

## **Trumpeter John Martin (Giovanni Martino)**

**IN THE EARLY AFTERNOON** of June 25, 1876, General George Custer and five companies of the U.S. Seventh Cavalry Regiment prepared to attack a massive Indian encampment on the banks of the Little Big Horn River. A few minutes earlier, accompanied by a handful of officers and scouts, Custer had climbed a small hill and watched as one element of the planned envelopment, a column of three companies under the command of Major Marcus Reno, had commenced their attack on the village. Sensing that the moment to strike was at hand, Custer and his column of nearly 210 troopers, scouts and civilians raced along the bluffs overlooking the valley floor for several hundred yards before halting at the edge of a ravine (Medicine Tail Coulee). As the troopers anxiously readied their weapons and checked their mounts, Custer spoke privately to his trusted adjutant, Lieutenant William W. Cooke, and ordered him to send for reinforcements and additional ammunition. Sweat beaded from the Lieutenant's thick beard as he penned the famous last dispatch - "Be Quick. Bring pacs." - before handing it to John Martin, a young bugler attached on orderly service to Custer's column that very morning.

While Custer and his command rode to their fate, Martin raced back on their trail to find the remaining Seventh Cavalry companies under the command of Captain Frederick Benteen. Although the Indian warriors quickly overwhelmed and annihilated Custer's column, Martin survived and lived on another forty-six years. The history books, aided by journalists, would remember John Martin as "Survivor of the Custer Massacre" and the "last white man to see Custer alive." Yet the story of John Martin neither begins nor ends with the Little Big Horn.

On the morning of January 29, 1852, a small bell rang near the back wall of a home in Sala Consilina, a small town tucked into a hillside in the Salerno region of southwestern Italy. The primary occupant, Maria d'Amelio, rushed to the source of the ringing. A niche in the wall, once home to a window, now housed a horizontal wooden wheel, topped by a small round cabinet that protected a cradle. The bell's chimes faded only to be replaced by the creaking wooden wheel. When it stopped, Maria looked down to find an infant nestled in the cradle. Another baby had been abandoned, left in the "wheel" (*la ruota*) by the mother to be cared by others. So common was the practice that homes like Maria's (a *Proietti domiciliata* or Home for Foundlings and Abandoned Children) were created throughout Italy, and many other parts of Europe, for the purpose of caring and eventually placing the unfortunate infants.

To protect the mother's identity and provide a safe refuge for the infant, foundling homes – modeling cloistered convents - installed a simple rotating wooden mechanism: *la ruota* (wheel). A wooden wheel laid on its side replaced a low window; affixed to the wheel was a small cradle or cabinet. A long wooden pin held the wheel in place as it revolved. As the newborn was placed in the open cradle, the mother or midwife rotated the wheel, and the baby revolved into the home; to notify the attendant of the new arrival, a small bell hanging by the wheel was rung.

Was this infant the same John Martin (Giovanni Martino) who carried Custer's final dispatch at the Little Big Horn in 1876? History books refer to Martin's surname at birth as Martini (and not Martino), but little effort was made to confirm Martin's true origins, including his actual place of birth. In 1997, Professor Giuseppe Colitti and Dr. Michele Esposito, two scholars living in Sala Consilina, began an extensive investigation for information relating to Martin's birth. Their initial examination of civil birth records in Sala for the assumed original surname, Martini, failed to produce any males by that name for the period of 1851-1853 (an earlier search in Roma proved equally futile). Esposito's familiarity with Sala's archives proved fortunate, however, and they soon located a leather-bound register specifically used for recordation of abandoned children. In a two-page document entitled *Atto di Nascita di Esposizione di un Bambino Proietto* (Act of Birth for an Abandoned Child), they found proof of Giovan Crisostimo Martino's birth.

During this same period, a freelance Italian researcher and author named Claudio Busi was checking various immigration records including ship and passenger manifests, and the Battery Conservancy's Castle Garden database of immigrant registration. The ship's manifest for the S.S. Tyrian listed Giovanni Martino as a 21-year-old laborer from Italy who boarded the ship in late March 1873 in Naples. Despite the mismatched surname, the manifest information matched the known data for John Martin. Immigrants to America quickly realized the societal disadvantages of being different. While language barriers hindered a seamless assimilation, foreign accents would eventually fade and immigrants could expect to blend in more easily with an anglicized name. Amending his name from Giovanni Martino or Martini to John Martin is a logical modification. Later, a reversal of sorts may have occurred, and his new American surname, Martin, was "Italianized" to Martini. While never forgetting his Italian origins, he attached more significance to his current identity as John Martin, American citizen and soldier.

After his baptism in Sala, the infant Martino was placed with a local wet nurse, Mariantonia di Gregorio (Botta), wife of Francesco Botta. Her ability to breastfeed the baby implied she had recently

given birth, but the fate of that child is unknown. The Bottas received a stipend from the *Comune* of Sala to help in their care of the child. His place within the Botta family are unknown and his childhood years are a blank period for which Martino offered little clarification.

