August 1862 led to several killings of settlers by the hands of four young Mdewakanton braves. The Santee Dakota bands, after this inciting incident, rebelled against the U.S. government and killed hundreds of Minnesota settlers in several days.<sup>16</sup> Governor Alexander Ramsey appointed Henry H. Sibley a Colonel in the volunteers, who gathered forces and set out to blunt the Dakota attacks. At the Battle of Wood Lake, the Dakota momentum was checked and a few thousand were taken prisoner.<sup>17</sup> Although the immediate surge of violence had stopped, this event was the impetus for an outcry of vengeance from Minnesotans. Governor Ramsey and the settlers' voices reached President Lincoln, who ordered the creation of the Department of the Northwest, under General John Pope, to assault the Dakota further.<sup>18</sup>

What followed was a series of technically three campaigns each summer of 1863-1865. In 1863, now-promoted General Sibley and the specially selected General Alfred Sully departed the Minnesota border for the Dakota Territory. The intent was to create a large pincer movement with Gen. Sibley heading west towards Devil's Lake and Gen. Sully coming from the south by way of Fort Pierre and the Missouri River.<sup>19</sup> Contrary to Gen. Pope's strategy, neither force found the other and each conducted separate engagements with various bands of Lakota and

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<sup>15</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 12-14; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 88-89; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 23-34.

<sup>16</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 22-24; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 132-137; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 35-40.

<sup>17</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 26-30; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 137-140; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 52-61.

<sup>18</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 31-33; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 135-137; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 45-47.

<sup>19</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 80; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 88.

Dakota people. Gen. Sibley was given battle at Big Mound, Dead Buffalo Lake, and Stony Lake, as his few thousand soldiers pursued several thousand Dakota and Lakota fighters giving ground and conducting delaying actions west towards the Missouri River.<sup>20</sup> Gen. Sully missed Gen. Sibley and fought a lone action at the Battle of Whitestone Hill, a large engagement that resulted in the deaths of many Yanktonai Nakota.<sup>21</sup>

The following year, only Gen. Sully departed west for further engagements to quell the demands for further military action. Following the Missouri River as a logistics line, Gen. Sully followed his scouts to a large gathering of Lakota and Dakota allies awaiting him at ground of their choosing.<sup>22</sup> In the largest engagement of U.S. soldiers and Indigenous people in the American West, Gen. Sully won the Battle of Killdeer Mountain by confounding the Dakota and Lakota battleplan through launching explosive artillery into the women and children.<sup>23</sup> After destroying the winter supplies in the camp, Gen. Sully led his troops in a harried retrograde action towards the Missouri River supply line as Lakota and Dakota warriors engaged him constantly in the Battle of the Badlands.<sup>24</sup> This concluded the major engagements in the Dakota Territory as Gen. Sully's 1865 campaign met and fought no one, the Dakota and Lakota avoiding further pitched battle.

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<sup>20</sup> Isern et al., *Battles and Forts of the Dakota War*, 43-77; Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 99-128; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 163-167; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 94-113.

<sup>21</sup> Kimball Banks, Byron Olson, Dakota Goodhouse, Aaron Barth, and Lorna Meidinger, *Whitestone Hill Application for Registration of Historical Places* (United States Department of the Interior: National Park Service, 2013), 9-33; Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 153-176; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 169-179; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 125-146.

<sup>22</sup> Isern et al., *Killdeer Mountain Battlefield Survey*, 35-36.

<sup>23</sup> Isern et al., *Killdeer Mountain Battlefield Survey*, 46-67; Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 202-219; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 209-213; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 166-167.

<sup>24</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 220-246; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 217-222; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 178-187.

The story of the US-Dakota War is a complex evolution of voices, some written, some oral, and some etched in stone monuments. In short, the Dakota have been a focal point of the story as they transition from devils, to completely absent, and finally to conscious actors. The view of U.S. soldiers has changed as well, moving from defenders of the innocent, to heroes, to hooligans, and eventually settling now as ordinary men pushed to their personal extremes. This narrative does not belong to historians alone but began during the marches as U.S. participants recorded their experiences in diaries and letters back home. These recorded writings were the first entries in the public memory of the event for EuroAmerican society. Writing with an awareness of their contribution to how people will remember the war, what they reveal, discuss, highlight, and omit are clues to the interpretation they wished to create. Corporal William Seeger is shockingly honest in his recollections of the war in an 1899 edition of the newspaper the *National Tribune*. At the Battle of Killdeer Mountain, he openly admits to men refusing to take prisoners, the disadvantage of Dakota and Lakota arms against U.S. breech-loading rifles, and taking a scalp from a slain enemy.<sup>25</sup> Distributed to a wide audience, this published account speaks to the widespread approval of these actions even thirty years later. It is doubtful that a newspaper would release such statements unless there was little fear of public outcry, hence Seeger's willingness to share such revealing details.

Roos was sixty years old in 1862 and fighting in the American Civil War when news came that "the Indians, 10,000 men strong, had attacked northwestern Minnesota and murdered about 1,000 people and ravished [sic] the country."<sup>26</sup> His unit, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Minnesota Regiment, was sent to relieve Fort Abercrombie. While there, he records seeing the aftereffects of the fighting,

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<sup>25</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"

<sup>26</sup> Carl Roos, "Carl Roos' Civil War Diary" Charles John LaVine, August, 2006, 53.

the fates of men, women, and children attacked, but does not add any personal feelings on the matter. He simply writes down what happens. Incredibly opinionated throughout the rest of his diary on war, religion, and his fellow soldiers, the lack of detail of what he sees around Fort Abercrombie is arresting. Roos does not differentiate between separate Indigenous bands and only refers to them as 'Indians,' so perhaps his record of events is meant to stand for itself.<sup>27</sup> This diary contrasts strongly with others, like Seeger's, who share powerful emotions over the war.

For Ole Orland, the details of the war elicit no dramatic language or expressive emotion. He writes about the Battle of Killdeer Mountain with so little detail that it is hard to interpret which fight took place. He relates the beheading of killed Lakota enemies with the same level approach to the weather: "Returned about dark to Camp with the heads of three Indians... Was verry [sic] hot."<sup>28</sup> Whether Orland simply lacked dramatic flair is irrelevant when we consider that this report encompassed the 1864 expedition to his readers. Public memory would find little reason for excitement with this account and others that related the details as a job that required doing, nothing more. Thus, raging vengeance is again tempered by level-headedness, which is encapsulated by Orland.

The next influence on public memory was the memorials established at battlefield sites and memorials to Minnesota settlers killed in 1862. Many of the battles are barely represented by markers and the ones that do contain plaques are small and weathered. The Battle of Big Mound site has a rock engraving that is hard to read and a small star for the killed Surgeon Weiser.<sup>29</sup> The

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<sup>27</sup> Roos, "Carl Roos' Civil War Diary," 57-58.

<sup>28</sup> Ole Orland, "The Diary of Ole N. Orland, a soldier with Company A, First Regiment, Dakota Cavalry, with Sully's Expedition to Dakota Territory in 1864" State Historical Society of North Dakota, 1, 6.

<sup>29</sup> Isern et al., *Battles and Forts of the Dakota War*, 59-60.

Battle of Stony Lake site's plaque contains two paragraphs and sparse details on the fighting.<sup>30</sup> Little understanding of the scope of the war can be gleaned by these resources and no Dakota or Lakota influence is mentioned. Therefore, visitors to the sites in the years following would need to sate their desire for elaboration elsewhere, likely from veterans or their diaries, and their impact on the public memory of the war would only grow.

During the 1890s, major government works to fully encapsulate the reports and accounts of the American Civil War and the US-Dakota War were published. Incredible undertakings, these volumes provide great detail on the correspondences of the war but must be considered carefully. The authors are often high-ranking, politically minded men and they often omit details that may bring stains to their reputations. For example, *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars 1861-1865* contains reports written by then Colonel Sibley to free settler prisoners among the "savages", but no letters in reply by Little Crow and his compatriots are included, simply paraphrasing of their internal conversation that is doubtful.<sup>31</sup> Gen. Sully writes to his superior on the positive outcome of the Battle of Killdeer Mountain and mentions a key turning point in the fighting when "The artillery fire soon drove them out of their strong positions...with Brackett's battalion, moving up on the right."<sup>32</sup> Although true, the fact that the artillery mainly fell on defenseless women and children is left out. Thus, these official reports carried lots of weight in the narrative of the US-Dakota War and stood as testaments, given their authors. It is only with recent academic scholarship that the holes in the reports are identified and seriously discussed.

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<sup>30</sup> Isern et al., *Battles and Forts of the Dakota War*, 76.

<sup>31</sup> The Board of Commissioners, *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars 1861-1865* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Company, 1890) 742-746.

<sup>32</sup> Report of Alfred Sully, July 31, 1864. U.S. War Department. *War of the Rebellion*, ser. 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, 143.



In Minnesota, several markers, usually tall stone obelisks and cairns, commemorate the dead settlers. The Fort Ridgely State Monument, created in 1911, was established by the state legislature to recognize the battle sites in the area and was a step towards preserving the location for educating the public.<sup>33</sup> Although updated by the Minnesota Historical Society in 1971, the wording highlights the bravery and skill of the fort defenders and their use of artillery and give no agency to the assaults commanded by Dakota leaders. Thus, this site perpetuates a lack of depth in the Dakota, whom the plaque labels ‘Sioux’, and accentuates the gallantry of the Minnesota soldiers. The Lake Shetek State Monument is dedicated to fifteen victims of the fighting. Completed in 1925, the engraving simply reads “Humanity”, followed by the names of the dead and their ages, most of whom were children under ten years old.<sup>34</sup> The desired effect is quite clear as the viewer stands stunned, likely wondering what monsters could kill children. Painting the Dakota in such ways had a harsh impact on the flow of public memory by focusing on a narrow point of depredations.

Non-academic historians propagated the view of Dakota people as murderous villains even further in their published works. Doane Robinson, the Secretary of the South Dakota Department of History, wrote a history of the Dakota in 1904 that describes the Lake Shetek attack as an indiscriminate massacre of a dozen families.<sup>35</sup> Robinson seems to agree with Gen. Pope that every Dakota prisoner taken by Gen. Sibley was “guilty of murder or the violation of young girls” and regrets Lincoln’s leniency. He cites no sources. This harsh view of Indigenous

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<sup>33</sup> “Monument Narratives,” *Family and Friends of Dakota Uprising Victims: 1862 U.S. – Dakota War in Minnesota*, November 30, 2021, <http://www.dakotavictims1862.com/monuments/index.html>

<sup>34</sup> “Monument Narratives,” *Family and Friends of Dakota Uprising Victims: 1862 U.S. – Dakota War in Minnesota*, November 30, 2021, <http://www.dakotavictims1862.com/monuments/index.html>

<sup>35</sup> Doane Robinson, *A History of the Dakota or Sioux Indians: From their earliest traditions and first contact with white men to the final settlement of the last of them upon reservations and the consequent abandonment of the old tribal life* (South Dakota, 1904), 305.

people reached a large audience of readers. Thus, many EuroAmerican people were educated to see Indigenous people as murderers, rapists, and little more. Cyrus Townsend Brady is another non-academic writer that produced the originally 1904 work *Indian Fights and Fighters*. Although Brady includes testimonies from veterans of the fights he writes about, the eyewitness accounts are solely EuroAmerican. James T. King's 1971 introduction calls Brady's book "a white man's history of the Indian wars", drawing attention to the complete lack of Indigenous sources.<sup>36</sup> Descriptions of scalping killed enemies and narrowing in on Indian "cruelty and brutality" had the effect of making heroes of every EuroAmerican fighter on the plains encountering a savage, mindless enemy.<sup>37</sup> It is no small wonder that consumers of these works in American society likely adapted games of 'cowboys and Indians', with the Indians always the bad guys, always the losers.

Professional, trained academics write with the goal of taking no sides and objectively analyzing the sources for a truer discourse on the US-Dakota War. Each author, however, does have evidence of personal bias in their works. Charles M. Oehler published *The Great Sioux Uprising* in 1959 through Oxford University Press, but still propagates the viciousness of Sioux antagonists by writing about children burned alive, babies tomahawked, and pregnant girls ripped open.<sup>38</sup> Critical of how the U.S. government handled the treaties in 1851 and 1858, Oehler is overly taken by racial differences to be considered objective.<sup>39</sup> Micheal Clodfelter's *The Dakota War: The United States Army Versus the Sioux, 1862-1865* sticks to traditional military

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<sup>36</sup> Cyrus Townsend Brady, *Indian Fights and Fighters* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), xvi.

<sup>37</sup> Brady, *Indian Fights and Fighters*, 118, 185.

<sup>38</sup> C. M. Oehler, *The Great Sioux Uprising* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 51, 56, 57.

<sup>39</sup> Oehler, *The Great Sioux Uprising*, 13.

dissection of the fighting. Published in 1998, Clodfelter is among historians who focus on generals moving formations around the battlefield with little discussion on the Indigenous actors.

Doreen Chaky's *Terrible Justice: Sioux Chiefs and U.S. Soldiers on the Upper Missouri, 1854-1868* reaches back before 1862 to include numerous interactions between the U.S. and Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota prior to the war. This examination develops the past actions, whether killings or broken treaties, that increased the tension among Indigenous and EuroAmerican interactions. Indigenous sources come to the fore in a way unseen before and add to their depth as sentient people groups. Paul Beck's *Columns of Vengeance: Soldiers, Sioux, and the Punitive Expeditions 1863-1864* focuses on the U.S. soldier through their diaries and letters. This is a post-Vietnam approach to studying the foot soldiers' lives and values, which Beck attempts in the Dakota forces as well, but does not have the sources to validate these voices. Beck is important for discussing the ugly sides of war and the weight upon the soldiers and society. Academic authors like Chaky and Beck shaped the narrative of the US-Dakota War further by analyzing Indigenous voices and agency while examining soldier-level opinions and feelings. Though these efforts, the Dakota stop standing as ferocious straw men and U.S. troops are allowed doubt, anger, indifference, and desires for revenge.

