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THE GIRL IN GREEN
(Story on Page 6)

(Tribune Color Studio photo)



(Tribune colorphoto by Godfrey Lundberg)
Custer at the battle of the Little Big Horn, as interpreted by Walter S. Oschman, Chicago artist.

Lost Hero of the Little Big Horn

By JOHN H. THOMPSON

IN THE MUSTY FILES of the National Archives building in Washington, it lies forgotten by all save a few research workers. A congressional medal of honor, the nation's highest military award for valor, given only to the bravest of the brave.

Pvt. Neil Bancroft was one of them, one of the 22 soldiers who were awarded the medal of honor for valorous conduct when they fought the Sioux Indians at the battle of the Little Big Horn, June 25-26, 1876, where Gen. George Armstrong Custer and half his command were killed.

But Pvt. Bancroft never knew a grateful nation had so honored him. By the time the medal was issued, Oct. 5, 1878, and reached the 7th cavalry regiment, Pvt. Bancroft had completed his five year enlistment and was discharged.

And that, as far as the army adjutant general's office was concerned, was that. The army never tried to find Bancroft. The last entry in the yellowing AGO files records Bancroft's discharge and the return of the medal to the AGO, where it lies today, the colors of the ribbon a bit faded, the bronze of the medal somewhat darkened, still in its original case which was once sent by registered mail to Pvt. Bancroft, for that was the army's way of doing things in those days.

If he were alive today the old Indian fighter would be almost 104 years old. He was pushing 28, a strapping lumberman by trade, when he was enlisted here in Chicago, by Capt. Henry Carroll, of the 9th cavalry, on Sept. 20, 1873. On the Little Big Horn he was 30.

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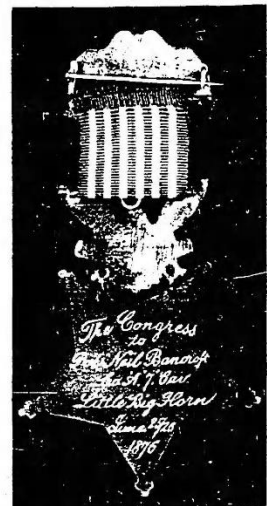
The chances are he is dead; 104 is an advanced age for even a rugged old Indian fighter. But there are no known vital statistics to show that, either here or at Oswego, N. Y., where he was born. For the purposes of history Bancroft stepped off the stage Sept. 20, 1878, when he turned in his cavalry blues and saddle at Fort Abraham Lincoln.

But the researcher turns over the old muster rolls of the 7th cavalry, whose company A Bancroft joined soon after his enlistment. He sees the neat ink noting the award to Bancroft, entered after his discharge. He studies the original reports made by Maj. Marcus A. Reno, Custer's second in command, and others, and the old pages of history come alive again.

Chicago was headquarters for the military division of the Mississippi when Bancroft decided a five year hitch with the cavalry was just what he needed. Four years before, at Fort Laramie, in 1869, the white men had signed a solemn treaty with



The congressional medal of honor awarded Pvt. Neil Bancroft for heroism at the Little Big Horn.



Reverse side of the medal. It was issued Oct. 5, 1878, and reached the 7th cavalry after Bancroft's discharge.

the plains Indians, designed to end the Indian wars which had gone on for 30 years.

By the 1870's the treaty had been broken many times. Expeditions seeking gold and other minerals and the riches of the Montana territory had gone out, followed by Indian traders, despite our covenant that the land would be barred to the white man.

The pressure of our expanding western civilization was too great for any treaty, perhaps. At any rate it was broken, and the Indians took to the warpath under such Sioux chiefs as Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and Galt.

From his St. Paul headquarters, Maj. Gen. Alfred H. Terry, commander of the department of the Dakotas, had gone to the Yellowstone river, Indian hunting, Maj. Gen. George Crook, from Omaha, had just had his ears pinned back by Sitting Bull on Rosebud creek.

Now Terry was there, seeking the Indian village. Under him were Maj. Gen. George Gibbon, with the 7th infantry and a few cavalry troops, and Gen. Custer, the "boy general," or "Long Hair" as the Indians called him. Custer had the 7th cavalry from Fort Abraham Lincoln, in the Dakotas. (At the time of this campaign against the Indians Gibbon held the regular army rank of colonel, Terry and Crook both were brigadier generals, and Custer himself was a lieutenant colonel.)