According to Italian journalist and author, Pasquale Petrocelli, nine-year old Giovanni met Giuseppe Garibaldi when the latter made a triumphant entrance into Sala. Garibaldi's volunteers - a small force called the *Spedizione dei Mille* (Expedition of the 1,000) - were marching north to conquer Naples during the long fight for Italian unification. Over the next few years, news of Garibaldi's triumphs stirred Martin's imagination, and surely planted a seed of hope that would help him escape a dismal future as a sharecropper or day laborer.

Petrocelli wrote that a few years later, Giovanni - now 14 years old - left Sala to join Garibaldi's forces as the General's men marched close to Sala on their way north. Too young for combat, he served in some other capacity, very likely as a drummer boy. In later years during his many interviews, Martino proudly recounted marching with Garibaldi, but offered few details. Little evidence exists to confirm or refute his assertions. He eventually returned to Sala in 1870, but a young and energetic Giovanni must have grown restless with the life of a farmer or laborer. There was a big world beyond the valleys and farms of Sala. Martino embarked for America in March 1873 on the S.S. Tyrian. After twenty-seven long days at sea, the Tyrian arrived in New York Harbor where immigrant passengers were registered at the Castle Garden (now Castle Clinton) facility. Once he completed the registration process at Castle Garden, Giovanni Martino crossed the East River into Brooklyn, a New York City borough filled with recently immigrated southern Italians.

Unfortunately for Martin, the United States was in the grip of a severe national recession – the Panic of 1873 – when he arrived. With few employment opportunities available, especially for illiterate and unskilled laborers from southern Europe, he opted to enlist in the U.S. Army on June 1, 1874. Army pay was low but guaranteed as was room, board and clothing. Martin was assigned to serve as a trumpeter in Company H of the Seventh Cavalry Regiment. Reflecting his new life in a new country, Giovanni Martino's new "American" name - John Martin - appeared for the first time in his enlistment documents, as did a physical description of the twenty-one year old: 5' 6" in height with brown eyes, black hair, and a dark complexion. Following limited training at Jefferson Barracks (Missouri), the Army's recruiting depot, Martin joined his new Company H comrades at Fort Abraham Lincoln (located near present-day Bismarck, North Dakota) in time to march with them on an expedition into the Black Hills (Dakota Territory). Persistent claims of a bounty of untapped mineral resources,

perhaps even gold, mounted and the Federal government ordered Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer to confirm the reports. As the large expedition lumbered out of Fort Abraham Lincoln on July 2, 1874, as they, Martin rode with his new unit. When they returned in late August, news of their discovery (gold) had been broadcast across the country through telegraphs lines and newspaper headlines.

As prospectors and speculators rushed to the territory hoping to strike it rich, the Lakota (Sioux) and other Indian tribes protested vehemently to the government about incursions onto their sacred land, the Black Hills. The Army tried to remove the trespassers, but their resources proved unequal to the task. Eventually, unable to stem the tide of interlopers, the government issued an ultimatum to the tribes (primarily Lakota, Arapaho, and Cheyenne, along with contingents of Kiowas and Comanches): They had to relocate to designated reservations by the end of January 1876. Although many Indians had little recourse and resigned themselves to life on the government reservations, others were outraged and encouraged by Hunkpapa (Lakota) holy man and spiritual leader, Sitting Bull, the “hostile” tribes determined to resist and refused to move to the reservations as ordered. For their common defense, they united into one immense camp that totaled perhaps ten thousand men, women and children.

Initially, a winter offensive planned by General Alfred Terry to return the rebellious tribes to reservations, but delays postponed it until the early spring. On March 30, the first of three columns - Colonel John Gibbon and 500 men - mobilized from their winter encampment at Fort Ellis headed towards the vicinity of the Yellowstone River. From Fetterman, a second column of 1,300 under General George Crook left in late May. Lt. Colonel George Custer’s Seventh Cavalry Regiment, approximately 700 troopers, formed the third element.

Cold and fog greeted the Seventh Cavalry troopers in the early morning hours of Wednesday, May 17, 1876. Compounding their misery was a heavy mist that prevented any fires for coffee. Hoping to advance quickly, Custer eschewed the use of slow-moving wagons, and instead opted for a large mule train (or pack train) to carry ammunition and other supplies. For the next few weeks, the Seventh rode several hundred miles through rough and broken terrain. As could be expected, tempers flared and Martin described one particular incident with Henry Voss, the Regiment’s Chief Trumpeter, in a diary he later showed to a reporter (in 1906). While they camped by the Little Missouri River on May 29, Martin wrote, Voss “... detailed me as mounted orderly for headquarters; but as it was not my turn, I refused to do the duty, and after some words the chief trumpeter had me tied up on the picket line for two hours (strung up by the thumbs).” An upset Martin spoke to his company commander, Captain Frederick Benteen, who reported the matter to General Custer. “[Custer] sent for me,” Martin wrote,

“and said he would have it investigated as soon as we got back to quarters.” Martin’s assignment to accompany Custer’s headquarters staff was routine and part of a rotation among all of the company buglers. Reasons for his displeasure with the order are unrecorded. In three weeks, the command had traveled nearly 300 miles over hard ground, with only a few days of rest.