Lastly, National Park Service reports represent the most recent scholarly works on the US-Dakota War. Historians coupled primary sources with modern military assessments of the physical terrain, KOCOA analysis, as well as previously unutilized Indigenous sources.<sup>40</sup> This work produced the most comprehensive acknowledgement of agency and understanding of an opponents' strengths and weaknesses in both the Dakota and U.S. army. For example, Gen. Sully

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<sup>40</sup> Isern et al., *Battles and Forts of the Dakota War*, 199-100, 105.

purposefully burned abandoned winter supplies as a logistical assault impacted more Lakota and Dakota people than bullets.<sup>41</sup> This evaluation compliments other current scholarly work on logistical attacks, such as Eliot West's conclusions that U.S. army forts in key river valleys cut Indigenous access to vital river valleys and hamstrung their supply system.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Lakota and Dakota allies did not hide their presence from Gen. Sully, desiring to give battle on their chosen ground, and assaulted the U.S. troops with a battleplan accounting for their weaponry.<sup>43</sup> This presents the Indigenous forces as thinking, planning, and tactically gifted in a way never before acknowledged as the sources are objectively weighed.

The public memory of the US-Dakota War has therefore changed drastically in roughly a century and a half with many contributors to the narrative. New scholarly work has altered the picture of Indigenous forces the most, allowing for their skill and clear planning to be heard. U.S. troops are also considered differently as their doubts and oppositions give them a multi-faceted appearance. It is through the combined sum of all of these voices, books, reports, and images that the US-Dakota War is understood today.

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<sup>41</sup> Isern et al., *Killdeer Mountain Battlefield Survey*, 66.

<sup>42</sup> Eliot West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, & the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 275-286.

<sup>43</sup> Isern et al., *Killdeer Mountain Battlefield Survey*, 47, 52-59.

## **CHAPTER TWO: WRITING OUR OWN MORAL CODE: WILLIAM SEEGER AND THE MEN OF BRACKETT'S BATTALION SEEK JUSTICE IN THE 1864 DAKOTA WAR CAMPAIGN**

Dusk had fallen on the quiet prairie of the Dakota territory on June 23, 1864. Brigadier General Alfred Sully's columns of Iowans and Minnesotans had made camp along the Missouri River near Fort Sully, pitching tents, stoking fires, and tethering horses to picket-pins. Picket details received their orders and set out on the perimeters, not just for the federal troops, but for the two hundred Dakota prisoners under military escort to their reservation at the Crow Creek Agency.<sup>44</sup> The men assigned as guards were not ordered to keep the Indigenous people from escaping, but to prevent US cavalymen from molesting them as they rested. As Sully's force lay down under shelter-tents, the familiar crack of a Sharp's carbine raised the alarm. Armed men rushed through camp to discover the source: a Minnesota cavalry trooper from Brackett's Battalion Minnesota Cavalry stood over four bleeding Dakota, one of them clearly dead. The shot came from the carbine of Corporal James (Jim) Edwards and the officers present conducted a speedy investigation which determined the event to be an accident.<sup>45</sup>

How could one bullet accidentally strike four people, who were all supposed to be resting while the pickets would supposedly be facing outwards? The answer is a complicated one, not of forensic science, but of the psychology of the men who made the determination of the truth behind the event. Jim Edwards was a veteran, and while he had been away fighting for the preservation of the Union, his mother had been killed and his sisters stolen during the initial

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<sup>44</sup> William Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign," *National Tribune*, October 05, 1899, 7.

<sup>45</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"

fighting of the US-Dakota War of 1862-1865.<sup>46</sup> Upon evaluating evidence, the officers simply determined that Minnesota troopers would not guard the Dakota any longer, and their camps would be separated as much as possible. This decision can best be understood when one remembers that the expeditions of Sully in 1863, 1864, and 1865 were punitive against all Sioux tribes, a much different fight than the one taking place in the southern United States.<sup>47</sup> Fighting Confederate rebels meant setting one's face against a fellow white, a Christian enemy, someone who had not personally harmed anyone the federal troops knew. Fighting Indians was waging war against an 'other', both in religion and race, and a foe that had spilled the blood of families the soldier knew, some of them kin of cavalymen to their left and right.<sup>48</sup> William Seeger was a US cavalry soldier in Brackett's Battalion and a comrade of Jim Edwards on Sully's 1864 campaign. His story of events published in the *National Tribune* more than thirty years after the fact shows how these men framed their attitudes towards enemy Dakota before leaving Minnesota and on the march. Soldiers like Seeger prepared for war against Indians differently than they did against Confederates. They harbored deeply cemented bloodlust that was built upon personal tragedies, acts of violence before and during the campaign, the passive approval from senior leaders, and vows of vengeance among the brotherhood of the unit.

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<sup>46</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"

<sup>47</sup> The term Sioux will be used only to describe the entirety of Oceti Sakowin, including Dakota, Nakota, and Lakota people ranging from modern Montana to Minnesota, in the context of Sully and his forces' understanding, as well as the context of United States citizens' understanding.

<sup>48</sup> The term Indians will be used only to address and highlight the opinion and wording of the time of United States citizens and soldiers regarding all Indigenous Americans. This is not a derogatory term relating to Plains Indian tribes. It will be used to draw attention to the sometimes racist and often over-encapsulating simplification as they addressed Indigenous Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

William Seeger was a Russian-born child of two German parents whose family emigrated to United States in 1852, living in Cincinnati, Ohio and St. Paul, Minnesota.<sup>49</sup> He was only seventeen years old when he left his family near Luner in 1861 to join recruits heading for Fort Snelling, Minnesota. Although almost rejected for his age, he was taken on due to his skills as a saddler and served with the 5<sup>th</sup> Iowa Volunteer Cavalry Regiment. After his initial term of military service, Seeger was mustered out on January 1, 1864, having suffered injury to his eyes due to measles. This did not end his military service as he re-enlisted into Brackett's Battalion in March 1864 and stayed in uniform until he was mustered out in June 1866. By 1880 Seeger was living in Lake Crystal, Blue Earth county, Minnesota, with his wife Abvalia and their three children. William Seeger died in 1908 on his birthday, May 4, at the age of sixty-four, in Excelsior, Minnesota.<sup>50</sup>

The 5<sup>th</sup> Iowa served in the western theater of the American Civil War from December 20, 1862 to August 11, 1865 and the Minnesota-originated companies G, I, and K completed three years with them until they were mustered out for the purpose of joining Brackett's Independent Battalion, Minnesota Cavalry, under Major Alfred B. Brackett.<sup>51</sup> Brackett's Battalion, as the Minnesota cavalry battalion was called, was brought under the service of Major General John Pope's Department of the Northwest and organized under First Brigade alongside the 6<sup>th</sup> Iowa Cavalry, all units under the direction of Brigadier General Alfred Sully. This was to be a second

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<sup>49</sup> Edward D Neill, eds., *History of the Minnesota Valley, Including the Explorers and Pioneers of Minnesota* (Minneapolis: North Star Publishing Company, 1882), December 6, 2020,

<https://books.google.com/books?id=GGdAAAAAYAAJ&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q=seeger&f=false>

<sup>50</sup> William Seeger Discharge, *Muster-Out Roll*, June 1, 1866; William Seeger 1880 Census

Report, *Joshua Migley Lake Crystal, Blue Earth, Minnesota Census Report 1880*, June 18, 1880; "Of Interest in the City," *New Ulm Review*, May 6, 1908, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89081128/1908-05-06/ed-1/seq-1/>

<sup>51</sup> Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 155-158.; Bergemann, *Brackett's Battalion*, 3-21.

time, in 1864, that Sully would lead federal soldiers into the Dakota territory protecting the Minnesota frontier and colonization of the western territories.<sup>52</sup>

The outbreak of the US-Dakota War in Minnesota of 1862 was a tragic climax to years of strained relations between Upper and Lower Santee Bands of Dakota living in Minnesota beside white settlers. Two major land treaties, one in 1851 and one in 1858, had reduced great tracts of former Santee land to a small reservation along the Minnesota River. Dakota people became dependent on the annuity payments to support their families. Greedy annuity agents and traders often took government payment money to cover debts owed to them from when the Santee Dakota bought food on credit. These Minnesota Dakota were not the only ones seeing their lands pressured by white settlers' presence as Hunkpapas and Sihasapas along the Upper Missouri River had uneasy exchanges with men like Captain William Reynolds who threatened them with extermination. This generated pessimism of the future for many Lakota and fear of losing their homelands. As the Civil War raged, gold became rare and food was often late. The Dakota approached annuity agents to request assistance for starving families and were met with general indifference.<sup>53</sup>

Forced into a dire position with no way to reliably take care of their loved ones, spurned by years of cheating, lying traders and agents, and sensing that the Civil War was taking a drastic toll on white Minnesotans, the Dakota Santee were ready for war. In August 1862, four Dakota young men killed several men, women, and children in Acton, Minnesota. The original four Dakota men road south gathering allies, including Chief Red Middle Voice, Shakopee, Little Crow, and hundreds of Dakota warriors. About six hundred citizens of Minnesota died in the

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<sup>52</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 158.

<sup>53</sup> Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 37-39; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 101-107.



fighting and Governor Ramsey reacted by dispatching Henry H. Sibley with a few hundred men to pacify the situation which ended in a small battle at Wood Lake and the surrender of 2,000 Santee. Of these prisoners, thirty-eight would be hanged in Mankato in the largest mass execution in United States history. This would not be enough to satisfy the screams for vengeance across Minnesota, which led to Sully's three punitive expeditions into the Dakota Territory in 1863, 1864, and 1865.<sup>54</sup>

Sully led thousands of federal soldiers into the Dakota Territory to punish the Dakota for the Minnesota settlers' deaths, yet engaged many tribes like the Hunkpapa who had nothing to do with the fighting in Minnesota and wished to defend their homelands. He was minorly successful in once again bringing fear of United States' power to the Dakota nations and Brigadier General Henry Sibley's work in 1862 stopped large Santee attacks from occurring in Minnesota ever again, but Sully's fight brought more combatants into the fray, not less. Despite having intelligent men like Sibley in 1863 who had traded with Santee tribes for over twenty years, spoke their languages, and was personal friends with many Santee chiefs like Little Crow, the punitive expeditions attacked all Dakota, Nakota, and Lakota people they encountered. While many Dakota fled to Canada or west to the Missouri River, Sully's expedition found and engaged others, some of them Lakota people who had nothing to do with the 1862 fighting. Regardless, the engagements of Big Mound, Dead Buffalo Lake, Stony Lake, and Whitestone Hill, caused dozens of Dakota casualties from conflict and likely many more through impoverishment once United States troops destroyed their tepees and food stores.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 35-61; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 131-142.

<sup>55</sup> Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 88-154.; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 143-182.; Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 99-176.

In 1864 Sully once again set forth to put an exclamation point on the previous year's combat. This was the campaign that William Seeger and his compatriots in Brackett's Battalion joined in. Multiple factors brought this expedition to bear, including greed for Dakota Territory land and Montana gold, fear that the Dakota still had enough strength to raid Minnesotan farmland, and a strong desire to see those Santee still thought guilty of the 1862 killings brought to a terrible end. What resulted was a long march to the Battle of Killdeer Mountain, a close victory for Sully where a conglomeration of Oceti Sakowin were attacked and their supplies obliterated, a far greater threat to their survival than bullets. The battleplan of the Indians was working as dismounted white soldiers came closer to ravines holding hidden akicita waiting to get close with the cavalymen, but Sully's orders to shell the encampment with women and children turned the tides in his favor. The artillery attack forced the akicita to evacuate the mountainside of their families, which was successful thanks to a suicidal frontal charge of Wahpekute.<sup>56</sup>

The change in how the professional historical community has viewed and interpreted the US-Dakota War in Dakota Territory has been a shift in attentions to primary characters in the action. What was once the study of federal generals maneuvering regiments against groups of Indian belligerents has transformed into the micro-level view of inter-tribal warfare, soldier personal feelings, and unsung heroes of varying races. Micheal Clodfelter, who published his book *The Dakota War: The United States Army Versus the Sioux, 1862-1865* in 1998, provides a traditional military approach to the campaigns. He does poor work in giving agency to Native Americans, despite a chapter reviewing the background of Chief Little Crow and the

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<sup>56</sup> Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 155-176, 207-213.; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 163-182.; Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 176-219.

complications surrounding this controversial figure. Although Dakota voices are heard, once the campaigns begin, most of the sources are from the federal soldiers. Clodfelter also gives credence to Dakota accounts of the aftermath of battles in counterpoint to Sully and other US commanders' assessments, sifting to find the true results of killed and wounded on both sides somewhere in between. His analysis is helpful in understanding the previous historical viewpoint on the Dakota War, but lacks Indian agency.

Doreen Chaky, who published *Terrible Justice: Sioux Chiefs and U.S. Soldiers on the Upper Missouri, 1854-1868* in 2012, swings the focus to the Dakota people. Her goal is to give a platform to the Dakota leaders who attempted to settle matters with words and diplomacy instead of heated violence. Although not excusing the Minnesota violence of 1862, she delves further into the starving condition of all Lakota and Dakota people and other awful events, such as the murder of Mato-cu-wi-hu, that bred anger among them. Chaky discusses the early military successes in 1862 against the slowly mobilized and slow-moving United States relief forces under Sibley which had little mention previously, as it showcased federal failures, but also uses the word rape when condemning Santee treatment of white Minnesotans. She examines the actions of Santee who helped settlers escape and those that betrayed settlers to their violent deaths. The Santee who did not run away but stayed in Minnesota planting crops and staying loyal to the United States are given notice. Finally, heroes such as Eagle Woman are praised for saving the Galpin family, although they were white.<sup>57</sup>

*Columns of Vengeance: Soldiers, Sioux, and the Punitive Expeditions 1863-1864* is Minnesota-born Paul Beck's work, published in 2013, that explores the soldiers who fought for

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<sup>57</sup> Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 13-14, 131-147.

Sibley, Sully, and Pope. From the beginning of his book, he delves into the motivations for soldiers to join as many hastily created units draw volunteers for the newly created Department of the Northwest. Using a plethora of diaries and letters, he shows that many federal soldiers wanted bloody vengeance that could barely be slaked, while others saw political strings pulled by greedy entrepreneurs. Beck does not forget to mention Santee leaders like Standing Buffalo who, having personal ties to Sibley, wrote to him expressing his desire not to fight.

Unfortunately, Dakota chiefs were not absolute monarchs and warriors from Standing Buffalo's tribe participated in the attack on Ft. Abercrombie, further illustrating the internal conflicts the Santees themselves faced. Even the love soldiers had for Sully, showing why they were willing to follow him into the hellscape of the Badlands, is wonderfully captured by Beck. Voices from the rank and file are key for historians to interpret why men marched hundreds of miles after the tribes on the plains.