In the Civil war Custer, commanding a division of cavalry, had never lost a flag or a gun. He had made a name for himself as an Indian fighter, and he was eager for the hunt.

Only the winter before at Washita Custer had split his forces and crushed and routed a band of Sioux. The Indian ponies then were lean and half starved. This was summer time now, and Custer should have known that the Indian ponies were fat and sleek from grazing on the grass of the Rosebud and the Little Big Horn rivers. The same tactics might be dangerous now.

These were worthy foe, these Hunkpapa Sioux, Minnicoujou Sioux, the Two Kettle and Blackfoot Sioux, the Sans Arc and Ogalala Sioux, the Cheyenne and Arapahoe. In the late 1880's the commander-in-chief of the British army, Lord Wolseley, called the little United States army the best in the world, because it had been whipped into shape, largely thru 40 years of fighting these same Indians.

Enemies rated the plains Indians as the finest light cavalry in the world, "superior to the best English regiments," "foemen far more to be dreaded than any European cavalry."

Marksmen beyond compare, they lived by shooting the buffalo herds while riding over rough ground at top speed. And it was only when the white man exterminated their commissary, the buffalo, that the plains Indians finally met defeat.

This was the enemy waiting for Custer when he left the headwaters of Rosebud creek

on June 22, 1876, with orders to seek out the Indian village. Terry and Gibbon were to go down the Yellowstone to the Big Horn with the main column, thence down the Big Horn to its juncture with the Little Big Horn. Terry was certain he would find the Indians there. Custer, by following the Rosebud, then cutting across country, to the Little Big Horn was to come up on the Indians from the south and east, pinching them against Terry and Gibbon.

Glory beckoned as Bancroft trotted off behind "Long Hair." With a late start the column made only 12 miles the first day. On the 23d, as it picked up the clear trail of a big Indian village on the move, Custer drove harder.

Wearied and thirsty, the troopers added 33 miles that day, and 28 more on the 24th. On the 25th at dawn they crossed into the Little Big Horn valley.

Custer had close to 700 men and officers. Splitting his forces he took five troops with him along the north bank of the river. Reno, with three troops, was sent along the south bank, with Capt. Frederick Benteen sweeping the country on Reno's left with the rest.

Bancroft and the others in Company A rode with Reno, who said his orders were not definite, merely to attack. Custer was to support him with the main column. The general waved his big plains hat and rode off. It was the last time Reno saw him alive.

Two miles farther on, at about 12:30 p. m., Reno came in sight of the village, lying within the shadows of the Big Horn mountains, near the river. Custer had expected no more than 1,500 men at most, and had figured the Indians would run from the troopers.

What Reno found was a village of 2,000 tepees, each with two to three warriors, over half of them veterans. Up went his arm. Sergeants formed the column into a long

skirmish line. The bugler blew the charge. Bancroft and the others set their spurs and drove for the village, a thin, thin line, with guidons flying. It was Reno's luck, as a soldier later remarked, that the Hunkpapa Sioux under Chief Gall were on that flank. Of all the Sioux this was the bravest, and smartest of the warrior societies.

Caught by surprise while their ponies were grazing, the Hunkpapa raced for their ponies, leaped on, and rode to intercept the charge. Back in the village all was confusion as old men and women and babies fled toward the south while warriors tried to grab rearing ponies.

As more and more warriors rode on to the line, Reno called a halt. Had he carried his charge, say the Indian veterans, Reno would have split the village, and Custer could have come in from the north. It might have been a rout. At least it would have given the white men better positions.

But Reno, remembering his Civil war experience and being green at Indian fighting, ordered his men to dismount and fight. Many of the Indians were firing the latest model Winchester and Remington magazine loading rifles, sold then by white traders. Bancroft and his mates were armed with pistols and single shot carbines in which the cartridges often jammed.

Soon outnumbered, Reno fell back. Some say he lost his head, ordering the command to mount and dismount three times. Some of the cavalry never heard his command to retreat. Whatever the cause, in no time at all, as the Sioux whirled and circled with their outlandish war cries, the retreat became a rout.

Reno held for a time in the timber beside the river, then fell back across the ford, as his losses mounted, to the top of a hill, where he was joined by Benteen. As the attack slackened he set the men to digging rifle pits.

And where was Custer? Reno could hear firing to the northwest where Custer should have crossed another ford. Indians from Reno's front began deploying to join the attack on Custer.

Custer had started down to the ford when he saw the Indian village in confusion and Indians running. But there were four Indians who didn't run, as Stanley Vestal, an Indian historian later reconstructed the scene, for there were no survivors with Custer.