Scouts spotted a large fresh Indian trail on June 22, and General Terry ordered Custer and the Seventh to follow it immediately. For two days, the command advanced quietly for “every precaution had been taken to conceal our march,” Martin noted. Custer even ordered that “Trumpet calls would not be sounded except in an emergency.” A little before 8:00 a.m. on June 25, “Trumpeter Vose [Voss] called back to me to report as orderly to General Custer,” the diary related, “although, again, it was not my turn, [but] I did as he commanded.” Martin’s recollection is imprecise: He told Graham in 1922 that Benteen ordered him to report to Custer, yet his diary – written no later than 1906 - indicated Chief Trumpeter Voss issued the order. As troopers prepared their mounts, Martin reported to Custer who “just looked at me and nodded.” With a battle imminent, and the need to maintain constant communication between units, Martin was one of several orderlies attached to the headquarters staff that day.

Custer, Martin later recalled, was wearing “a blue-gray flannel shirt, buckskin trousers and long boots,” and his distinctive “yellow hair was cut short, not very short - but it was not long and curly on his shoulders like it used to be.” Martin watched as Custer spoke with an Indian scout named Bloody Knife. Through an interpreter, Bloody Knife appeared to be telling Custer of a “big village in the valley, several hundred tepees and about five thousand Sioux.” Fearing the discovery of his force, and assuming the Indians would attempt to escape in the face of a battle not to their advantage, Custer opted to attack immediately. He believed the order and discipline of his Seventh effectively eliminated numerical advantages. With the village nearby and battle imminent, Custer “ordered me to sound officers' call and I did so,” Martin said, “... there was no use to keep quiet any longer.” Following the late morning meeting with his officers, Custer divided the 700 troopers of the Seventh into three attack battalions.

After the troopers mounted, Martin wrote that the Seventh “... moved out in column of fours, fifty feet between each company.” Custer was followed closely by his adjutant, Lieutenant William W. Cooke. Trailing further behind were two color-bearers, Chief Trumpeter Voss and Martin. After several miles, Major Marcus A. Reno and the three companies (around 140 troopers) rode toward the Little Big Horn valley as ordered. Captain Frederick Benteen, also in command of three companies, was sent to the

southwest to block any escape. Captain Thomas McDougall and one company rode with the Regiment's pack train of mules laden with ammunition and supplies.

"We went at a gallop," Martin recounted for Colonel W. A. Graham in 1922, "the General seemed to be in a big hurry." Custer and the remaining five companies (approximately 220 troopers) rode for one or two miles, by Martin's estimate, before arriving at "... a big hill that overlooked the valley." The command halted near its base while Custer, Martin and the headquarters staff climbed the hill (or ridge) for their first look at the Indian encampment across the river. "It was a big village, but we couldn't see it all from there, though we didn't know it then," Martin recalled, "but several hundred tepees were in plain sight." Martin told Walter Camp in 1908 that as Custer and his officers viewed the village through field glasses, they observed "... children and dogs playing among the tepees but no warriors or horses except a few loose ponies grazing around." The General, Martin recalled, "... seemed both surprised and glad ..." by what he saw, and the officers debated whether the warriors were away hunting buffalo or still asleep in their tents.

Custer "turned in the saddle and took off his hat and waved it so the men of the command ..." at the base of the hill, Martin recounted. In his high-pitched voice, the General shouted, "Hurrah, boys, we've got them! We'll finish them up and then go home to our station." Martin's diary reflected a slightly different speech, with Custer exhorting, "Boys, have courage! Be brave, and as soon as we get through with these Indians we will go home to our winter station." In other eyewitness accounts, Custer and Cooke waved their hats to Reno's men who were beginning their attack on the valley floor.

After he rejoined the troops, Custer and his experienced adjutant, Lieutenant Cooke, conferred briefly. Following a mile of hard riding, the command reached a deep ravine that led down to the Little Bighorn and the village. It was probably around 3:35 p.m., moments before Custer launched his attack. As the men started to descend into the ravine, Custer called Martin over. "Orderly, I want you to take a message to Benteen. Ride as fast as you can and tell him to hurry," the General's words tumbled out rapidly, "Tell him it's a big village and I want him to be quick, and to bring the ammunition packs [boxes]." Martin did not reply, but as he checked his horse, Lieutenant Cooke called out, "Wait, orderly." As he pulled a field order pad from his jacket, Cooke told Martin, "I'll give you a message." Cooke noticed how quickly the excited Custer spoke and perhaps doubted Martin's ability to comprehend the order clearly and precisely. Echoing Custer's orders, Cooke's note read:

*Benteen*  
*Come on. Big Village.*

*Be quick. Bring packs.*

*W. W. Cooke*

*P.S. Bring Pacs.*

As he handed the dispatch to Martin, Cooke added, "Now, orderly, ride as fast as you can to Benteen. Take the same trail we came down. If you have time and there is no danger, come back; but otherwise stay with your company." Cooke's specific commands stressed the immediate need for Benteen to support Custer's attack. Martin's diary, however, described a different scenario. Custer perused the note - already written - before calling for an orderly to deliver it. An unidentified trooper - another orderly - stepped out to which Custer replied, "No, no, the other man [Martin]." As Martin took the dispatch, Custer instructed, "Trumpeter, go back on our trail and see if you can discover Benteen and give him this message. If you see no danger come back to us, but if you find Indians in your way stay with Benteen and return with him and when you get back to us report."

Martin followed the trail back and finally located Benteen around 4:00 p.m. A relieved Martin trotted up - his horse, wounded by several rifle shots fired at Martin, could go no faster - saluted and handed the dispatch to Benteen. "I told him what the General said," Martin recalled, "that it was a big village and to hurry." Benteen read the message, and asked for Custer's location. In his diary and Graham interview, Martin indicated he replied, "About 3 miles from here."

"Is [Custer] being attacked or not?" snapped Benteen.

"Yes, [he] is being attacked," Martin answered. In 1922, though, Martin recalled telling Benteen, "... that the Indians we saw were running and I supposed that by this time he had charged through the village." During the Court of Inquiry in 1879, Benteen testified, "[Martin] said the Indians were all skedaddling, therefore there was less necessity for me going back to the packs." In the three-year period between the battle and Court of Inquiry, questions emerged regarding Benteen's slow response to Custer's last message. The Captain's contempt for Custer was common knowledge within the Regiment, and when reports of their discord reached the public, Benteen's actions after receiving the dispatch were scrutinized.

After he received Cooke's note and briefly questioned Martin, Benteen passed it to three other officers who had just come up from his company. Martin recalled that he rejoined Company H although he

testified to the contrary at the Court of Inquiry in 1879; at the Inquiry, Martin said he rode back to the pack trains to rush them forward at Benteen's request. Benteen and his three companies began moving in the general direction of the village, but upon reaching a high ridge, they watched "... an immense number of Indians on the plain, mounted of course and charging down on some dismounted men of Major Reno's command." Reno's battalion had attacked one end of the village, but their assault was quickly repulsed and they were "flying for dear life." As they retreated across the Little Bighorn and clambered up the steep bluffs to a position now called Reno Hill, Benteen led his men to their relief and "... a more delighted lot of folks you never saw."

Reno beseeched Benteen to halt his command until the Major could re-organize his men. In their disorder confusion, unable to form a skirmish line, the shattered remnants of Reno's command was saved by the timely arrival of Benteen. The combined battalions of Reno and Benteen paused on the hill as they waited for the pack train, but as the gunfire from the direction of Custer's assumed position increased, a sortie was dispatched - initiated by Captain Weir but eventually joined by the entire command - and rode to a small hill two miles to the north. When a large group of mounted warriors was spotted heading in their direction, the combined command retreated from the indefensible hill to their original position further south.

"We withdrew to a saucer like hill, putting our horses and packs in the bottom of saucer and threw all of our force dismounted around this corral," Benteen explained to his wife in a letter written in early July. His men divided their ammunition with Reno's, who had expended most of theirs, as they waited for the ammunition from the pack mules (which arrived an hour later). Nearly 350 troopers eventually reached the hilltop. Reno and his men guarded the north rim while Benteen secured the south with the still-intact Company H. McDougall (Company B) and Captain Thomas French's Company M were posted on the western edge of the position, while Captain Myles Moylan and Company A defended the east perimeter. The soldiers hurriedly strengthened their position, but the task of digging rifle pits proved difficult since there were "only three or four spades and shovels in the whole command."

At midnight, Reno ordered Martin to sound Reveille at 2:00 a.m. (June 26). The Indians initially replied with a weak fusillade, but as the sun rose, their fire increased. The hours passed slowly for the besieged troopers. Sweating heavily in the unrelenting heat, the swirling dust choked and caked them; and, silhouetted against the sun, the troopers seemed like ashen ghosts. In an effort to relieve their agony, especially for the wounded, troopers volunteered to retrieve water from the river beneath their



position. At noon, as the water parties dashed down to the river, sharpshooters from Martin's Company provided covering fire. For their valor, twenty-four men were awarded the Medal of Honor.