These historians have done excellent service in furthering the modern understanding of the Dakota War and helped the academic community understand it in context with the many years of conflict between white settlers and Indian people who had lived and traded beside each other. As settlers and miners flooded westward, interactions between whites and Indians grew exponentially and Clodfelter, Chaky, and Beck draw them all together. However, the personal narrative of William Seeger that he provided to the *National Tribune* newspaper in 1899 peels back another layer of the motivations and factors that drove federal soldiers to campaign with barbarism. This demands further analysis. What happened that caused men, especially Minnesota settlers, to not take prisoners and conduct indiscriminate warfare against the Dakota?

Seeger's story is full of youthful optimism. Throughout the narrative related to the *National Tribune*, he gives his account as a cavalryman riding west, fighting in the Battle of

Killdeer Mountain and the Battle of the Badlands. They reach winter quarters haggard and set out on the following spring, but Seeger's descriptions of 1865 are sparse. At the beginning of the 1864 campaign, Seeger does note that most of the men in the four companies of Brackett's Battalion, designated Company A to Company D, were present with the 5<sup>th</sup> Iowa in service south, but only Company D has veterans of Sibley's 1862 and 1863 campaigns. After recruitments filled vacancies and brought the battalion to full strength, many of the new recruits came from southeast Minnesota and forty-one were from Olmsted County alone. Seeger says they are, "...a motley crowd; some are old soldiers that seen service in other organizations, but they are mostly young men, or rather boys; some few are older men who are already gray, and who ought to have known better than to enlist."<sup>58</sup> To call his comrades 'boys' is rather telling of the fresh faces around as Seeger is nineteen years old himself. Nonetheless, he is proud of them and, after some intense drilling, only three months later in May of 1864 his unit marched past his family home in front of mom, dad, brothers, and sisters. He calls them a "good, hardy-looking lot of soldiers" and makes no mention of wanting to stay with his relatives over his brothers in arms.<sup>59</sup>

The closeness normally associated with combat troops serving together was not absent in this group. For instance, Seeger was tasked to be the battalion's saddler, a trade skill that had originally earned him a spot in the army three years prior. In March 1864, Solomon Doolittle was selected as the battalion armorer and, probably due to their skilled positions and southern experience with the 5<sup>th</sup> Iowa, the pair were given leave to go hunting and explore with the scouts.

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<sup>58</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"

<sup>59</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"; Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"; Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"; Bergemann, *Brackett's Battalion*, 91.

They were evidently fast friends and stuck together, even during a close call later with raiding Lakota in Dakota Territory. Also, Seeger further expounds on the tight fraternity by relating the story of a whiskey barrel. In preparation for the 1865 campaign, B Company, Brackett's Battalion was drawing rations and accidentally received a barrel of whiskey instead of vinegar. Seeger says, "When the officers found out the mistake and came to Co. B's quarters they found only the empty barrel – and much hilarity."<sup>60</sup> The men had taken full advantage of the commissar's mistake. The ability of the soldiers to create friendships on campaign and take pride in their fellows is evident as Seeger has an air of longing in his recollections.<sup>61</sup>

There were times of need for water and food during the campaign, but Sully was a competent logistician. It is a weak argument to blame a lack of proper supplies and preparations for excessive acts of violence or say there was too much suffering long into the campaign for the soldiers. As already mentioned, Sully eventually led the 1864 columns through the Badlands of Dakota Territory which forced the soldiers and animals to endure a dry, thirsty march. Plus, the slow response in 1862 of the Minnesota state government to protect fleeing white settlers was a rush job. It is incorrect to say this campaign was similarly ill-prepared as Seeger relates to us his equipping in detail and this possibility is quickly laid to rest. "We have received our new arms – light saber, Sharp's breech-loading carbines and Colt's navy revolvers, also our new saddles and equipments, shelter-tents, wagons, mules, harness, and one ambulance. . . new uniforms, blankets."<sup>62</sup> Kurt Bergemann writes that these weapons were "a great improvement over the arms they were issued in 1862."<sup>63</sup> Even the mounts the soldiers ride on were brand new Canadian

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<sup>60</sup> William Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign," *National Tribune*, October 26, 1899, 7.

<sup>61</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"; Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"

<sup>62</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"

<sup>63</sup> Bergemann, *Brackett's Battalion*, 98.

ponies. The opportunities for living large on campaign only improved as, prior to the 1865 campaign, Seeger and Sol Doolittle purchased a milking cow to carry camp gear and provide dairy on the trip. The stresses of living sparsely while pursuing enemies across foreign territory seem light in comparison with what many other contemporary soldiers faced. Except for the possibility of combat, large portions of this account start to sound like a camping adventure. Brutal conditions were not long endured, but sporadic. Elements of nature or dissent among the ranks are not factors that pushed these young boys and men to exceptional violence.<sup>64</sup>

The men of Brackett's Battalion were not devoid of family sentiments nor sociable interactions with regular civilians. Warfare had not made them beasts, for Seeger tells of homegrown volunteers-turned-soldiers who maintained their humanity. For example, in May 1864 the men carried fiddles with them and as they marched west across Minnesota would gather together local girls at Winnebago City for dances long into the night. Bergemann writes that Company B soldiers danced with girls at Garden City and Lieutenant Reed wrote a letter to the *Mankato Weekly Record* about the festivities. Men often lagged behind the moving columns to stay an extra day or two with their families before catching up again. The mental image of mothers and girlfriends waving goodbyes is clearly a cherished memory of Seeger, for he gives ample detail as the battalion moved on. Previous warfare had not robbed veterans entirely of their emotional capacity. The soldiers of Brackett's Battalion sought out, organized, and enjoyed the comforts of family and civilian interactions.<sup>65</sup>

Friction with other battalions within the brigade was light-hearted and both brigades had high morale. Brackett's enlisted men knew each other and came from the same counties and it

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<sup>64</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"; Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"; Bergemann, *Brackett's Battalion*, 98.

<sup>65</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"; Bergemann, *Brackett's Battalion*, 100.

may have been rare that the same men would have relationships within units organized outside the state. Seeger's account gives evidence that men did not need to be neighbors to share soldierly bonds. One account of good-hearted competitive teasing Seeger shares is when the 6<sup>th</sup> Iowa Cavalry and the 7<sup>th</sup> Iowa Cavalry laughed at the Canadian ponies issued to Brackett's Battalion, a much smaller breed than normal American cavalry horses. Seeger recalls with pleasure the sweet revenge of watching these men on the return trip walking next to their "large American horses" while Brackett's Battalion continued to ride ponies "in the pink of condition."<sup>66</sup> The light exchange is an example of esprit de corps existing all across the blue formations and not just in isolated pockets.<sup>67</sup>

Previous expeditions had not broken the spirits or mental health of the men serving beside Seeger. Even the last major battle in the Badlands, their toughest challenge in physical endurance, did not break the men. Seeger's account gives credence to sound and happy soldiers, despite the actions on the battlefield and their strenuous trek through the Badlands. Truly, it would be hard to imagine a worse military experience than marching through the barren Badlands and fighting enemies every step, running cannons by hand, and taking more wounded than any battle before. Seeger remembers, "Our supplies were nearly exhausted... For nine days we have lived, marched, and fought on one cracker a day and very little else."<sup>68</sup> Seeger says that nothing in his military career had ever rivaled it and men were marching with ragged uniforms, long hair and unkempt beards, and lucky ones substituted their military uniforms for "Indian moccasins and buckskin breeches".<sup>69</sup> Another diary by cavalrymen like Frank Myers of

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<sup>66</sup> William Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign," *National Tribune*, October 19, 1899, 7.

<sup>67</sup> Bergemann, *Brackett's Battalion*, 90-91.; Bergemann, *Brackett's Battalion*, 98.

<sup>68</sup> William Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign," *National Tribune*, October 12, 1899, 7.

<sup>69</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"



Company B, 6<sup>th</sup> Iowa Volunteer Cavalry Regiment describes the starving conditions, the oppressive heat, and how they shot mules that gave out. These men must have been a sorry looking lot, trudging towards the Missouri River with emaciated bodies. Yet, when they finally reach a place to rest, draw new and warm clothing, cut their hair, and vote for the presidential election, they look forward to winter quarters at Fort Ridgely, Minnesota. Seeger does not document feelings of grating against Sully for leading them through such a challenging ordeal. The winter quarters are a festive time with families visiting or coming to stay, dances and parties, and regular pay plus furloughs. Seeger spends his vacation time at home, remaining the family-oriented person that does not regret four years of active duty campaigning. These men exhibit the same traits in social behavior that they did prior to leaving.<sup>70</sup>

The practice of brutality against Dakota people on the battlefield was not externally forced upon them but constructed internally and shared among fellow soldiers in the field, nowhere else. Multiple events on the way west created a spirit of violence among the federal soldiers. These must be considered in sequence and aggregation. To begin with, the sense of justice Seeger and the other soldiers believed and acted within was a code they wrote, not the government and not the army. When a recruit named Cyrus Marsten visits a tavern in St. Paul, he is drugged, beaten, and robbed. His companions take up a collection for him and Marsten sent it home to his poor family. This noble act is not the end of the story. Following, a party of twenty ride into town, surround, loot, and burn the establishment and exchange gunfire with the staff. The next day the owner accuses several cavalymen before the garrison commander, and they are locked in the guardhouse. Seeger tells how the arrested men were forcibly liberated by the rest of

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<sup>70</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"; Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"; Frank Myers, "Diary of Frank Myers, Miller, SD, Co B. 6<sup>th</sup> Iowa Cavalry. Sully's Expedition" State Historical Society of North Dakota.

the battalion and at their trials, the Commandant drops every case due to their alibis. Although a complete slap in the face of military protocols, Seeger comments that “it is refreshing to see how the boys stick together through thick and thin, right and wrong.”<sup>71</sup> His moral compass is not limited by the regulations of the army. He can hardly be blamed as the Commandant himself appears complicit, buying the obviously prepared alibis and not addressing the near mutinous actions of a whole battalion. No matter what is written in the rule books, the passive approval by the senior officer sets a new standard of behavior and the first lesson is clear: if the men collectively believe it is right, it is.<sup>72</sup>

This was not the only time commanders sent subtle, unspoken commands to their subordinates. It may not have been on accident that Sully’s columns camped at Spirit Lake, Iowa, and passed close to New Ulm, both containing burial sites of families killed in 1857 and 1862, respectively. Seeger recalls the Spirit Lake killings and one of the perpetrators, Inkpaduta, and vows to “make good Indians of them for sure this time.”<sup>73</sup> Outside of New Ulm, Seeger and his comrades stand around the gravesites of the Bloom family and “we all promised one another to avenge their deaths and not take a prisoner.”<sup>74</sup> This blood rage was not explosive, but a slowly kindled fire burning softly until combatants were engaged. Then, oaths taken between brothers and the remembrance of the dead caused the fires to ignite beyond control.<sup>75</sup>

Before battle is joined, Seeger relates the shooting of four Dakota Santee prisoners under escort west to their reservation by Jim Edwards. As mentioned, one shot is recorded in Seeger’s

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<sup>71</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"

<sup>72</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"

<sup>73</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"

<sup>74</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"

<sup>75</sup> Bergemann, *Brckett's Battalion*, 100.

narrative, but three wounded and one dead are the result. Seeger does not have suspicion for Edwards, but sympathy for the man who lost his mother and sisters to the 1862 uprising. “Imagine his feelings who can?” is the question Seeger challenges as Edwards is ordered to protect the Indians that not only killed so many in Minnesota, but were twelve years later participants in the demise of Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer’s command at Little Big Horn, according to Seeger.<sup>76</sup> Whether this is true of these particular Dakota Santee does not matter because it is what the soldiers believed to be true. They believed it so strongly that federal troops could and did rationalize what is by law murder into a natural course of events, justified and forgivable.<sup>77</sup>

The embers of vengeance lodged deeply in the hearts of Sully’s soldiers. Once fighting ensues with the enemy, Seeger’s account is just as revealing by what is not included. A Union officer named Captain Feilner is ambushed and killed. The three enemy combatants are pursued, caught, shot over two hundred times, and decapitated with the heads stuck on poles by order of Sully.<sup>78</sup> Seeger sums up the fate of the enemy warriors in just twenty-one emotionless words. Seeger writes “They were pursued, overtaken, and killed; their heads cut off and stuck up on poles near the scene of the shooting.”<sup>79</sup> This barbaric action seems a natural response to Seeger. It is apparent that this event stood out as other cavalymen recorded it in their diaries. Ole Johnson with Company D, 6<sup>th</sup> Iowa records the event with two sentences after describing the weather. Frank Myers and Ole Orland with Company A, 1<sup>st</sup> Dakota Cavalry Battalion also remember the event, so the incident was likely known in every regiment under Sully’s command.

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<sup>76</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"

<sup>77</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"

<sup>78</sup> Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 160.

<sup>79</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"

Once again, a senior officer's involvement implies favorable disposition towards the mutilation. Enlisted men cannot be expected to do anything less because by giving these orders, Sully teaches his soldiers that this behavior is acceptable. It is unsurprising that Seeger and others do not view the event as excessive.<sup>80</sup>

When the Battle of Killdeer Mountain is complete, Seeger gives a fair assessment of the fight and Brackett's Battalion's portion in it. He is not full of brash machismo, but accurately records the losses his unit suffered, gives detail of a personally embarrassing separation from his unit that forces him to run for his life, and admits that the Dakota were at a significant disadvantage in ranged weaponry as bow and arrow equipped braves faced breech-loading rifles in federal hands. Given his frank and fair analysis, it is unsurprising that Seeger freely admits that his unit took no prisoners. "We routed and scattered them in all directions, killing a good many, and did not take a single one prisoner." Killdeer Mountain was cleared of Lakota and Dakota non-combatants by Sully firing artillery on the women and children, which was not done on any Confederate battlefield and set an example different from any fight these soldiers had previously been engaged in.<sup>81</sup> After clearing the abandoned encampment, they may have had the opportunity to take prisoners, but Brackett's Battalion did not record any. This was an accomplishment worth more than any citations rendered by the army because it was a promise

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<sup>80</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"; Ole Johnson, "Diary of Ole Johnson 1863-1865" State Historical Society of North Dakota, Small Manuscripts Collection.; Myers, "Diary of Frank Myers,"; Ole Orland, "The Diary of Ole N. Orland, a soldier with Company A, First Regiment, Dakota Cavalry, with Sully's Expedition to Dakota Territory in 1864" State Historical Society of North Dakota.

