

# How the nez perce indians almost made it to canada in their epic journey for free...

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It was in the year 1877 that the Nez Perce, who made their home in the northwest part of the United States, made a journey of over 1, 000 miles in an attempt to find freedom from reservation life in Canada and escape the clutches of the United States Army. . The journey was long and arduous, and many battles occurred over the course of it, although the band of several hundred Nez Perce continued to prove their superiority in battle as they denied the soldiers a sound victory. It was not until eleven weeks after the war started that it was resolved with the surrender of the Nez Perce just forty miles short of their destination. It began the morning of June 17, 1877 at White Bird Canyon, where the Nez Perces were camped. As watchers alerted the Nez Perces the movements of the soldiers, who were under the command of Captain David Perry, those soldiers rode down into the ravine, which was 3, 000 feet below. The Nez Perce women were sent off with the horses “ to bring fresh mounts to the warriors” (Howard 165), while the warriors split into two factions, each taking one side as the soldiers approached.

The warriors remained concealed by the landscape as the soldiers approached, and attacked successfully from them. The confusion that arose as soldiers were shot out of their saddles and the horses bolted helped to give the rest of the soldiers more of a disadvantage, and the Nez Perces pushed their own advantage “ as pressure was applied to the confused troops” (Beal 56). Both trumpeters were killed, making communication amongst the troops difficult, and the warriors soon turned Perry’s flanks and sent them fleeing back up the slopes to the Explain how the Nez Perce Indians almost made it to Canada in their epic journey for freedom in the

summer of 1877 Page 2 of 8 lateau. Even as the troops reached that plateau, the Nez Perce continued to pressure them, causing them to continue their flight away from the warriors. At one point during the battle, the Nez Percés drove a herd of ponies through the line of the soldiers, and this tactic succeeded in panicking the soldiers even more, adding to the confusion. In the midst of those ponies were warriors who used the cover of those ponies to attack the troops in the rear, devastating their ranks further. This was a large blow to the morale of the troops, who quickly fled.

The Nez Perce warriors pursued the fleeing troops “ to a point within sight of Mount Idaho” (Beal 58). Upon their return, the warriors picked up the weapons of the thirty four fallen soldiers, adding them to their own collection. In contrast to the number of dead soldiers, only two of the Nez Perce warriors were even injured, and none were killed.

During this battle, the troops were not outnumbered by the Nez Perce, nor were the Nez Perce armed better. Many of the warriors “ acquired their only weapons from fallen solders” (Beal 58). It was the ability of the warriors to take advantage of their surroundings and the fact that the troops entered a situation in a way in which they were at an extreme disadvantage as well as the almost complete absence of caution on the part of the soldiers and their leaders that gave the Nez Perce their first victory. It was at the Clearwater River that the Nez Perce met with others and made camp in early July. They were being followed by General Howard and his men, and so met there to unify and discuss their plans. Five leaders in all made council, including Looking Glass, who had insisted upon remaining peaceful only to be forced

to flee with his people Explain how the Nez Perce Indians almost made it to Canada in their epic journey for freedom in the summer of 1877 Page 3 of 8 as soldiers attacked their village without provocation. During this time, General Howard caught up to them, forcing them into their second major battle. It was afternoon of July 11 when the attack came.

The Nez Perces were not prepared, but quickly gathered their weapons and joined in battle. As some herded the horses up the river and out of danger, others, led by Chief Toohoolhoolzote, charged the soldiers. Again, the Nez Perces took advantage of their terrain and used it to best their enemies. Using “ rocks, trees, and bushes” (Fisher 205) to hide behind, they inundated the forces with gunfire. As the troops turned to face Chief Toohoolhoolzote and his people, the chief received reinforcements from other bands, convincing General Howard that he was facing far greater numbers than he actually was. This prevented him from ordering a charge, and instead he had his men construct barricades for a prolonged battle, those Nez Perces who had attacked doing the same around the only water spring in that area.

While the Nez Perce warriors were forced back out of the ravine, the army troops continued to have to retreat as they were faced with the main Nez Perce force. At one point, there was a gap in the line of troops, and the warriors took advantage of this by moving to attack them there. When General Howard sent men to reinforce the troops there, those men mistook the troops in the rear for Nez Perce, and they fired upon each other. Fortuitously for them, the high grass prevented accurate aim, and no one

was killed. The soldiers found themselves at a large disadvantage due to the fact that the Nez Perces controlled the water supply.

The July heat and the lack of water tortured the Explain how the Nez Perce Indians almost made it to Canada in their epic journey for freedom in the summer of 1877 Page 4 of 8 roops, and while nightfall gave them respite from the heat, the temperature grew cold enough to torture them in other ways. The next day brought General Howard to the decision to attack the barricade that the Nez Perces had put up around the spring so that his men could have the water they desperately needed. He assembled his men for a charge which took the warriors by surprise, and the Nez Perces fled the area, which allowed the soldiers relief from their thirst. In the afternoon, as Howard was preparing to send men against the Nez Perces, he got word of the supply train coming to meet with them. As skirmishers from the Nez Perces were seen in the area, Howard switched his attention to protecting the supply train, sending men to get between the warriors and the train. This led to a race, the Nez Perce warriors finally being forced to retreat in the face of Howard's troops.

After the supply train was saved from the warriors, Howard ordered his men to charge, and the troops “ rushed forward in skirmish order, firing by volley” (Howard 209). This forced the Nez Perces, who had already lost some warriors who chose to leave and attempt to deliver their families to safety, to turn and flee. This resulted in the ranks of the Nez Perces being broken, and they left the Clearwater River, leaving behind many supplies. It was at the Bearpaw Mountains that the Nez Perces finally lost their bid for freedom.