By 1:00 p.m., a trooper later noted, "The Indians had nearly all left us, but they still guarded the river." They returned within the hour and resumed their attack, but by 3:00 p.m., the shooting stopped entirely. The heat combined with the corpses of dead men and horses to create an untenable position on their hilltop, and with less Indians blocking their path, the command took up a new position closer to the river. Martin's Company H suffered the most on that first day; their exposed position the subject of long-range fire from nearby hills. Martin testified at the 1879 Inquiry that during the second day of the siege, he was "the only one that sounded the calls." The Seventh's trumpeters paid an especially heavy toll: Eleven were killed during the two-day battle, including Custer's Chief Trumpeter Henry Voss. The other trumpeter from Company H, William Ramell, was badly wounded during the hilltop siege.

"After the Indians left in that evening," Martin stated during the Inquiry, "I sounded retreat, recall and march, as there might be some of our friends in the ravines." Many believed that Custer had escaped and would return with one of the other columns. They would learn in a few hours that he was never coming back: Custer and over 210 Seventh Cavalry troopers, civilians and scouts lay dead on the gentle hills by the Little Bighorn River. By mid-morning on June 27, General Terry's relief column arrived, but the besieged command's joy turned to sorrow when they learned the fate of Custer and his men.

Later that morning, Reno introduced Martin to General Terry, "This is the man who carried the last dispatch, General." Terry queried Martin for several minutes on Custer's last position and movements. Satisfied with the bugler's responses, Terry thanked him and added, "Well, you are a lucky man and I wish you good fortune." Martin likely remained with Reno's headquarters staff after reaching the hilltop, necessitated by the loss of eleven buglers killed with at least one more wounded. His proximity to Reno as orderly - within two yards of the Major at all times - created an opportunity for Reno to introduce Martin to General Terry.

Following the battle, Martin and other Seventh Regiment survivors remained in the Dakota Territory, encamped by the Yellowstone River while new officers and recruits refilled their ranks. In early August, the Seventh decamped and spent several futile weeks searching for hostile tribes before turning back for their base. The demoralized Regiment straggled into Fort Lincoln on September 26. Martin continued to serve as trumpeter of Company H - still under the command of Benteen - over the

next three years. Reinforcements continued to arrive and by 1877, the newly reconstituted Seventh Cavalry Regiment campaigned successfully against Chief Joseph and the Nez Percé with key victories at the battles of Bear Paw and Canyon Creek.

On January 13, 1879, the U.S. Army convened an official Court of Inquiry to investigate the conduct of Major Marcus Reno during the two-day conflict. Reno demanded the public forum to defend his actions. Many of the surviving officers and enlisted men - including Martin - traveled to the Palmer House, a Chicago hotel, to offer their testimony at the Inquiry, which ran from January 13 through February 11, 1879. On a frigid Friday afternoon, Martin testified at the Court of Inquiry, the last of several witnesses to appear on January 31. He was asked approximately 150 questions, although many were the same question restated differently. Elements of Martin's testimony lacked consistency, prompting doubts over his truthfulness. The imperfect quality of his English may have played a role, and perhaps not all of replies were recorded properly. Transcription of the Inquiry's proceedings was poorly handled, and the Army did not officially record the Inquiry. Instead, several reporters jotted testimony into their notebooks and filled in the blanks afterwards. According to Martin, Benteen erred when he testified that the bugler was ordered back to 'hurry up' the pack train after delivering his dispatch. "I told them so at Chicago in 1879 when they had the Court of Inquiry," he explained to Colonel Graham, "but I didn't speak English so good then, and they misunderstood me and made the report of my testimony show that I took an order to [the pack train]. But that is a mistake." Language issues aside, Martin's less than perfect recollections, author Larry Sklenar noted, "... ought to have been better, but since he was treated like an idiot at that forum, there is little guarantee that he was questioned with clarity." In early March 1879, the Court of Inquiry ended and Reno was absolved of any wrongdoing. Over the course of a long interview in 1906, Martin showed the journalist a copy of a report from the proceedings. "Martin's name is that of the only witness mentioned," offered the reporter, "it was his testimony that swung the balance into Reno's favor."

Despite Martin's perceived failings, as noted by Benteen, the bugler remained in the Captain's Company H until his scheduled discharge on May 31, 1879. As Benteen's trumpeter, he would have been in close proximity to the Captain on a daily basis. Were Martin incapable of performing his duties, the ever-critical Benteen would have transferred him to another company or regiment if for no other reason than the Captain's own safety and that of his command.

After his testimony before the Court of Inquiry, Martin rejoined the Seventh Regiment at Fort Lincoln for a few months and was honorably discharged on May 31, 1879, after completing his original five-year enlistment. Three weeks later, Martin re-enlisted for another five years as a trumpeter with the

Third Artillery Regiment, Battery G, stationed at Fort Schulyer in the Bronx, one of the five boroughs of New York City. He never explained his decision not to reenlist with the Seventh. Perhaps, the memories of the Little Bighorn weighed on him; or, he may have tired of the hard life of a cavalry trooper. While serving at Fort Schuyler, John met Julia Margaret Higgins a 19-year-old Irish girl from Oswego, New York. Following a short engagement, John and Julia were married at St. Raymond's Catholic Church in Westchester County (New York) on October 7. In 1880, while stationed on coastal defense duty in St. Augustine, Florida, the Martins welcomed their first child, Julia. A son followed three years later. In late June 1884, Martin re-enlisted for another five years with the Third Artillery Regiment. The Martins remained in St. Augustine until the Regiment was transferred to Fort McHenry in Baltimore, Maryland. Initially they lived in the tight confines of the Fort's quarters, but soon settled into their own home at 1410 Woodall Street in the Locust Point section of south Baltimore. A local newspaper article reported on the physical appearance of Fort McHenry proudly added that Martin - "Sole Survivor of the Custer Massacre" - was now stationed there.