<sup>81</sup> Sully's order to intentionally aim cannons and fire lethal munitions towards unarmed women and children stands on another level of violence against noncombatants for the Civil War era, but was not the only violence directed at civilians. General William T. Sherman utilized "hard war" to draw the American Civil War to a rapid close, which involved attacks on civilian infrastructure and people. While lethal means were not ordered by Sherman, civilians were the targets to break the back of the Confederate Army logistically and psychologically. See John Fabian Witt, *Lincoln's Code: The Laws of War in American History* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, and New Delhi: Free Press, 2012), 278-280.

kept to his brother cavalymen and their lost loved ones. The reason there is no shame in Seeger's words is because wrongs had been righted according to the code of justice agreed upon by the unit. This was a higher obedience, above the regulations of the army, and above conduct against Confederates in years prior.<sup>82</sup>

Cleaning up operations at Killdeer Mountain included distasteful tasks like burning Dakota supplies, burying fallen comrades, and executing abandoned dogs. Seeger kills a combatant and scalps him. He records that Jim Edwards does the same. On the surface, it appears that giving no quarter was not enough for the men of Brackett's Battalion, but abuses to corpses must naturally follow. However, the State of Minnesota was giving out bounties of \$100 "for hostile Indian scalps", which Seeger is quick to mention, along with the good things such surplus income would do for his family back home.<sup>83</sup> How much culpability for many barbarous acts should be lain at the feet of civilian government at the time, as Dakota warriors did not surrender their scalps peacefully? A hazy gray area exists where mutilations of enemy dead can be called 'war crimes' and 'service to the state government' in the same breath.<sup>84</sup>

Lastly, for contrast, one more examination of William Seeger's morality is in order. On the return trip to Minnesota, a group of white soldiers and miners are encircled, besieged by Hunkpapas who were not in the Minnesota fighting, and rescued by a cavalry force, the famous Fort Dilts siege. Although the following event is debated, Seeger records that several miners poisoned some hardtack with strychnine and leave them for Dakota. The result is the awful death of forty pursuing Hunkpapas and others terribly sick and Seeger does not approve. He says, "It

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<sup>82</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"; Bergemann, *Brackett's Battalion*, 116-118.

<sup>83</sup> Linda M. Clemmons, *Dakota in Exile: The Untold Stories of Captives in the Aftermath of the U.S.-Dakota War* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019), 135; Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 45.

<sup>84</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"

was horrible, to say the least.” Although brief, this statement resounds because this young cavalry soldier is carrying a scalp in his gunnysack. The scalp is not dishonoring, but utilitarian because the reward money benefits his family. The reason Seeger disapproves is because the miners were outside of the pact between soldiers. They were civilians and not privy to the vengeance the soldiers were carrying out in battles. This is important to catalogue so that William Seeger and his fellow soldiers are not written off as savage murderers, but men seeking to bring justice, their justice, to killers. The soldiers’ code is one of their making and not accessible to civilians.<sup>85</sup>

William Seeger’s account in the *National Tribune* is in line with previous arguments but reveals that the formation of the attitudes of soldiers is deeper than stated before. The cavalymen of Brackett’s Battalion wreaked havoc among their enemies in 1864, completing vows of vengeance that they made with one another all along the path out west, not just at the outset. They sought to punish an enemy that had stolen loved ones from their brothers and to do it their way. Soldiers were fueled to commit barbaric acts not by blind fury, but by the carefully nurtured anger that was built upon the memories of tragic events. They were given passive permission by senior officers to act outside the law. Sully gave orders for mutilation of corpses and firing on civilians, which gave soldiers the example of how this fight would be different from any other. In totality, their fight was for revenge and not political ideals.

This analysis relies heavily on the narrative of one cavalryman, William Seeger, and adds wealth to the study of the Dakota War. Other primary sources were put in comparison and Seeger is surprisingly forthcoming and honest with new information that has not been commonly

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<sup>85</sup> Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 192-201; Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"

utilized in secondary sources. He does not shy away from admitting incriminating facts. It is fair to note that his newspaper entry is published thirty years after the events, plenty of time to allow the outside world to influence his source material, likely a journal. One example would be him recounting Sully's description of the Dakota Badlands as "that looks like hell with the fires out."<sup>86</sup> It is incredibly unlikely that Seeger was in a position to overhear the commanding officer mutter these words, therefore some level of later accounts probably affected the relating of his narrative.

The argument presented does not contradict previous works on the US-Dakota War, but amplifies the motivations of one half of the combatants. Beck argues that the soldiers wanted revenge for the 1862 Minnesota killings, but the Seeger narrative shows it was much more than that. They wanted vengeance for their families, for their brothers' families, and for each other. They operated by a standard of justice that was unlike any other because it was created by them, for them, and subtly encouraged by their commanders and government.

This paper is important for analyzing 19<sup>th</sup> century American motivations to leave home as young men and fight wars for years. It gives further layers to the motivations that allowed these men to keep up the fight. It is also important in the conversation about modern warrior culture. Deeply rooted comradery, personal ethics, and rationalization for acts of war change how soldiers view their role within that war. As shown, there is a duty for today's military officers to be highly sensitive to the behaviors encouraged in young soldiers. Appropriate attitudes must be cultivated as soldiers train and prepare for war as this will directly lead to the actions they take.

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<sup>86</sup> Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"; Clodfelter, *Dakota Wars*, 180.

What we learn from this conflict is that right and wrong may shift for a unit collectively based on the orders given by commanders and the behaviors permitted before and during combat.

In future discussions about the Dakota War, the Seeger narrative must be included as a relevant source. William Seeger delivered an open look into his thoughts and beliefs during a difficult war that deserves analysis when studying why Minnesota men rode west.



### **CHAPTER THREE: IMPERFECT VIGILANTES: HOW GENERAL HENRY H. SIBLEY'S SOLDIERS ABUSED THE COURSE OF JUSTICE**

Brigadier General Henry Hastings Sibley's 1863 punitive expedition into Dakota Territory did not encompass the typical image associated with US Army plains warfare. Fast moving, mounted cavalymen with repeating carbines became the standard in later years. Sibley's force contained mostly infantry with some light artillery, mounted rangers, pioneers, as well as logistics in the form of teamsters, wagons, and animals. A surprising aspect may be the approximately seventy native scouts, a mixture of full-blooded and mixed blood, which led the army as Sibley's eyes and ears.<sup>87</sup> The presence of the native scouts among federal forces creates a conundrum with many questions that deserve attention. The matters of how the scouts were recruited, which groups they originated from, and how much US soldiers trusted them have become centers of intense recent study with discouraging findings.

Although commended by Sibley for their bravery and stalwart service, scouts working for the US army were often distrusted by their allies and treated scornfully.<sup>88</sup> Wartime passions cannot excuse this behavior as wrongs far beyond insults or poor food surfaced on the campaign trail. Fatalities with little recompense occurred under Sibley's command with evidence of foul play. The question of who perpetrated the acts is secondary to understanding what type of command environment existed that such behavior would occur among disciplined troops in the first place. To be sure, many of the scouts were well known even by Sibley himself who had

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<sup>87</sup> Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 90-91; Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 76; Isern et al., *Battles and Forts of the Dakota War*, 35.

<sup>88</sup> United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: a Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I, Vol. XXII, Pts. I and II*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), 359.

previously traded with individuals whom he now marched against.<sup>89</sup> How allies were then treated with such disdain despite serving so admirably speaks markedly to the state of affairs in Sibley's regiments. This ugly trend did not occur overnight nor was it limited to a few hotheads within the ranks. Consciously and unconsciously, the command elements allowed actions that fed many soldiers' suspicion and dislike of their native scout allies. Through this process, as the inevitable extremes of warfare stressed the soldiers, this tension exploded into violent acts of vigilante justice by US servicemen against native scouts within their own ranks.

In the summer of 1862, while the United States was engaged in its brutal civil war, Santee Mdewakanton, Wahpekute, Wahpeton, and Sisseton living on reservations along the Minnesota River were starving. The previous winter had been harsh, there was not enough game to live on, and government annuity payments were late. Food was on hand in warehouses, but Indian Agent Thomas Galbraith refused to release any morsel without payment from the annuities. In this desperate situation for the Dakota, an attack on several settlers at the hands of four young men served as the final blow to the weakening dam holding back their pent-up frustration. Under the leadership of Little Crow and other chiefs, the Lower Band Dakota launched a war against Minnesotan settlers, causing hundreds of casualties in a few weeks.<sup>90</sup>

With surprise on their side, the attacking Dakota were successful beyond taking isolated settlements and won engagements with regular soldiers at the Redwood Ferry and Birch Coulee. Governor Alexander Ramsey called upon Sibley to lead a hastily formed expedition to relieve

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<sup>89</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 37-38; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 16; Gary Clayton Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth, ed., *Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Minnesota Indian War of 1862* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), 149; Nathaniel West, *The Ancestry, Life, and Times of Hon. Henry Hastings Sibley, LL.D* (Saint Paul: Pioneer Press Publishing Company, 1889), 253.

<sup>90</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 22-24; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 131-137; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 35-42.

Fort Ridgely, which had been assaulted twice, and defeat the Dakota. With a combined force of 1,600 men, Sibley launched forth from Fort Ridgely to engage Little Crow's army in the decisive Battle of Wood Lake on September 23. It is worth noting that many of the akicita under Little Crow were coerced into joining, especially the Wahpeton and Sisseton, and desertions were high prior to the clash with Sibley's relief army. A peace faction existed among the Dakota and those who desired war with settlers used threats of force to keep unity. Within two months of the first shots fired, some Santee Dakota were so opposed to the war they fought for Sibley at Wood Lake. 3<sup>rd</sup> Minnesota Infantry soldier Madison Bowler, for example, praised John Other Day for killing three enemy and capturing ponies. Thus, right from the opening scenes of the US-Dakota War, Indigenous people fought each other on both sides.<sup>91</sup>

Following the arrest, transportation to Fort Snelling, and imprisonment of about sixteen hundred Dakota who surrendered at Wood Lake, Sibley felt the matter complete and wished to be done with his military service. However, Major General John Pope, the head of the newly created Department of the Northwest, Minnesota Senator Henry Rice, and Governor Ramsey desired to placate the calls for punishment and revenge that flowed from Minnesota newspapers and the population. Pope kept Sibley in command of one army while placing Brigadier General Alfred Sully in command over another, both ordered to enter the Dakota Territory in 1863 and catch all remaining Dakota in a giant pincer movement. It is for this purpose that Sibley recruited his native scouts and set forth on June 15<sup>th</sup>, a campaign that saw several engagements in Dakota Territory and stretched to the Missouri River and back again.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 31-38; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 133-139; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 54-58; Isern et al., *Battles and Forts of the Dakota War*, 19; Anderson et al., *Through Dakota Eyes*, 100-105, 186-192.

<sup>92</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 45-49, 99-128; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 163-168; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 88-106; Isern et al., *Battles and Forts of the Dakota War*, 43-77.

The reasons men of the Dakota nations would join Sibley's forces are complex, interwoven, and difficult to interpret with clarity through the sources. Even accounts written by scouts themselves, like Gabriel Renville's narrative written in Dakota, tell some of the story, but not all.<sup>93</sup> In the nineteenth century official military reports, scouts are often little more than a footnote, if mentioned at all.<sup>94</sup> To begin with, how the scouts came into Sibley's service is questionable. Many secondary sources agree that Gabrielle Renville was a key figure in this process, who volunteered his services as a scout to Sibley and recommended thirty-one trusted individuals.<sup>95</sup> Why he did so is multi-faceted and debatable, even with his written account surviving for modern analysis. According to Renville, Sibley's court conducted after the Battle of Wood Lake to ascertain guilty parties among captured Dakota found no wrongdoing by Renville, his stepfather, nor their families and they were allowed freedom to leave as they chose. Finding his home ransacked, he voluntarily moves his camp to join the Dakota marched to the Redwood Agency and sought out Sibley to enlist as a scout.<sup>96</sup> Linda M. Clemmons uses writings from Protestant missionaries to state that Renville and others enlisted in order to escape incarceration and provide for destitute relatives.<sup>97</sup> Additionally, some mixed-blood people like Joseph Coursolle had children captured during the August 1862 outbreak and joined Sibley to fight wildly for their freedom.<sup>98</sup> Clearly, the motivations to serve Sibley concurrently touched financial hardship, rescuing loved ones, loyalty to Christian contacts and EuroAmerican society,

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<sup>93</sup> Anderson et al., *Through Dakota Eyes*, 100.

<sup>94</sup> United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion*, 352-359.

<sup>95</sup> Anderson et al., *Through Dakota Eyes*, 273-275; Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 38; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 15-16; Clemmons, *Dakota in Exile*, 139.

<sup>96</sup> Anderson et al., *Through Dakota Eyes*, 233.

<sup>97</sup> Clemmons, *Dakota in Exile*, 139-140.

<sup>98</sup> Anderson et al., *Through Dakota Eyes*, 57-60, 239-241.

and release from the large net of imprisonment that encompassed most captured Dakota at Wood Lake.