One was Bob-Tail-Horse, a young man with as cold a courage as young Bancroft had. Bob-Tail-Horse and his warriors rode out to meet the column of blue. And as it halted, unexplainedly, in the face of the four, the Indians opened fire. With five others they held the ford against Custer's column until hundreds and hundreds of warriors, late for the battle, dashed across the ford and joined the fight.

That sealed the fate of Custer. He and his troopers fought valiantly down to the bitter (Continued on Page 17)

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(Laska photo from European)
Monument in Custer park in South Dakota's Black Hills.



LOST HERO

(Continued from Page 11)
 end, falling back on a hill, but unable to reach its crest before the Indian cavalry poured over them. It was all over in an hour and a half. Not a trooper on Custer's hill survived.

And then back came the Indians to besiege Reno. Reno managed one sally from his lines, but was soon driven back to the hill, cut off from all water in the river below. As Reno, a veteran of the Civil war, describes the Indian attacks:

"I have never seen the fire equaled."

Reno had about 340 men when he started. He had left a pile of dead and wounded across the river. Now, on the hill, the number of wounded continued to mount. For 16 hours the Reno force had been without water, and the cries of the wounded were pitiful.

Capt. Benteen called for volunteers to get water for the wounded. That may not sound like very much today. But Reno and his men knew it was the most hazardous task a man could do, for it meant crawling down the slopes with canteens and kettles under the most galling fire.

So the captain called for volunteers and the entire command responded. It was that way with the men of the 7th cavalry. From the volunteers, Capt. Benteen selected three troopers: Bancroft, David W. Harris and Stanislaus Roy.

Creeping, crawling, sliding,

and slipping, the three troopers made it down to the Little Big Horn while bullets spattered about them. Not once, but twice, and three times, the volunteers made the dangerous journey for water.

Bancroft, Harris, and Roy survived their journeys, and were alive the noon of the 27th when, after the Indians withdrew in good order, Terry and Gibbon arrived with the relief party. Sitting Bull's braves had done to Custer what Custer had planned to do to the Indians. The relief party buried nearly 300 dead and carried out Reno's 52 wounded on litters to the Big Horn river, where an army packet, the Far West, carried them 700 miles to Bismarck, N. D.

In the slow way of the army, it took nearly two years for the AGO to get around to awarding medals for that action. At first the company commanders put in almost all of their men, until told by Gen. Terry that the medal of honor was intended for "conspicuous acts of gallantry in action." A board of officers reduced this number to 22.

But when it came to finding Bancroft the army wasn't interested. The medal itself, the only medal given for any military deed at that time, had just been born in the Civil war. It was not until many years later that it came to be guarded and protected by the pyramid of lesser medals below it. And, now that the safeguards are so thoro, there could never again be a case like that of Pvt. Bancroft.

IF YOU CAN READ THIS You Can Help Those Who Can't

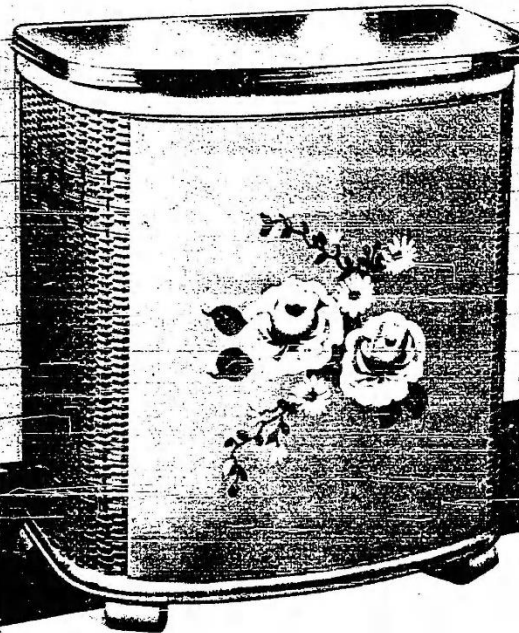


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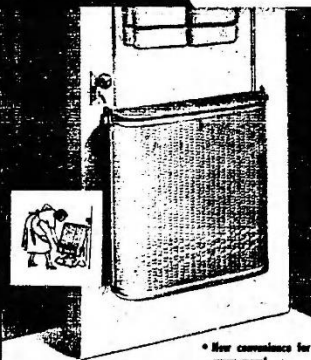
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