They had made camp along Snake Creek, making it as defensible as possible by digging foxholes with tunnels connecting them. They dug pits with which to shelter the noncombatants as well as pits to conceal warriors.

Explain how the Nez Perce Indians almost made it to Canada in their epic journey for freedom in the summer of 1877. At this point, it was Colonel Nelson A. Miles who was leading the troops, 375 in all. By approaching them from an angle, he was able to keep his presence from being known to the Nez Perces until close to the time of attack, and on September 30, 1877, he sent his troops into the last battle with them. The Nez Perces were not so easily defeated, however. As the troops charged their position from the southwest, the warriors waited to fire until the troops were within a hundred yards of their pits, and then they rose up and began to shoot, their aim deadly and accurate. They quickly forced the troops back, but had to face the Fifth Infantry, who stopped at the crest of a hill and began raining fire on the encampment. The Nez Perces returned fire, “picking off infantrymen and horses” (Howard 317).

After the first charge, the troops found that their casualties were extremely high. Only one officer in the Seventh Cavalry came through it unscathed. The battle was particularly deadly for officers, who the Nez Perces purposely targeted with their gunfire to help undermine the command of the troops and make it far more difficult for them to organize and fight effectively. The soldiers were not the only ones who lost important men that battle. Several of the Nez Perce leaders were killed as well, and many Nez Perce were killed by friendly fire, a testament to the chaos that had ensued.

A second charge from the troops was soon to follow as Miles ordered his men to attempt to cut off the water supply to the Nez Perce. As two companies of cavalry engaged them, another charged down to attempt to capture the rest of the village. However, they were greeted by gunfire, and were unable to successfully capture the village due to the strong defensive position of the Nez Perces. The gunfire kept them Explain how the Nez Perce Indians almost made it to Canada in their epic journey for freedom in the summer of 1877 successfully at bay, although fourteen men managed to make it through to the lodges, those men were engaged in battle by Chief Joseph and his warriors, five dying and the rest being forced to escape as night fell. As the Nez Perces were forced behind their camp, they manages to dig in well enough to make their position easily defensible. They dug more trenches, forcing Miles and his men to withdraw and commit to a seige of the camp, worrying about the possibility that Sitting Bull would bring troops with which to support the Nez Perces.

That night, the weather turned harsh as it began to snow, causing both sides more trouble. They spent a difficult night, the soldiers having no shelter to protect them from the cold and the winds. Miles sent a missive to General Howard describing the situation at the time, prompting Howard to send troops, which arrived on October 4. Negotiations with the Nez Perces began on October 1. Colonel Miles sent a representative to discuss the terms of surrender. This led to Chief Joseph meeting with Miles at the army camp, and he was kept there overnight.

The Nez Perce captured an officer sent to spy on the camp, and held him there until Joseph was returned. While the officer was treated well by the Nez Perce, Joseph was not shown the same courtesy, being hobbled and rolled up in a blanket to be kept with the mules. Upon Chief Joseph's return to his camp, all of the chiefs had a meeting discussing the possibility of surrender. They could not come to a unanimous decision, but it was finally decided that they would continue the fight, even though it was possible that they would have made it to freedom had they left behind those who were weaker and less able to successfully escape. Explain how the Nez Perce Indians almost made it to Canada in their epic journey for freedom in the summer of 1877

Page 7 of 8 When General Howard arrived on October 4, he met with Miles to discuss the situation. They decided to send two Nez Perce scouts who came with Howard to speak with the entrenched Nez Perce. The next day, the two made the journey into the camp, parleying with the leaders. During these discussions, Chief Joseph came to the decision that continuing the fight was a futile effort, and that too many of his people were dead or suffering.

This is when Chief Joseph made his famous surrender speech, counting on the promises of Colonel Miles to keep the promises he made. The surrender came on October 5, 1877. The fighting stopped, and Joseph rode with five warriors as guard to where Miles was waiting with General Howard, and he gave his rifle to the general, solidifying the surrender just forty miles from the freedom of Canada..

The promises that Colonel Miles had made to Joseph were ignored by the government. Instead of sending the Nez Perces to the Lapwai reservation,



which was near their ancestral home, the government sent them to Kansas, where the climate and conditions were not conducive to their health and well being. While Miles fought to have the original terms honored, it was not until 1885 that Chief Joseph and his people were sent to the Colville Reservation in Nespelem, Washington. In looking at the flight of the Nez Perce Indians, it quickly becomes apparent that there were two major factors in their success against the army. One is more tangible and apparent as the valiant people used their knowledge of the land and abilities to utilize it to their advantage both in battle and in their travels. The fact that their people were accustomed from a very young age to working with the land gave them chances that they Explain how the Nez Perce Indians almost made it to Canada in their epic journey for freedom in the summer of 1877 Page 8 of 8 could not otherwise have had, especially against people who were more accustomed to those ideas. The second important factor was the inherent need of all people to be free. This was especially true of people who had seen others around them forced away from their homes and into reservations far from where they had lived.

This intense need to avoid that fate drove them on past points that would cause many to falter, and added an element to their fighting that the soldiers did not have and could not really understand. This kept them going under difficulties that seemed impossible to surmount, and gave them courage to stand up against those who would oppress them. The journey of the Nez Perce Indians was an extraordinary attempt to remain free by people who it seemed had little chance to stand up against a force such as the United

States Army. It is a testament to the strength and courage of these people who simply wanted the respect and consideration that the United States government refused to give them. They fought hard and they fought well, and they almost won. If Chief Joseph and the other leaders had compromised their humanity and left their weaker people behind, they likely would have made it; but they refused to do so.

Like all of the other tribes before them and after, they were forced onto a reservation far from home so that their land could be used by others. While in the end they lost what they had so desperately fought for, they knew that they had done all that they could to retain their freedom, and more than most people could have managed.