Perhaps bored by the tedium of peacetime service in a heavy artillery battery, Martin traveled to Washington, D.C. in October 1886. He hoped to obtain a messenger position with the War Department. "A neatly dressed artilleryman named Martin, the sole white survivor of Custer's command," noted a *New York Times* reporter, paid a visit to General Philip Sheridan's office at the War Department. Sheridan, Commanding General of the U.S. Army, "promised to further his [Martin's] application as far as it lay in his power to do so." Since Martin remained with his artillery unit at Fort McHenry, Sheridan's assistance was unsuccessful. In December 1892, Martin transferred to a different unit (Battery D) in the Third Artillery Regiment. He returned to Washington with the Third Artillery for the parade celebrating the inauguration of President Grover Cleveland on March 4, 1893. A journalist assigned to cover the parade observed, "On the extreme left of the front rank ... marched a bronzed and rugged featured veteran who would have received a share of plaudits on his own account had his history been known. His name was John Martin and he was the only survivor of the Custer massacre."

He transferred into Battery L of the Fourth Artillery on April 14, 1893, followed by another move to Battery D of the Fourth Artillery in November of that year. Martin's transfers may have been driven by a need to remain stationed at Fort McHenry, a result of a rapidly growing family that required his patriarchal attention. He re-enlisted for a three-year commitment with Battery D of the Fourth Artillery in late June 1894, and again in 1897; enlistment commitments had been reduced from five years to three. In 1898, at the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, Martin's Artillery Regiment was transferred to Tampa, Florida, before being sent on to Cuba.

By 1900, the Martins had moved to 1321 Hull Street, a row house close to Fort McHenry. Their move may have been necessitated by a growing family; after the births of Julia and George, the family welcomed Mary (or Mollie as she was called), Jane, May, John Jr., Frank and Lawrence. John remained in Cuba with the Fourth Artillery Regiment until September 30, 1900, when he re-enlisted with the rank of Corporal in a familiar unit, Company H of the Seventh Regiment. At nearly fifty years in age, he was too old for active campaigning, not to mention saddled with familial responsibilities; his enlistment, therefore, appears more honorific than practical. Although Company H remained in Cuba until May 1902, Martin did not, and on June 15, 1901, he transferred to Company 39 of the recently created Coastal Artillery Corps, culled from existing units including Martin's Fourth Artillery Regiment. One month later, he moved to Company 90 (also Coastal Artillery Corps), stationed at Fort McHenry, and returned to Baltimore. Corporal John Martin received a final promotion - to Master Sergeant - prior to his mandatory retirement (due to age limitation) on January 7, 1904. After thirty years of continuous military service, he left the Army and prepared for the next phase of his life. His retirement drew the attention of the press, and several newspapers noted Martin's pension of "three quarters of his regular pay [roughly \$30 per month]."

Following his retirement, John and Julia opened a small confectionery shop on Fort Avenue, near the gates of Fort McHenry. With many mouths still to feed, the Martins hoped the shop would supplement his Army pension. After three decades of military service, Martin tried - but failed - to adjust to his new life as husband, father and shopkeeper. In 1906, he left his family and Baltimore to return to his first American home: Brooklyn. The allure of New York played a part in his decision to leave Baltimore. Martin's acclaim as the 'sole survivor of the Custer massacre' was enhanced and glamorized in New York, less so in Baltimore. Initially, Martin moved into an apartment or rented room at 58 York Street in the Vinegar Hill section of Brooklyn.

After he settled in Brooklyn, Martin looked for work and one newspaper account indicated he had been "filling a clerical position for a livelihood." By July 1906, however, Martin began a new job as a ticket agent for the New York City subway with the help of Major Francis M. Gibson of the New York Street Cleaning Department. Gibson had served as First Lieutenant in Benteen's Company H and knew Martin well. John Martin arose very early each morning and donned his subway uniform. He walked to the closest station at the time, near the Brooklyn Bridge, and rode to the 103<sup>rd</sup> Street Station in upper Manhattan. As a ticket agent, he worked a twelve-hour daily shift, and while "... has a good living [was] assured," it was exceedingly "monotonous work from 7 o'clock in the morning until 7 [o'clock] in the evening." The job paid him \$45 per month, and when combined with his Army pension, John Martin pocketed \$75 every month.