No singular reason stood to explain enlistment as a scout for these men. Additionally, the consequences could be dire. Service for the federal army involved long distance travel away from the main body to conduct reconnaissance to the front and sides, a dangerous job. Grueling tasks and bad rations were common as the scouts were treated like lesser members of the force. Joseph Brown worked as an interpreter for the scouts and was accused of stealing portions of their pay for himself. Scouts were hired to patrol the Minnesota border and keep Dakota from entering the state. This situation forced the scouts to combat their own people and sometimes brought kin against kin with disastrous results. Solomon Two Stars was forced to kill his own nephew, which he called the “awfullest moment of his life.” All of this sacrifice fell on hard hearts among federal officers, such as Major Robert H. Rose who desired to fire two scouts for arriving late with the mail after riding through enemy territory on tired horses. In the south, General Alfred Sully imprisoned scout Alexander LaFramboise for “interpreting wrongly,” although language and social miscues were to blame. Lastly, mixed and full-blood Dakota scouts faced social ostracism and ridicule from their own people. Viewed as traitors, threats of violence surfaced and Renville was authorized four bodyguards, since he was viewed as the chief scout. Risking their lives for family and hoping they made the right choice by serving the federal army, the scouts were caught in between the lines during a tumultuous war between Indigenous people and EuroAmericans. No clear answers existed for them. Instead of appreciation for the tough

choices they made, most endured revilement within their own ranks and worse was yet to come.<sup>99</sup>

Many of the soldiers who made up the federal army under Sibley marched enflamed with the passions for revenge and violence hot in their blood. These men were mostly from Minnesota and Iowa, flashpoints for recent Indigenous attacks on settlers. They did not view the attacks in August 1862 as warfare, but cold-blooded rape, torture, and murder of innocent people. The abuses to victims, regardless of sex or age, were reprinted and retold, furthering EuroAmerican settlers' rage. Minnesotans cried out for vengeance and extermination of the Dakota in newspaper columns, which the men were sure to read. The soldiers wrote letters and journals speaking freely of their desires to not simply kill Dakota akicita, but some went as far as mentioning any and all Indigenous people. Corporal Duren Kelley wished to "kill and spare not, obliterate the last traces of this detestable race" and argued for the execution of Dakota prisoners. Eli Pickett said his hatred of the enemy was enough that "I could murder the most helpless of their women and children without a feeling of remorse." Many were veterans of American Civil War battles against Confederate forces and compared the Dakota to their previous foe as cowardly, skulking, and inferiors in comparison. With such rage surging among the force, their camps were obviously dangerous places for Dakota scouts to be, no matter how honorably they had previously served. This environment of racially based hatred explains why little effort was

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<sup>99</sup> Anderson et al., *Through Dakota Eyes*, 242; Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 51; Clemmons, *Dakota in Exile*, 138-153; Charles E. Flandrau, "The Indian War.; The Expedition Against the Sioux Its Progress and Prospects" *New York Times*, July 25, 1863.

taken to distinguish between Dakota people that had participated in the August 1862 fighting and those that had not.<sup>100</sup>

During the beginning of Sibley's march westward for the 1863 punitive campaign, he stopped his army to camp at the site of the Battle of Wood Lake. This was an intentional, calculated move to remind his soldiers of his victory several months before and stoke the flames of their vengeance as they remembered what happened the year prior. This is significant because Sully did the same thing by camping his army near Bloom, Minnesota and Spirit Lake, Iowa before crossing into Dakota Territory, both sites with memorials to killed settlers that the soldiers paid respects to. It is almost a certainty senior leaders in the Department of the Northwest planned this during the winter months prior to the campaign since both wings did it. Sibley knew how to lead men from his political career, but he was not a military trained man, having never attended West Point. Additionally, two days before the expedition departed Camp Pope, he learned that his seven-year-old daughter Mary had died, his third child lost. While tragic, Sibley's grief likely contributed drastically to his decision making in a leadership position he was chosen but not trained for. His generalship in the months to come regarding logistics and shrewd executions of battles was fantastic, these facts considered, but his handling of soldiers and reigning in their ferocity was substandard.<sup>101</sup>

On July 18, 1863, Lieutenant Albert R. Field of the Mounted Rangers shot a mixed-blood soldier named Private Joseph Robinette. According to the court of inquiry ordered by Sibley and eye-witness accounts, Robinette was riding a rampaging horse through the camps' tents and

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<sup>100</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 29, 45, 68-71; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 140-141, 167; Bergemann, *Brackett's Battalion*, 3-21; Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"

<sup>101</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 78, 82; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 49-52, 118-122; Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"; West, *The Ancestry, Life, and Times of Hon. Henry Hastings Sibley*, 1-247.

Field intervened. It appears that Robinette was “having one of his fits,” likely a seizure of some kind, and not in control of the horse. Field kicked the horse after grabbing hold, attempting to control it, and Robinette responded by drawing his saber. Thus, Field claimed self-defense in the shooting and was acquitted. The response among the soldiers may be surprising. More than one advocated a death sentence for Field for the attempted killing. How much of the court martial trial evidence was available publicly to these soldiers is unknown, but they were fully aware of the result: Field went free. While not disputing the right or wrong of the court’s findings, one may surmise that lessons were gleaned by the soldiers regarding violence against allies among them with Indigenous heritage. This incident was widely known. Compare this case to Sibley’s punishment of soldiers disturbing Dakota burial sites for fun less than a month earlier. Respect for the sanctity of the enemy was enforced, but when the soldiers believed greater punishment was in order for a shooting involving a mixed-blood man, the result was less. It is possible this impacted the moral calculations of the enlisted men.<sup>102</sup>

A week later, Sibley caught up with a massive gathering of a few thousand Dakota with whom his scouts had commenced negotiations. Similar to the August 1862 fighting, many of the Dakota wished no ill for the EuroAmerican settlers and wanted peace, Chief Standing Buffalo among them. We know this from a letter written by Catholic priest Alexis André on behalf of Standing Buffalo who declared that he restrained his people from the August 1862 fighting and defended his choice to remove his people for fear of settler retribution. It was obviously a wise decision to flee Minnesota to escape the heated passions of the settlers given the existence of the

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<sup>102</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 87, 96; Tom Isern, “A Shooting at Camp Atchison,” *Plains Folk* (July 8, 2016); Arthur M. Daniels, *A Journal of Sibley’s Indian Expedition, During the Summer of 1863, and Record of the Troops Employed* (Winona, Minnesota: The Republican Office, 1864), 9; Lieutenant Albert R. Field Service Records, *Reproduced at the National Archives*; Isern et al., *Battles and Forts of the Dakota War*, 34.



punitive expeditions themselves. Many native scouts had relatives among this camp and were therefore caught in a quandary, not wanting to see their family attacked by the federal army. In fact, Scarlet Plume sent a message through the scouts, possibly Renville himself, to Sibley warning the general of the plot to kill him during peace talks prior to the fighting. Those Dakota seeking peace were attempting to circumvent the pro-war faction. The scouts devised a brilliant non-lethal solution to aid the peace faction by leading Sibley's army to encamp next to a "strongly alkaline" lake. In the previous weeks, hot, dry conditions had made water a precious resource. Even if soldiers drank water saved from wells dug earlier on the march, animals drinking from the lake would be dehydrated and of little use pursuing fleeing Dakota people. Scouts met Dakota men three hundred yards from the federal line to pass on Sibley's intention to meet Standing Buffalo and others. Sibley's wish was for those who had not participated in the August 1862 fighting to separate peacefully from the belligerent groups. During this discussion, a member of the pro-war faction assassinated Captain Josiah S. Weiser, a surgeon who had joined the talks thinking he recognized some of the Dakota men. The Battle of Big Mound commenced, which is incredibly tragic as men like Standing Buffalo and Scarlet Plume lost their opportunity to settle matters nonviolently. Regardless, many federal soldiers lost faith in their scouts after the alkaline lake incident. They likely were unaware of the existence of peaceable communications taking place, although roundabout, between Sibley and Standing Buffalo through the scouts. Trust in the scouts had been tenable for many soldiers to begin with, as previously established, and failure at Big Mound cemented it. The consequences were immediate.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Father Alexis André, *Discourse of Standing Buffalo (Tatanka Nazin)* (St. Joseph Parish, Pembina Settlement, January 29, 1864), 1-5; Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 89-90, 102-104, 109; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 94-99;

During the Battle of Big Mound, a beef contractor named George A. Brackett and Lieutenant Ambrose Freeman had been away hunting antelope. Three full-blood scouts led by Chaska, a Dakota who had fully adopted EuroAmerican society who had saved settlers the year prior, arrived to ask why the men were so far away from the camps. At that moment, a small group of akicita discovered and attacked the group, killing Freeman. Chaska and the scouts defended Brackett and led him to safety, allowing him to hide among swampy reeds while they drew the enemy away. Brackett lived off the land and made it to Camp Atchison alive. However, after the Battle of Big Mound, a rumor circulated that Chaska had killed Freeman and Brackett, taking advantage of the chaos of battle to complete his murder. Instead of a hero's welcome, the soldiers met Chaska's story with suspicion. One of the soldiers poisoned Chaska and after an hour of suffering, he died.<sup>104</sup>

The unknown murderer is to blame, but more can be dissected from this awful episode. The soldiers lived in a command climate that acceded violence against their native scout allies, consciously or not. Edwin Patch gives a single line in his diary for Chaska's death with no emotion: "Tonight one of our Indian scouts died suddenly – sick only an hour." Arthur M. Daniels records Freeman's death and Brackett's disappearance, naming Chaska as involved but suspiciously missing as well. Chaska's death gets one sentence in the diary, equally cold, but later Brackett's discovery generates immense joy. Details of Brackett's strange diet utilized to survive are included, but Chaska's obvious exoneration is not mentioned. Daniels does not include Chaska in his list of casualties. He does not view scouts as allies. Some soldiers did write

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Isern et al., *Battles and Forts of the Dakota War*, 43-45; United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion*, 353.

<sup>104</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 111-112, 127-128; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 100; Isern et al., *Battles and Forts of the Dakota War*, 36; Tom Isern, "The Chaska Monument," *Plains Folk*, (May 27, 2015).

solemnly and regretfully about Chaska's murder, bemoaning his fate. The existence of such callousness, however, is a direct symptom of the behaviors witnessed, participated in, and allowed. For example, Sibley originally objects to the practice of scalping fallen Dakota after the Battle of Big Mound, but is convinced of its importance and countermands his previous order. Thus, during the moments when Chaska's fate was discussed secretly among federal soldiers, men were scalping dead enemies and carrying them as badges of honor. Violence against the Dakota was authorized at levels not seen on Confederate battlefields and Chaska's murderer took his cues from his brothers-in-arms and his commanding officer.<sup>105</sup>

General Henry H. Sibley was a man thrust into a position of military leadership by extraordinary circumstances, answering a call to quell fighting but also because his relations with the Dakota put him in a place to organize peace. A leader, but not a professional soldier, he performed remarkably well considering the hostile political and social environment surrounding his campaigns and the personal tragedy that haunted him. However, Sibley missed just how severely the August 1862 fighting had impacted his soldiers and how deeply the rhetoric of vengeance penetrated their moral spheres. His wavering treatment of the Dakota, from respectful care of their burial sites to allowing butchery of their bodies, sent confusing messages to his force, furthering the more radical elements in their distrust of all Dakota, including their own scouts. The native scouts were all attempting to navigate the treacherous waters of their current world and provide for themselves and their families as best as they could. This was not an easy task as many had relatives on both sides of the battle lines. The scouts fell into this atmosphere of distrust and racial hatred and suffered for it. Sibley's command failed to enforce strict

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<sup>105</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 109, 127-128; Daniels, *A Journal of Sibley's Indian Expedition*, 11, 15, 20; Isern, "The Chaska Monument,"

guidelines of behavior for allied scouts to protect them from racially divided violence and the federal soldiers acted within boundaries they set for themselves.

The sources of the US-Dakota War are thin for the perspective of smaller actors, such as mixed and full-blood scouts serving under federal forces. Most literature produced in the past focused on the generals involved and even modern secondary works lean heavily on the written diaries and letters of EuroAmerican soldiers. Thus, interpreting the internal machinations of minority groups is challenging at best. However, by blending what written accounts we do have with actions on the ground and basic human motivations, such as the preservation of family members, one may arrive at a reasonable conclusion for a pattern of behavior. The scouts were just as human as the soldiers next to them, just as susceptible to feelings of fear, pain, courage, and love.

The US-Dakota War is a complicated, highly emotional American event whose consequences are still felt today. Previous academic work on this conflict has vacillated from treating the Dakota as devils to strawmen awaiting defeat. Historians, professional or not, have construed federal forces as righteous defenders of American settlers or heartless butchers. None of these are true for either side and continued objective analysis is important for sorting out these facts and presenting them to present day memory groups. The native scouts often fought against their own tribes, but the reasons are just as intricate as the divisions within the Dakota camp to make war, make peace, defend traditional lands, or run to Canada. This work shows that the scouts were people making the best decisions for their loved ones they thought possible with the options available to them at the time. Unfortunately, many federal forces did not comprehend the difficult choices and sacrifices before their allied scouts, or perhaps chose not to do so. Not every

federal soldier was a murderer, but scouts were attacked by their own for assorted reasons. In the end, command elements' treatment of the Dakota along racial lines contributed to this violence.

Modern academia will profit from this research and analysis as our understanding of past American conflicts continues to change as we change as a society. Pin-point focus on often neglected groups operating on the scene of this war helps deepen the collective interpretation of other aspects of the war as well. Military leaders seeking examples of how simple, small adherence to discipline can have drastic impacts will find prime material in this work. Also, Sibley stands as a vital lesson of how important understanding one's command climate regarding any issue, such as racially different allies, may be. Lastly, public interpretation of this work has long lagged behind scholarly work as popular movies and books have educated people based on outdated analysis. Scouts should be valued for the attempts they made at peaceful resolution and how they literally stood between the two belligerent forces aimed at one another. Their sacrifices should be highly valued and remembered.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: A LINE CROSSED: HOW GENERAL ALFRED SULLY'S ESCALATION OF WRONGS FUELED ACTS OF ATROCITY**

On June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1864, Captain John Feilner, a topographical officer, took two soldiers as aides to explore the Medicine Rock, an important cultural site for Indigenous people living in the upper Great Plains. While heading down to a creek to get water on this hot summer day, three Pabaksa fighters approached the party and opened fire, mortally wounding Feilner. When Brigadier General Alfred Sully received word from Feilner's aides, he dispatched A Company from the First Dakota Cavalry to run down the enemy. The cavalymen were successful, but this was not enough payback. Sully ordered the heads of the dead Pabaksa cut off and impaled on poles. Scout George Northup cut off a portion of scalp and sent it home to his brother. Sergeant Henry N. Berry sent home a scalp lock that wound up in the State Historical Society of Iowa research facility, where Sara James-Childer discovered it in 2009. James-Childer, a Dakota researcher, sadly endured further horror and trauma through this discovery one hundred and forty-five years after the event. Taking human body parts as trophies was not a part of the order, yet these soldiers felt comfortable doing so with impunity. This detail shows how quickly the troops learned from Sully's example of gruesome treatment of the enemy and they immediately took the next steps.<sup>106</sup>

Desecration of enemy corpses and killing the defenseless are morally reprehensible acts that can hardly ever be considered within the bounds of military necessity. Modern soldiers ought to risk hurt upon themselves and their unit before using lethal force that harms

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<sup>106</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 193-195; Brad Tennant, *The 1864 Sully Expedition and the Death of Captain John Feilner* (Aberdeen, South Dakota), 10-14; Sara James-Childer, "From her historical notebook" *Sota Iya Ye Yapi*, July 8, 2015.

noncombatants and respect the deceased no matter the uniform. In the middle of the nineteenth century, honor and duty were ideals inseparable from military service for people from Maine to California. Therefore, in 1864 as Sully's punitive expedition moved northwest into Dakota Territory, it is alarming how many occurrences of scalping, beheading, and targeting of innocents transpired. Sully was an experienced commander against Indigenous people for the United States army and was not shaken even during intense firefights. Nonetheless, the departure from regular army practice began at the command level, which was a foundational tenet in the break from ethical warfare. This campaign was marked by a drastic turning point, the death of Feilner, the expedition's lone topographical officer and personal friend of Sully. Immediately, violence beyond military necessity began from Sully's order and his soldiers responded in kind. Brigadier General Sully shrewdly used the death of Captain Feilner as an excuse to treat enemy forces with extreme ruthlessness, disregarding the ethical codes of warfare, which directly trickled down to his subordinates and taught his soldiers and scouts to brutalize the Dakota people.

