

The Diversion
Bozeman Trail, 1866

The U.S. Army completed three forts along the Bozeman Trail during the summer of 1866, Forts Reno, Phil Kearny and C.F. Smith. They were erected for the protection of emigrants, gold seekers and freight wagons traveling along the trail, which took them through the buffalo and game-rich hunting grounds of the Lakota Sioux bands, and that of the Northern Cheyenne and Arapaho. The presence of these forts (and their contingents of soldiers on horseback and walking to police the area) greatly fanned the flames of an already heated conflict that began with the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851. Just as Sitting Bull's Hunkpapas detested Fort Buford on the Upper Missouri, so too did Red Cloud's Powder River Oglalas keep Ft. Phil Kearny almost constantly besieged. One daring ploy, often used by the Indians against the soldiers during the many skirmishes, was a decoy feint. This involved sending a small group of fighters against a larger company of soldiers. The soldiers would fight off this small group and give pursuit. The retreating warriors were actually a decoy to lure the soldiers into a surprise trap made up of superior numbers of Indians waiting to envelop them.