A strong attraction to New York, and what it could offer him, impacted Martin's decision to remain. He was a favorite of reporters who interviewed and reported regularly on his activities; editors almost universally used the same title or byline for stories on Martin: "Sole Survivor of the Custer Massacre." From their accounts, a portrait of John Martin emerged. "A trifle under medium height, with clear, brown eyes, iron grey hair and a short-cropped moustache," one journalist observed, "[Martin] does not look his 53 years by half a score." A correspondent from the *Brooklyn Standard Union* opined, "Martin has weathered well all the storms of life ... He does not look the years that have passed him by and is bright and cheerful."

On many nights, after his long shift at the subway station had ended, John Martin rode the train to Broadway. As his celebrity expanded, Martin added to his income with appearances on Broadway stages, often at the request of stage managers and producers. To the delight of theatre-goers, Martin played various bugle calls or regaled the patrons with stories of his time with Custer, the Seventh Cavalry and the Little Bighorn between acts or during intermission. In February 1907, Martin was feted with "his old regiment, the Seventh Cavalry, and other military organizations in full uniform attended a 'military night' of a popular play a few nights ago ...". Later that year, a newspaper reported that The American Theatre honored Martin during their production of "Custer's Last Fight." Martin participated in functions and events sponsored by veterans' organizations. He traveled with fellow Seventh Regiment veterans each year to West Point on the anniversary of the Little Bighorn, in addition to attending many events hosted by the Charles F. Roe Garrison of the Army and Navy Union.

In 1911, he readily traded his subway job for a less taxing one as a mechanic's assistant at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The new position eliminated the long daily commute to the 103<sup>rd</sup> Street Station in Manhattan; another benefit to an aging Martin was the Yard's proximity to his home (less than a mile). Martin's acclaim as Custer's bugler drew the interest of his co-workers: In April 1914, members of the George Bleck Association, a fraternal organization for Navy Yard employees, attended a lecture by fellow member John Martin. His bona fides were confirmed at the conclusion of the lecture, a reporter noted, when Martin "produced convincing documentary evidence tending to substantiate his claims."

He remained a favorite of parade organizers and schoolchildren well into his late 60s. Sergeant John Martin, "a grizzled old man," observed one reporter during the Liberty Loan parade in New York City in April 1918, "... reclined in an automobile float filled with children." As Martin grew older and less mobile, Brooklyn schoolchildren were brought to his apartment to hear of his exploits at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. When his general health declined in 1918, Martin was forced to curtail his active

participation with many groups; and, he likely gave up his Navy Yard job at this time. In 1920, the sixty-eight year old Martin lived with the Cicco family at 168 Prospect Street, according to Census records which listed him as an “uncle-in-law” of the Cicco family. Aside from renting a room in their home, Martin’s connection to the family is unknown and he does not appear to have been directly related.

As for John Martin’s own family, May and Lawrence (and likely John, Jr.) remained in Baltimore near their mother. Daughters Julia and Mary (Mollie) were both married and lived in Brooklyn, not far from their father’s apartment; they may have even preceded John’s arrival in 1905 or 1906. John and Julia’s first son, George, an Army officer and was stationed at Fort Adams, Rhode Island; he retired after attaining the rank of General. Another son, Frank, was an officer in the Marine Corps and assigned to Fort Howard, Maryland.

On December 18, 1922, John Martin was struck by a truck (or taxi) as he crossed a street near his Brooklyn home and was hospitalized at the Cumberland Street Hospital, located by the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway in Brooklyn. While the injuries he sustained were severe, a more devastating medical issue was discovered and for six days, John Martin struggled for his life from complications arising from a serious bronchial pulmonary condition. His fight ended at 10:15 on Sunday morning, December 24, 1922. Martin was survived by his widow, four daughters, four sons, and several grandchildren. The funeral was held at the home of his eldest daughter, Julia Martin Jensen, at 2:00 p.m. on the following day.

Trooper John Martin’s last ride ended at Cypress Hills National Cemetery in Brooklyn on December 27, 1922, where he was buried with full military honors in the veterans section. His family was joined at the funeral by Martin’s fellow Seventh Cavalry troopers, as well as veterans from assorted Army and Navy Union groups, including the Charles F. Roe and General George A. Custer Garrisons. The Army placed a granite headstone at his grave that bore the understated inscription:

*John Martin  
Italy  
Sgt [Sergeant]  
90 Coast Artillery  
December 24, 1922*

In 1991, the borough of Brooklyn hosted a memorial service at Martin’s gravesite. A new headstone had been purchased for his grave by the Little Big Horn Associates, one of several organizations dedicated to the study and research of the battle and its participants. With the blessing of Ron Hartman

(now deceased), John Martin's great grandson, the new headstone was unveiled on a sunny mid-summer day in a ceremony attended by many of Martin's relatives, several members of the Little Big Horn Associates and local elected officials. The original headstone was laid in front of the new headstone, and now serves as a footstone. Martin's new headstone bears the following inscription:

*John Martin*  
*Sgt. U.S. 7th Cavalry*  
*Died Dec. 24, 1922*

*Carried Gen. Custer's*  
*Last Message*  
*Battle of Little Big Horn*  
*June 25, 1876*

Shortly after his death, Martin's widow, Julia, applied for an Army pension assignment. In order to validate her claim as his wife, Julia was required to provide proof that their separation was only that, and not a divorce. Depositions were collected from family and neighbors by the Army Pension Board, and the Rector of St. Raymond's, Edward McKenna, issued a replacement Certificate of Marriage as validation. The matter was resolved in Julia's favor on March 23, 1923. Unfortunately, Julia began to suffer from dementia and declared insane in September 1924; she spent her remaining years confined to the Spring Grove Hospital in Catonsville, Maryland.

Critical assessments of Martin portray him as an ignorant immigrant who tried to hide his poor English skills through contradictory statements. With few defenders, the Italian-born Martin became a convenient target, some of which originated from bigoted and racist attitudes consistent with the era. However, questions regarding Martin's varying renditions of the events have merit. Was he inscrutable by design or default? As the years passed, Martin happily continued to be interviewed by historians, researchers and journalists regarding his memories of the Little Bighorn. Perhaps thoughtlessly, he occasionally amended a few details of the battle and his life; yet, his intent was to correct an inaccuracy or discrepancy in the deposition taken at the 1879 Court of Inquiry. Language issues complicated his ability to express properly what he saw and heard, more so earlier in his life than the later years. Despite this, Martin's memory, noted one journalist, was "sharper and truer than that of many men who would pass themselves off" as superior to him. Ultimately, John Martin remained consistent in his narration, despite some obvious yet minor embellishments.

Through the collaborative and solo efforts of many, John Martin - Giovanni Martino - has not been forgotten and interest in his life continues today, especially in his native Italy. Italians hold great admiration and pride for Martin, *il trombettiere di Custer*, as evidenced by their research and eagerness

to make his story known. The important discovery and confirmation of his true surname and circumstances comes from the diligent and selfless efforts of Italian researchers, historians and journalists: Professor Giuseppe Colitti, Dr. Michele Esposito, Pasquale Petrocelli, and Claudio Busi.

Admiration for Martin extends to his adopted land, as well. On May 28, 1999, Martin's service was recognized and honored by the Arlington National Cemetery's Taps Project, a permanent exhibit created by Air Force Master Sergeant and Trumpeter Jari A. Villanueva (retired) which pays tribute to nine famous buglers in U.S. Army history. The exhibit is moving, not only with respect to Martin, but also to other often forgotten buglers and their importance.

In 1906, his interview with a reporter from the *New York Evening Post* revealed another side of John Martin. "I was born for a soldier," he told the reporter, "and I love the life. The best times I ever had were on the field, and I often think of the old days with longing." The reporter noted the fire in Martin's eyes when he spoke of his campaigns. The article concluded with the final entry in Martin's diary: "I am now 51 yrs of age on my next birthday ... for the remainder of these few years which I have to spend in this world, I hope I shall be able to spend in peace and happiness with all my friends." He signed it: "Most sincerely yours, John D. Martin, Sergt. U.S.A. (retired)"

A soldier's true worth is best judged by his comrades, and not by the critiques and assessments of latter day historians. 'Bugler' Martin was held in high regard by the men he served with, respected for his actions and demeanor. Garnered from the many articles on Martin is the oft-repeated comment on his cheerful and bright attitude. "Martini (sic) was a salty little Italian who had been a drummer boy with Garibaldi in the fight for Italian independence," Private Charles Windolph wrote a few years after the battle, "We used to tease him a lot but we never did after this fight. He proved he was plenty man." The German-born Windolph, wounded during the battle, earned a Medal of Honor for his heroism throughout the two-day engagement. Few could contest the courageous Windolph's opinion of any man.

Colonel Graham interviewed Martin extensively in 1922 and opined, "he was a rather remarkable old soldier, who never misses an occasion to honor the Stars and Stripes, and who turns out in the old blue [uniform], his left arm literally covered to the elbow with service stripes, every time the call of patriotism sounds, whether it be to honor the dead or greet the living." The series of interviews with Graham concluded a few months before Martin's death, and Graham added a fitting epitaph: John Martin, he wrote, "... is well worthy of your respectful attention." Journalist and author Pasquale



Petrocelli considered that in Martin, "... we do not find a hero per se, but rather a normal man. One with qualities both good and bad. He very much represents the humble and rarely acknowledged aspects of the Italian immigrants of his era, who also worked and sacrificed for their adopted homeland."

John Martin lived an historical odyssey, and his adventures and experiences may likely remain unparalleled. His life spanned both the ancient and modern world, and included a side trip to the Wild West. For most, however, his life is summed up in one imperfect statement: The last white man to see Custer alive.

Leo Solimine

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