The US-Dakota War began in 1862 with Santee Dakota launching assaults in central Minnesota. The settlers of the young state were taken by surprise and hundreds lost their lives before the organized, lightning raids of the Dakota warriors. Two strongpoints received dozens of fleeing EuroAmerican settlers, Fort Ridgely and New Ulm. They faced attacks multiple times and held on by the skin of their teeth. Governor Alexander Ramsey tasked Volunteer Colonel (later Brigadier General) Henry Hastings Sibley to relieve the beleaguered islands of refuge and

quell the fighting. Sibley did so successfully and won the Battle of Wood Lake, which broke the offensive of the Santee Dakota.<sup>107</sup>

The United States government responded with the creation of the military Department of the Northwest, commanded by Major General John Pope. Under the command of Pope, Sibley and Sully led two columns of US soldiers into Dakota Territory in 1863 with the intention of capturing any Dakota people who may have escaped from Sibley's engagement in Minnesota, or Lakota people residing on lands the US government wished to settle, in an encircling pincer movement. While the grand scheme of the tactic failed miserably, since Sibley and Sully failed to meet at the Missouri River, several battles such as Big Mound, Dead Buffalo Lake, Stony Lake, and Whitestone Hill allowed the federal forces combat with the Dakota and Lakota, prompting the generals to head back to Minnesota in self-ascribed triumph. The citizens of Minnesota were concerned about their border remaining safe from raids, but Pope had regional goals in mind. Miners discovered gold near the source of the Missouri River. To control this territory for US exploitation, Pope felt "the power of the Yanktonais and Teton bands of Sioux must be broken to pieces." Sully even claimed that the "the Indians have a piece of artillery with which they intend to stop boats going up the river."<sup>108</sup> Thus, this campaign was about more than punishing the Santee Dakota and Pope ordered Sully back into the Dakota Territory in 1864 to seek further combat and destroy the Dakota and Lakota people.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 132-141; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 35-45; Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 20-37.

<sup>108</sup> Pope and Sully were motivated by the United States government's strategic goals based on land regions and resources. This thinking surpassed the wants and needs of individual states and sought to feed national economic policies and opportunities. Therefore, it is significant to note that Sully's tactical decisions during battles served higher aims than the wishes of Minnesota and Iowa citizens.

<sup>109</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 99-128, 153-176, 179-181; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 163-182; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 88-154; Isern et al., *Battles and Forts of the Dakota War*, 34-116.



The major battle of Sully's second foray after the amassed Indigenous peoples in western Dakota Territory was the Battle of Killdeer Mountain. This would not be the last action of 1864 for federal forces as afterwards Sully's command endured a harrowing escape through the badlands in a running battle towards the Yellowstone River. However, Killdeer Mountain was the largest engagement of the US-Dakota War and significant for the numbers of mostly Lakota and Dakota people groups attacked that were not present for the 1862 warfare in Minnesota. The fighting members of Oceti Sakowin, the akicita, learned the advantages US federal forces held on flat, level ground with rifled weapons and small, maneuverable cannons firing exploding spherical shot. Federal forces learned that massed infantry on foot were too slow to catch mounted Lakota and Dakota warriors, who avoided charging US lines well within range of their arms.<sup>110</sup>

On June 26, 1864, Sully's forces left their staging area at Fort Sully and marched a total of twenty miles on the first day. Already, scouts and pickets were on the watch for enemy forces, keeping a sharp eye out for any hint of danger. Feilner was unafraid to travel outside the defended areas, no stranger to hostile combat zones from time served in California. His job was to function as more than a topographer, important though that position was for the army and government plans of expansion. Feilner collected native plant and animal species as well. For this purpose, he often had rode ahead of the infantry and cavalry columns as the army marched from Fort Ridgely to Fort Sully in previous months. Now that the force had deeply penetrated Dakota Territory, Sully recommended that Feilner take a larger guard with him on his

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<sup>110</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 202-219; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 207-215; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 155-177; Isern et al., *Killdeer Mountain Battlefield Survey*, 35-44, 67-68.

movements. Feilner refused, making light of the possibility of danger, and kept only two companions.<sup>111</sup>

Feilner's confidence proved a fatal mistake. On June 28, 1864, Feiler and his two escorts went to visit the Medicine Rock, a ten by twenty-foot limestone boulder with human and bear markings. This rock was a prayer rock of special religious importance for regional peoples. While stopping to get water after examining the site, three Pabaksa warriors ambushed Feilner's party and mortally wounded Feilner with a ball through his arm and lung. Living for a few hours after the shooting, Feilner calmly gave instructions for his final affairs, including sending his body to friends in New York. The three attackers were unsuccessful in making an escape and were shot down in a hail of bullets from the guns of pursuing cavalymen. This violent end was only the beginning of Sully's raging vengeance.<sup>112</sup>

Before deep examination of Sully's reply to the loss of Feilner, a discussion on the significance of Medicine Rock may help uncover why the three Pabaksa fighters elected to fire in the first place. Medicine Rock was and is a prayer rock for members of the Oceti Sakowin, one of six known prayer rocks in North Dakota. Believed to be an oracle of some type, it is actively used today. Its enormous size, weighing in at approximately forty tons, and unique markings have drawn attention to it from EuroAmericans for hundreds of years. Journal pages from Lewis and Clark's expedition and Major Stephen Long's travels make note of the stone and the method of supplicant prayer followed by the Indigenous people. Those seeking answers from

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<sup>111</sup> Tennant, *The 1864 Sully Expedition*, 8-10; Myers, "Diary of Frank Myers," "From the Indian Expedition," *Sioux City Register*, July 1, 1864; Johnson, "Diary of Ole Johnson,"; Orland, "The Diary of Ole N. Orland,"; Tom Isern, "Medicine Rock" *Plains Folk*, August 10, 2015; Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"

<sup>112</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 193-195; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 201-202; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 160-162; "From the Indian Expedition,"; Isern, "Medicine Rock,"; Johnson, "Diary of Ole Johnson 1863-1865,"; Myers, "Diary of Frank Myers"; Orland, "The Diary of Ole N. Orland,"; Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,".; Tennant, *The 1864 Sully Expedition*, 11-13.

the oracle presented gifts of diverse types and left them overnight, with the faithful returning in the morning to discern future events by interpreting the markings. EuroAmerican fascination with the source of the markings and the practice of worship made Medicine Rock a popular spot not just for Feilner's examinations, but also geological sampling into the twentieth century, vandalism, and relocation twice. Lake Oahe threatened to inundate Medicine Rock, so the fire department of Gettysburg, North Dakota, moved the stone to a new site next to Highway 212 in 1954. Weather damage and further vandalism prompted a second move to Gettysburg's Dakota Sunset Museum. Mystery still surrounds Medicine Rock, as the source of the human hand and footprint markings is still unknown along with the exact prayer ritual. Given the amount of interference by EuroAmericans in modern times, it is unsurprising Indigenous people retain this rite to themselves.<sup>113</sup>

The only sources we have on the three Pabaksa who fired on Feilner are the federal soldiers and news correspondents who wrote about the event. While not ideal for evaluating the judgement of these fighters, reading the facts presented does offer an insight that is worthy of analysis. Feilner had just finished examining the Medicine Rock, likely taking samples as he had done of bird, plant, and animal species during the campaign. The Pabaksa made an attempt to steal the Feilner party's horses, which was unsuccessful only because the horses pulled their restraining picket-pins and fled. Thus, the Pabaksa were on foot or too far from their own horses and tried to escape by running. They chose to engage federal forces and reveal themselves despite the fact that well over two thousand US infantry and cavalry were a short distance away.

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<sup>113</sup> Brad Tennant, More Than a Rock – the Historical Significance of Medicine Rock; Isern, "Medicine Rock,," "Medicine Rock State Historic Site" *State Historical Society of North Dakota*, December 4, 2021, <https://www.history.nd.gov/historicsites/medicinerock/index.html>.

The proximity of Sully's main body of soldiers may be judged by how quickly word of the attack reached Sully from Feilner's team. From here, conjecture is necessary, but these three Pabaksa were either scouting or headed to Medicine Rock to pray. Witnessing Feilner at their holy site, they may have taken his sampling as a sacrilegious abuse of the prayer rock. They defended the Medicine Rock with lethal force by engaging a uniformed, armed combatant and sacrificed their lives for the stance they took.<sup>114</sup>

Even in modern academic works, historians have rarely discussed abuses of religious icons or burial sites during the US-Dakota War. The fact is that the three Pabaksa warriors had good reason to believe that Sully's forces would not consider their holy sites to be sacrosanct. The year prior, Sibley's force encountered wooden scaffolds that held aloft deceased Dakota, which the soldiers preceded to tear down and scattered the bones. One of Sibley's staff officers, Charles Flandrau, recorded this shameful behavior in a dispatch to the *New York Times*. Flandrau also included his admiration of a hanging skull with its hair blowing in the breeze, showing his complete lack of regard for the human remains. While Sibley ordered the remains gathered and buried, the damage could not be reversed, and it is unlikely the family members were able to relocate the specific burial sites of their lost relatives. In a separate dispatch, Flandrau gives exquisite detail of burial mounds the men discovered, one of which they proceeded to dig up out of sheer curiosity. His disappointment is palpable as the soldiers only found human remains. Not all within the ranks enjoyed such activities, but the disregard for what the soldiers should have sensibly seen as off-limits presented the federal columns to all the Indigenous peoples living in Dakota Territory as invaders that disrespected their enemy's dead. With an entire year past after

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<sup>114</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 193-195; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 201-202; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 160-162; Isern, "Medicine Rock," "Medicine Rock State Historic Site,"; Tennant, *More Than a Rock*.

these events, it is entirely plausible that the Pabaksa had at least heard and felt compelled to defend their sacred sites to the death.<sup>115</sup>

Returning to the pivotal moment of the 1864 campaign, Feilner's death, reading details on his last moments alive show that Feilner was an exemplary soldier in regard to facing death with honor. The image painted by news reports of Feilner lying peacefully, directing instructions to those aiding him in a lucid manner, was not exaggeration nor propaganda. Society taught soldiers of the American Civil War era, many of whom had backgrounds in Christian religious practices, how to die well and pass with a holy death. There was a standard of a Good Death that was desirable and achievable, illustrated in poetry and songs. Feilner was almost responsible to his friends and loved ones back home to die well and properly, taking care of the disposition of his belongings and corpse, to ease their pain and suffering. This was a common thought among Civil War soldiers as battles left entire communities devastated of their male populations, since regiments often mustered together from a local district. A countenance at rest was also proof to survivors that one's soul was passing into eternal rest in heaven, welcomed into God's love, and thus motivated soldiers like Feilner not to grimace from the pain of wounds. Martial valor and one's reputation as a manly soldier did not stop when death was imminent, but influenced his conduct up to the literal last breath.<sup>116</sup>

American society's demand on men to serve their home country through military service touched on the most sensitive nerves in their identity, namely duty, honor, and manhood. Honor was a serious cultural maxim and inseparable from individual conduct. Americans esteemed

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<sup>115</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 86-87; Flandrau, "The Indian War,"; Charles E. Flandrau, "The Sioux Expedition.; Important News from Gen. Sibley's Command," *New York Times*, August 10, 1863.

<sup>116</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Random House, 2008), 6-7, 14-18, 30-31; "From the Indian Expedition,"

obedience to parents at the highest extreme as well, based on one of the Ten Commandments to honor one's father and mother, which psychologically translated to submissiveness to authority of any type. The military was no exception. Boys who were expected to address their father with respectful formalities such as 'Sir' found no difficulty in translating this behavior to a superior officer. Women enforced these gender expectations by wishing victory for their men in battle and expecting honorable conduct. They praised martial valor in male relatives, which strengthened honorable ideals, while occasionally passing over the realities of male weakness in the face of war's horrors. Communities were more fearful of shameful conduct than losing loved ones, a subconscious push certainly driving each young soldier as he left home.<sup>117</sup>

The duty to defend one's country played a gigantic role in shaping male behavior. Living in the United States, even as a recent immigrant, equaled an obligation to defend that institution. For many Americans living in the northern states, the cause expanded beyond preserving the unity of the country and grew to include removing the sin of slavery from their republic. Slavery was a stain on the values of American liberty, and they took it personally as a wrong to rectify. This motive that drove Union soldiers to risk their lives and suffer thousands of casualties in a day existed among federal forces long before the Emancipation Proclamation at the beginning of 1863. In fact, religious northern men and women believed that God was using the war to punish the United States for the sin of slavery. Northern states shared in this chastisement for their passive allowance of slavery for decades. Thus, the duty to serve included submission to the needs of the federal government and God's ultimate plan. For many Americans living in southern states, their duty was to preserve a way of life and defend the homes of their families

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<sup>117</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 3-4, 22, 156-157, 172-174.

from the danger of invading forces, whether or not slaves were a regular part of their life. The disappearance of slavery also threatened their identity as men, since freed slaves would become citizens of equal stature in the eyes of the law, an unacceptable thought. Therefore, for all American men serving in Civil War armies, duty and honor were linked to manhood and preserving respective societies. These ideals undoubtedly carried over into the federal forces serving in the US-Dakota War, as many were veterans of both conflicts.<sup>118</sup>

A powerful animus for US soldiers serving under the Department of the Northwest in the Dakota Territory was the notion of avenging widespread depredations against their civilian population, not infrastructure. Pope could not convince General-in-chief Henry Halleck to pull enough forces away from the front lines of the Civil War to repel the Dakota and relied heavily on freshly mustered units out of volunteers from Minnesota and Iowa. Not all of the men were brand new, such as Brackett's Battalion Minnesota Cavalry and the 6<sup>th</sup> Iowa Volunteer Cavalry, crack units with years of combat experience and excellent weapons. There were plenty of eager men seeking to join, enflamed from the 1862 surprise attacks, and the professional veterans next to them were often from northwestern states as well. The desire for revenge over the hundreds of killed settlers was nearly insatiable as newspapers and citizens cried for extermination of all Indigenous people in the region. Revenge was a common motivation for Civil War soldiers to kill fellow human beings. Injury done, even if was not personal and an enemy combatant killed a soldier's friend, was justification for revenge in the hearts of many men. For example, Union soldiers thirsted to avenge dead comrades after the Fort Pillow Massacre and shot down

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<sup>118</sup> James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5-6, 17-20, 22-23, 25, 130; Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Random House, 2007), 217-219.

