The Battle of Wounded Knee

The Wounded Knee Massacre or the Battle of Wounded Knee was the last armed conflict between the Great Sioux Nation and the United States of America and of the Indian Wars. Under stress for a half-century, Native Americans saw the rise of religious prophets predicting danger or prosperity. A prophet of the plains, Wovoka, promised a return to traditional life if people performed purification ceremonies. These included the Ghost Dance, a ritual in which people joined hands and whirled in a circle.

The Ghost Dance caught on among many of the Sioux, who were still struggling to adjust to reservation life and encouraged by Sitting Bull. In 1890, word spread that the Indians were becoming “restless”. The government agent in charge of the Pine Ridge Reservation (South Dakota) wired the army:

“Indians are dancing in the snow and are wild and crazy.... We need protection and we need it now.”

On December 29, 1890, 365 troops of the US 7th Cavalry, supported by four Hotchkiss guns, surrounded an encampment of Sioux near Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota. A day earlier, the Sioux had been cornered and agreed to turn themselves in at the Pine Ridge Agency in South Dakota. They were the very last of the Sioux to do so. The Army had orders to escort the Sioux to the railroad for transport to Omaha, Nebraska.

Hoping to calm the crisis, Indian police officers tried to arrest Sitting Bull. When he hesitated, the officers shot and killed him. His grieving followers, some 120 men and 230 women and children, surrendered and were rounded up at a creek called Wounded Knee (South Dakota).

In an effort to disarm the remaining Sioux, a deaf tribesman named Black Coyote could not hear the order to give up his rifle and was reluctant to do so. A scuffle over Black Coyote's rifle escalated into an all-out battle, as an accidental shot was fired. Those few Sioux warriors who still had weapons began shooting at the 7th Cavalry, in turn; the 7th Cavalry began opening fire indiscriminately from all sides, killing men, women, and children, as well as some of their own fellow troopers. The 7th Cavalry quickly suppressed the Sioux fire, and the surviving Sioux fled, but US cavalrymen pursued and killed many who were unarmed.

By the time it was over, about 146 men, women, and children of the Sioux had been killed. Twenty-five troopers also died, some believed to have been the victims of friendly fire as the shooting took place at point blank range in chaotic conditions. Around 150 other Sioux are believed to have fled the chaos, with an unknown number later dying from hypothermia. The incident is noteworthy as the engagement in military history in which the most Medals of Honor have been awarded in the history of the US Army.

The Massacre at Wounded Knee was the last major episode of violence in the Indian wars. Today the site has been designated as a National Historic Landmark.
Use the reading or your textbook to answer the following questions:

1. What was the Ghost Dance? How was the Ghost Dance perceived by U.S. soldiers?

2. How did the Ghost Dance add to the aggressions at Wounded Knee?

3. What happened to Sitting Bull? What was the outcome of this incident?

4. What “sparked” the 7th Calvary to begin shooting into the crowd of unarmed Sioux?

5. What was the final outcome of Wounded Knee?

6. Why is the Wounded Knee Massacre a memorable or “noteworthy” event in both United States and military history?