Confederate prisoners in the wake of later engagements. Returning injury with bloody reprisal was a manly act, and failing to do so a shameful cowardice. It was a great burden upon the shoulders of EuroAmerican settlers in Minnesota to avenge the killings and assaults that occurred in August and September of 1862. Men were reminded of the alleged horrors visited upon their wives and daughters, and their manhood hung in the balance of their response. For Americans living in the southern states, joining the Confederacy often included an element separate from their slave society, which was defending loved ones, rhetoric that blinded them to the institution they protected through their actions.<sup>119</sup> Minnesotan and Iowan soldiers were thus capable of greater atrocity, if left to settle matters outside military discipline, as the language of extermination inundated them prior to setting off on campaign.<sup>120</sup>

With such volatile emotions pent up within the hearts of the soldiers under his command, Sully headed out on the 1864 campaign with all the ingredients necessary for brutality on a striking scale. His orders following Feilner's death, therefore, did not motivate the men to discard their professional military restraint, but authorized them to commit acts of vengeance for lost loved ones. Leaders do more through personal example than they do through words, and after Feilner's killers were dead, Sully ordered Sergeant Benjamin Estes to return to the scene and decapitate the fallen enemy. The next morning, Sully ordered the heads impaled on poles. With this gruesome marker, the line of acceptable actions was redrawn for Sully's command.

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<sup>119</sup> Antebellum Southern Americans and Confederate Americans lived in a slavery society, whether they owned slaves or not. Their way of life, including economic interests and social hierarchy, depended on slavery. Non-slave owners were motivated to preserve this slave society based on these values. It is important to view events in the southern states in this context while evaluating alternate interests as well. See Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over*, 66-67.

<sup>120</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 28-29, 40, 44-45; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 45-47; Bergemann, *Brackett's Battalion*, 3-21; Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over*, 220-221; McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 148, 153-154; Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"



Commanders in the Civil War era held powerful sway over the motivations and actions of men under their command through their example. Combat leaders that put themselves in the thick of action, exposed to danger, generated highly driven teams that would follow their beloved officers anywhere. This rule would prove true for defilement of slain enemy combatants in the 1864 campaign. With this decision, respect for the deceased was suspended, although it was not a written order. In the fight to come, scores were settled against the Dakota and Lakota because the commander metaphorically led from the front in acts of grisly vengeance.<sup>121</sup>

The fallout of this sweeping change in military conduct came quickly. In almost exactly a month, on July 28, 1864, the Battle of Killdeer Mountain began as Sully's two thousand two hundred federal forces clashed against an estimated three thousand akicita. Dismounted cavalry with rifles marched in a square towards Killdeer Mountain, the location of the Dakota encampment and therefore a dual objective of key terrain: the combined logistic necessities for Dakota and Lakota winter encampment in the form of food, blankets, and tipis, as well as high ground. The akicita used their advanced skills as mounted cavalry to dash around the federal troops to draw fire and unleash arrows, unwilling to decisively close since they lacked rifled weapons. Union rifles were capable of inflicting lethal wounds at far greater distances than all Dakota and Lakota weaponry, which were suited for hand-to-hand fighting. The combined Dakota and Lakota force continued to seek a point of advantage until Sully noticed the crowds of women, children, and elderly watching the battle from the high terrain. Sully ordered his cannons to fire on the defenseless encampment with exploding shot, raining shards of shell casings on the

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<sup>121</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 193-195; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 201-202, 215; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 160-161; Isern et al., *Killdeer Mountain Battlefield Survey*, 35-36; McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 53-54, 58-59; Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"

crowd and inflicting casualties. This ended the akicita attempts at offensive combat, as they quickly disengaged to save their families. Many akicita were killed attempting to help the women and children flee the mountain or through a suicidal frontal charge led by Wahpekute chief Inkpaduta aimed at stalling federal forces at the cost of twenty-seven lives. Thus, Sully won the day, but he did so by intentionally firing artillery on noncombatants. It is significant to note that Sully's artillerymen did not refuse his order and continued to lob shells at the encampment even when the Dakota and Lakota people began to run away. Sully's actions had helped created a command climate that was prepared to kill children in the heat of battle. It would not be the last time that day.<sup>122</sup>

Once the battlefield belonged to the Union army, soldiers set about destroying the Dakota and Lakota camp items. Food, skins, tepees, travois, saddles, and cooking materials were burned in a massive fire that required hundreds of soldiers to complete the work. Sully wished to deny his enemy the logistical means to winter in Dakota Territory, thus helping the federal government extend influence over the land and pathways to the gold fields in Montana, even if it probably meant starvation for many Indigenous people. One of the most awful crimes committed in the entire war was the murder of two captured babies by federal scouts, bashing in the infants' skulls with tomahawks. They stated that 'Nits make lice' as a manner of explanation. This phrase appears in the narrative of the US-Dakota War earlier after Sully's victory at Whitestone Hill, where a Union soldier threatened to kill anyone attempting to use 'Nits make lice' as an excuse for murder. Apparently, that sentiment did not continue in the 1864 campaign. Hochunk scouts working for the Union army assisted in clearing the Dakota and Lakota encampment. They

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<sup>122</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 202-219; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 207-215; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 155-177; Isern et al., *Killdeer Mountain Battlefield Survey*, 35-44, 52-59, 67-68.

beheaded slain enemies. None of this behavior was considered acceptable practice for US forces, even against Indigenous people. Francis Lieber, architect of the law of warfare President Abraham Lincoln adopted, did not include Indigenous people in his protections, but limited what was possible against an enemy force. Torture, for example, was expressly forbidden, even if evidence of torture against federal forces was present. Despite these laws, no repercussions were meted out, despite the fact that they fell under Sully's command structure. Corporal William Seeger relates how he and Corporal James Edwards both took the time to scalp akicita they had killed on the field of battle. Thus, the hillsides of Killdeer Mountain were witness to multiple acts of cruel mutilation and murder. No soldiers or scouts were brought up on charges of war crimes or even reprimanded for excessive force. This is significant because court martials on campaign were common. These actions were condoned by Sully's command simply by the lack of consequences.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Beck, *Columns of Vengeance*, 216-219; Chaky, *Terrible Justice*, 176, 214-215; Clodfelter, *The Dakota War*, 175-177; Isern et al., *Killdeer Mountain Battlefield Survey*, 35-44, 52-59, 67-68; Witt, *Lincoln's Code*, 330-338; Lieutenant Albert R. Field Service Records, *Reproduced at the National Archives*; Seeger, "Sully's Sioux Campaign,"



Figure 1. Detail of Hochunk pictograph.  
National Anthropological Library, Smithsonian Institution.

Nineteenth century Americans struggled with the morality of killing people, even in times of war. Through the American Civil War, mounting carnage in the form of dead bodies littering fields was brought to public consciousness in the form of photography, forcing everyone to deal with the horrors of war, not just those who witnessed it firsthand. Severed body parts made people question the practical details of resurrection on Judgement Day, an uncomfortable topic many wrestled to grasp. Religious convictions chafed against the act of killing. Preachers attempted to justify warfare through the morals of Christianity. Each person was forced to settle internally the discrepancy between lawful killing and murder, sometimes while in uniform and preparing for battle. Conscientious objections were not unheard of. For many soldiers of the Civil War era, racial components helped ease the prospect of killing enemy combatants. Confederate soldiers often viewed killing black soldiers of the United States Colored Troops, including the wounded or those who had surrendered, a necessary measure to enforce slavery.

Extreme violence divided along racial lines offered a morality outlet for their prejudices. Federal soldiers in Dakota Territory were susceptible to the same ideas as they responded to Minnesotan's call for extermination of the Dakota nations as retribution for the 1862 attacks. However, while Civil War soldiers wrote about wishing to mutilate the enemies they killed, their brethren in the US-Dakota War did.<sup>124</sup>

One method soldiers used to deal with the burden of taking human life was to disassociate from themselves and take on the persona of another type of person. A common choice for Civil War era soldiers was to play Indians. Confederate soldier Byrd Willis wrote about seeing a comrade perform a war dance around a fallen Union soldier, whooping in impersonation of an Indigenous American warrior. Many others on both sides painted their faces with whatever was handy to copy the preparations Indigenous fighters underwent. These men sought to remove themselves from the situation mentally and become someone they regarded as a savage, thus capable of violence the person they were normally could never commit. This psychological technique has been utilized by American soldiers through various generations, such as the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne paratroopers who dropped onto Nazi-occupied France on June 6, 1944. Federal forces under Sully's command went beyond impersonating Indigenous warriors in appearance and desecrated their slain enemies in fashions they deemed equal to the stories they were told, exaggerated or not. It is chilling that professional soldiers could intentionally aim for and destroy women, children, and the elderly with little pause. Worse still is a leadership that refuses to purge such acts from its ranks.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, xvi-xviii, 32-34, 45-47, 55-56; McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 153-154.

<sup>125</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 36-37.



Figure 2. 101st Airborne pathfinder leader Jake McNiece paints the face of one of his soldiers to resemble a Native American.  
Jake McNiece, 1944, <https://www.npr.org/2013/05/27/186273553/jake-mcniece-wwii-hero-and-self-described-troublemaker>.



Figure 3. 101st Airborne pathfinders shave their heads into mohawks and paint their faces to resemble Native Americans.  
1944, <https://www.dday-overlord.com/en/media-library/photos/101st-airborne>.



Figure 4. In remembrance of the D-Day practice of face painting and mohawks, 101st Airborne soldiers in Afghanistan emulate this practice during a combat patching ceremony.

Tracy R. Myers, *The 66<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the D-Day Invasion*, 2010, Forward Operating Base Wolverine, Afghanistan, <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/302821/66th-anniversary-d-day-invasion>.

There is merit to analyzing the steps followed that took a professional, armed force, trained appropriately and sworn to allegiance to a governing body beyond their commander, and persuaded them to commit appalling atrocities. Reserve Police Battalion 101 was a unit of the German Order Police composed of men old enough to avoid drafting into the regular army, but still capable of service to the German war machine of World War II. Less than five hundred men from Hamburg were ordered to Poland in June 1942 and, while attached to the Schutzstaffel (SS), slowly, methodically transformed into a killing unit responsible for tens of thousands of Jewish deaths. Their evolution was gradual, as their first duties included guarding prisoner of

war camps and collecting captured military equipment. During their first experiences gathering Jewish people for deportation, the unit killed a handful of innocent people through suggestion. Word of mouth orders, nothing officially written down, were distributed that elderly Jews were useless and that no plans existed for them. Some men shot older men and women instead of loading them on trains, and no repercussions occurred. This was not the first time the Nazi command used unofficial means to communicate desires for genocide. Prior to the 1941 Operation Barbarossa invasion of the Soviet Union, word of mouth orders were distributed that no German soldier would be tried in a military court for shooting Jews or communists, who were expressly denied prisoner of war status. The massacre that followed was inhuman, and the technique of unofficial sanctioning of murder worked.<sup>126</sup>

Reserve Police Battalion 101 received orders for its first mass shooting at Józefów, Poland, on July 11, 1942. Major Wilhelm Trapp, a fifty-three-year-old policeman issued the order that the men of Józefów were scheduled for deportation to a labor camp while the women, children, and elderly were to be shot. Trapp offered any member who did not wish to follow the order the chance to step out and not participate. Out of five hundred, only a dozen men had the moral courage to walk out in front of their peers and hand over their weapons. Throughout the day of killing, men dropped out, walked away, missed on purpose, or simply refused to continue the gruesome work. Trapp was absent from the killing, and his men who did run into him saw a crying, shuddering wreck. Nonetheless, fifteen hundred Jews were murdered. In the barracks that night, few ate any food, but alcohol was consumed in massive quantities. Men passed out from drink and screamed from nightmares. These men were not demons and their actions haunted

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<sup>126</sup> Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), xvi-xviii, 11, 38, 40.



them. However, their skills of genocide improved and a month later one company killed seventeen hundred Jews at Łomazy. One third of the manpower in half the time massacred more people. As awful to comprehend as it may seem, these men learned to become more efficient murderers very quickly. It is important to note that the amount of time between Józefów and Łomazy was the same as Sully's order to impale on posts decapitated Pabaksa heads and the Battle of Killdeer Mountain. With orders and time to process, even the most despicable acts in warfare may become common operating procedure.<sup>127</sup>

General Alfred Sully did not set out on his 1864 campaign with the express purpose of turning men under his command into ruthless beasts, nor is that what happened. His aim was to engage Dakota and Lakota people groups for dominance of the Dakota Territory and weaken the ability of any Indigenous people at all from retaining possession of the land. He was successful mostly through the destruction of precious winter resources rather than military force. However, Sully's success in ensuring US government control was achieved using brutality that stemmed from his break from ethical practices of war. Feilner's death was an excuse to educate his troops on a new wartime morality and Sully utilized extreme violence and desecration of enemy bodies. He was successful in cementing a new attitude of acceptable behavior for everyone under his command, and scouts and soldiers alike responded by committing grisly war crimes with impunity. While cultural pressure from home states, personal desires for vengeance, and racial hatred contributed to the soldiers' motivations, the command example of Sully unleashed the worst side of his troops.

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<sup>127</sup> Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 2, 55, 59-65, 69, 78-87.

It is unfortunate that scholars of the US-Dakota War must rely so heavily on EuroAmerican sources. As more accounts from Indigenous sources arise, a broader picture of the conflict emerges, but some aspects will likely forever remain through federal eyes. The secrets of Medicine Rock and the final thoughts of the Pabaksa warriors who attacked the Feilner party will probably never be known. Nonetheless, reasonable, unbiased evaluation of the substantial body of evidence that is offered to the academic community is possible as modern readers strip away the prejudices of the nineteenth century to weigh facts.

This work does not contradict previous scholarly works on the US-Dakota War, but takes them further in the unsavory details of the war. Secondary literature in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries leaves behind cold military analysis and delves into the inner emotions of federal soldiers and Dakota akicita. This study goes beyond acknowledging the ugly aspects of the fighting and reveals why and how they occurred. These terrible acts were fed through multiple causes, but finding the primary vein allows contemporary students of warfare and scholars to trace the many tributaries to a source. Professional academics will profit from this study by discovering the difference between an individual soldier's moments of inhumaneness and an organized military unit's break from ethical standards of warfare. The 1864 campaign showed not singular mental illness, but a structured break beyond acceptable behavior in war. Military commanders of modern forces will learn an extreme example of the influence a leader possesses. Lessons exist in the form of what to emulate and what not to emulate. Sully's loss of professional military bearing and restraint permanently altered his command climate in the negative. Lastly, public memory groups will benefit from an academic embracing of a challenging moment in Indigenous-EuroAmerican relations. Union forces in Dakota Territory committed acts their fellow units never did in the bloodiest war in United States history. Their

actions were heavily influenced by the command's loss of integrity. Race was a factor, but not the only one. In the end, the command structure of the Department of the Northwest failed Indigenous Americans with its barbaric excesses in battle, the EuroAmerican people for departing from the morals of acceptable practices in war, and the soldiers under their command for leading them astray.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The US-Dakota War of 1862-1865 is an overlooked conflict that contains some of the worst scenes of American depredations during warfare. These acts of violence and disrespect are stains on the honor of the vaunted American military, which is why most choose to ignore this episode altogether. However, it is exactly for the sake of honoring the people who fought on both sides and understanding their complex motivations that historians must study and objectively analyze the US-Dakota War. Through this process we may continue the process of healing and restoration between Indigenous and EuroAmerican descendants today.

Through research and study of this important mid-nineteenth century war, I found a fascinating detail pertaining to US soldiers drawn mainly from the northwestern states of the Union. Some units, such as Brackett's Battalion Minnesota Cavalry, who fought in the US-Dakota War that intriguingly served on American Civil War battlefields as well. While serving primarily in the Western Theater of the Civil War, there are no records of these cavalrymen mutilating slain enemies, yet they proudly do so in the Dakota Territory. Thus, with the goal of discovering and unveiling the root problems that led to those wartime atrocities, I noticed a growing trend of violence that steadily increased in intensity until it manifested in war crimes. The key piece laid in the fact that the leadership over the soldiers was not ignorant of these acts but encouraged or participated in the violence. Social and peer pressures, internalized hatreds, and outwardly voiced cries for revenge for pains suffered weighed together on the scales of measuring the soldiers' behavior. Nonetheless, the single greatest factor that pushed federal soldiers to commit terrible acts lay in the conduct of the senior leaders over these units. The previous chapters outlay an assessment of the US-Dakota War, the push factors that propelled the largest federal land forces in American history onto the plains, and the resulting

consequences as they clashed with Indigenous forces. I argued that commanders such as Brigadier General Alfred Sully passively allowed, subtly encouraged, and openly ordered their soldiers to commit atrocities against their foes in a systematic approach that played on the soldiers' deep-rooted desires for vengeance, resulting in calamitous acts of violence.

The evidence cited throughout the previous chapters consists of primary and secondary sources from a wide selection of material. The primary source material consists heavily of diaries and journals from federal forces serving under the Department of the Northwest. Additionally, the accounts of native scouts hired to guide the US army on its campaigns and the Dakota who fought against Sully and Brigadier General Henry H. Sibley show a vast complexity of motivations. The secondary works include scholarly pieces from recent years to decades past, which provides the arc of modern academia's understanding and interpretation of the US-Dakota War. Also, National Park Service reports completed in just the last few years that contain examination from these standard landmarks and the latest Indigenous sources, worked against the backdrop of modern tactical ground analysis.

Through my writing, federal soldier primary sources far outweigh those of Dakota or Lakota people involved in the conflict. This is regrettable, but a consequence of the time period not placing value on Indigenous voices and written records. Also, some of the sources coming from Dakota leaders are through the recording of EuroAmericans, adding a further challenge to truly hearing both sides. The Corporal William Seeger account, on which chapter two is heavily reliant, is admittedly published thirty years after the completion of the events he describes. Through that time, it is rather apparent he has allowed his knowledge of the war gained since then to color his narrative. We see evidence of this as he is suspiciously present at almost all the major events of Sully's 1864 campaign, such as seeing Inkpaduta in Minnesota, hearing the shots

that killed Captain John Feilner, and eavesdropping on Sully's statements on the Badlands. However, the profit of this source lay in Seeger's willingness to reveal deep-seated emotions, openly discuss the revenge motivations of himself and those in his unit, share about committing wartime atrocities, and show us what the men of the unit were thinking. It is upon these points I made my arguments.

The secondary sources intentionally span years to include a variety of scholarly interpretation, but this same technique opens the door for arguments differing from my own. Paul N. Beck's book *Columns of Vengeance: Soldiers, Sioux, and the Punitive Expeditions 1863-1864* includes in excellent number for federal soldier primary sources, but focuses the woes of this conflict on them as well. This claim is not far enough along the route to the source of the problem, which was the commanders who capitalized on the soldiers' motives for revenge. Micheal Clodfelter was the standard for many years with his work *The Dakota War: The United States Army Versus the Sioux, 1862-1865*, but spends far too much time and energy focusing on the military history and excludes any possibility of Dakota and Lakota maneuvering on the battlefield with plans of their own. Thus, modern academia is grateful to profit from these works as starting points but must continue the lines of scholarly evaluation further on.

In totality, the sources utilized are admittedly imperfect, but this is to be expected. It is the labor of historians to sift in an educated, unbiased manner for the clues leading to structured arguments. Taking what exists and the previous probing conducted, I have built upon a collection of evidence to present a case that stands farther along a path of understanding an aspect of the US-Dakota War and not claimed superiority to earlier works. My conclusions are therefore not in competition with other scholars of this war, but compliment them by taking another step. In this

way, I confidently state that my argument sufficiently weighs the benefits and pitfalls of sources to present a final deduction worth discussion.

The opening chapter that begins the argument is actually the introduction, which lays the foundation of understanding between the varying memory groups who will benefit from it, namely academic historians, military leaders of modern forces, and the general public with focus on Great Plains communities. A society's evaluation of a historic event is not limited to books published by a distinguished university press, but from every television show, film, book, and play, to name a few influences, digested by viewers. The introduction traces the epistemology of all these sources, starting at the beginning with the letters and diaries of the federal veterans. How EuroAmericans at home first perceived the US-Dakota War was strictly through their eyes. Many of these accounts are highly emotional and limited to the individual's perceptions of events. These are not valueless for historians to use. In fact, they are the best sources for interpreting the internal machinations of federal soldiers, although not at face value. The wide range of attitudes toward their enemy from thirsting for combat to level-headed coolness stands as a testament for the humanity among the soldiers. The problem is that they only tell one side of the story. Some US soldiers lament the fates of killed or disrespected Dakota people, such as the scout Chaska or the destruction of the grave scaffolds, but we do not hear much in the words of the Dakota themselves. The senior government and military leaders interpreted the war through official reports from ground commanders. These reports are usually self-serving and hide information that separate sources reveal. Obviously, the stories the akicita told their families and descendants existed, but the settler society that was steadily moving onto the Great Plains did not receive them. Thus, these accounts were also limited in the influence they had on the war's

interpretation, resounding only with a select portion of the American population. These sources would not become available to EuroAmericans until generations after the war's conclusion.

The next set of sources that influenced how American society understood the US-Dakota War were erected monuments and non-professional historians. The monuments usually lack elaboration and draw sharply on the emotional stirrings among viewers. This is not to discount the losses suffered by either side, but for decades the majority of monuments spoke only of EuroAmerican deaths, which highlights an unfair proportion of Indigenous violence and softens federal soldier violence. The band of non-professional historians that produced volumes on EuroAmerican wars with Indigenous people all across the Great Plains do more harm than good for the narrative of the US-Dakota War. Their sources are not objectively seasoned from both federal and Dakota and Lakota warriors. The authors seek the emotional draw and exciting adventure stories, missing the human cost in the ugliness of war. The books they wrote hold little value to academic study.

Lastly, professional, well-researched academic works and National Park Service reports produced in the last three decades have shaped the epistemology of the US-Dakota War through wide-ranging, objective analysis. The authors do not take sides and no individuals in the narrative stand alone as heroes. Working with primary sources from both Indigenous and federal forces, a leveling has occurred that factors in events, such as broken treaties or unpunished shootings, taking place years before the 1862 fighting in Minnesota began. Scholars assign fair and honest blame on the US government for failing to deliver annuities and those select agents who abused this system, while citing military officers who warned of the consequences of these actions. These well-reasoned works are excellent secondary sources for viewing the US-Dakota War through an objective lens and we should utilize them as starting points for further analysis.



Chapter two centers around the detailed, visceral, and shocking account of US cavalryman Corporal William Seeger during his service in the US-Dakota War. A passionate man, Seeger does not shy away from grisly details or admitting his pacts made with fellow service members to refuse mercy to enemy combatants. It is through these heated moments that I trace how senior leaders kindled and used these emotions, unbeknownst to Seeger and his brothers in uniform. Balanced against secondary sources, the sight of graves and monuments dedicated to Minnesotan and Iowan settlers timed together with the vows of vengeance made among US servicemen. When researching the punitive expeditions, these encounters along the campaign trail happen with enough frequency that we cannot call them accidents. Additionally, the extralegal actions taken during combat operations are not coupled with punishment, or at least effective discipline, which signaled to the soldiers allowance and possibly tacit approval of their actions. Therefore, with personal morality factored in, it is still incorrect to place all the blame of the federal forces' awful deeds on the soldiers themselves, as they were following the individual example and explicit orders of commanders.

The next chapter studies the interactions US soldiers under Sibley's command had with Indigenous scouts serving as their allies. Centered mainly around two incidents of extreme violence, one fatal, against native scouts and soldiers within the ranks, I argue that Sibley's treatment of Dakota people and culture devalued these people in the eyes of the federal soldiers, failing to integrate these elements as full-fledged brothers in arms. Sibley did not calculate appropriately the desires for revenges among the men under his command and his tolerance of desecrating the bodies of killed Dakota akicita enflamed them. Thus, it is unsurprising that at least some of the soldiers eyed their scouts with mistrust. At the first suspicious rumor of betrayal, members of the US forces under Sibley murdered a scout in revenge for a crime he

never committed. This was only possible because of the command climate Sibley generated through his wavering treatment of Indigenous people and honored sites. If Sibley had strictly enforced respectable behavior among his men and made further efforts to ingratiate the native scouts as allies, the level of skepticism towards them by the US forces would have lessened.

In the last chapter, I evaluate the example of violent behavior condoned and exhibited by senior military commanders in the punitive expeditions at its the farthest point in Sully during the 1864 campaign. Feilner's death after his investigation at Medicine Rock marked a distinct moment of barbarism as Sully ordered decapitations and sadistic display of skulls on the field of battle. From primary source accounts, this impacted the force as a whole as multiple writers in different units make note of it. The lesson was clear and the effect to the standards of acceptable combat under Sully was immediate. The Battle of Killdeer Mountain was a large battle with great significance on the future domination of the northern Great Plains, but the depredations were unnecessary. Federal forces outranged their Lakota and Dakota enemy in small arms and artillery, making it entirely plausible that Sully could achieve his military objectives without resorting to shelling noncombatants. Nonetheless, his orders to do so were carried out effectively and mistreatments and murders on the field of battle immediately followed. Individuals are responsible for their own actions, but Sully drove a collective of well-armed, disciplined, and experienced soldiers to commit actions none of them had done before.

For the scholarly community, this argument as a whole is vital for considering the command issue relating to historic military campaigns. This is a new facet of studying the US-Dakota War and likely applies to numerous other conflicts as well. This is important because understanding the motivations of soldiers truly is more than the upbringing and belief system of a single person in uniform. Command influence is a heavy factor and depending on the

environment of the unit, may shape the actions of soldiers far more than peer pressure. This vein of study will impact the academic community concerning the personality, actions, and methods of military commanders to trace the behaviors witnessed in the warriors under their influence. While often not sovereign, a military commander sways the attitude and moral of a unit at levels previously undervalued in the scholarly community. Therefore, this aspect of historical analysis should be included in future discussions relating to military topics.

One memory group that would benefit from the reflections and ideas presented here are modern military officers currently serving in command or potentially will someday. The examples characterized in the commands of Sully and Sibley are replete with conscious manipulation and unconscious guiding of subordinates. Rightfully so, US commanders today are held responsible for the actions of all people under their authority and Sully shows the extremes possible when soldiers are provided the appropriate stimuli of moral stretching and rewritten ethics of behavior. Consequently, Sibley's case eliminates the excuse of a commander claiming complete innocence of the worst unintended consequences when proper procedures are not followed. If the smallest breaks from ethical military actions are endured and not properly punished, even disciplined units may quickly take further actions with or without the orders of a commander. Direct application of this knowledge is possible in units all around the world right now. These lessons should be instilled in future officers as well.

Lastly, for the public at large and the communities of Americans living in the Great Plains today, this work stands as a step towards reconciliation. It is only through dealing with the past and not ignoring it will societal wounds heal. Acknowledging past wrongs is a step, but understanding the source of wartime atrocities and embracing the fact that race was just one of

several factors will American people groups continue to find restoration of relationship. This is how we bring communities together to live in peace despite dark moments in a collective past.

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