

FOR THE RECORD:

*An attempt to answer the most frequently-asked questions
concerning the Battle of the Little Big Horn*

Written by

James V. Schneider

Edited by Diane Davis Merkel

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INTRODUCTION

The Battle of the Little Big Horn, more commonly known as "Custer's Last Stand," has evoked questions ever since the public became aware of it in July of 1876. Why should this relatively minor engagement (which would hardly have rated an obscure column had it happened during the Vietnam War) be almost universally known? Why has it become, aside from the Battle of Gettysburg during America's Civil War, the most written about event in American history?

Perhaps the answers to these questions and the questions that follow can be found in two basic irrefutable facts: when the 7th United States Cavalry marched into the valley of the Little Big Horn River on that hot June Sunday, it was led by one of the best-known men of that time—Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer. Custer had become the youngest Major General (at the age of 23) in the history of the United States Army; his name was almost constantly in the newspapers during the Civil War; he had accepted the white surrender towel from a member of Confederate General Longstreet's staff at Appomattox Court House, and he had already made a name for himself on the frontier. When word of the 7th's defeat was received back East, people wondered how such a catastrophe could have happened.

The press immediately began painting graphic portrayals of Custer as being the last man to fall heroically. These accounts also placed the blame for the disaster on everyone—from President Grant down to "inexperienced" troopers—but Custer. Thus, the many myths surrounding the battle began to be formed.

Perhaps a second reason why this event was blown out of proportion was the fact that there were no survivors from Custer's immediate command. All reconstructions of what took place on the Custer portion of what is now Custer Battlefield National Monument are pure speculation. Granted that some are more logical and scientific than others, but the fact remains that we will never know for sure what happened there. Added to this was the fact that the event had occurred in the "wilds of Montana" far from civilization. It was, therefore, easy for writers and "historians" who had never been to the scene to embellish their accounts beyond all truth.

Writers were not the only ones who perpetuated false ideas and information concerning Little Big Horn. Artists by the hundreds (over 1,500 attempts to depict some phase of the fighting have been done) tried their hands at a "Last Stand" painting. Most of these, especially the earlier ones, were nothing more than figments of the artists' imaginations. There were no sabres used at Little Big Horn—all but one, that of Lieutenant Mathey, had been boxed at the mouth of Powder River when Custer had ordered light marching order—yet most of the paintings show them being used. Custer's hair was not long; he had had Lieutenant Varnum take the horse clippers to it before the column left Fort Abraham Lincoln. There are more historically inaccurate details in many of the paintings that lend themselves to the general public's lack of historical knowledge concerning this event, but these are two that Hollywood has used almost constantly, and it seems that many people today base their knowledge of the Little Big Horn on these paintings and motion pictures, both of which give many false impressions.

I was privileged to work for the National Park Service as a Seasonal Ranger at Custer Battlefield National Monument during the summers of 1979-1980. It was here that the thousands of tourists who annually visit this area brought up the questions that make up the body of this work.

But they occasionally brought up other questions as well. I suppose the most frequently asked question at CBNM is, "Where are the rest rooms?" Believe me, that question is more easily answered than some others! I distinctly remember four other instances where questions were asked that left me a little flabbergasted. I was giving a lecture in the Map Room of the Battlefield museum one rainy morning to a group of touring Australians. When it came time for the question-answer period, an elderly man by the name of Bill raised his hand and asked, "What's this bloody bullshit about there being no survivors?" I nearly fell through the plate glass window but, when the laughter finally died down, I answered his question for him.

Another time, a little Indian girl, after hearing my lecture given atop Last Stand Hill, looked through the fence at the group of markers, raised her hand and said, "I'll bet he [Custer] thought he'd be pretty safe behind this fence, didn't he?"

Then there was the elderly Sioux gentleman who asked me, "Ya know the only mistake we made? We should have had tougher immigration laws and we should have conducted an environmental impact study before letting you people in here."

In June of 1979, there were several of Custer's personal possessions, including his toothbrush, on display in the Visitors' Center. One lady approached me after viewing the display and asked, "Were all toothbrushes that big or did Custer just have a big mouth?"

It was during that same month that a lady approached another of the Seasonal Rangers and I overheard her ask him, "Isn't it true that this battle really took place in South Dakota and the museum was built here to spread the tourism around?" It's questions and beliefs like that that make it hard for us serious students of the battle to advance the truth.

In attempting to answer the most frequently asked serious questions about this intriguing event, I have used sources that modern historians of the period highly acclaim. It is hoped that these answers will lead the reader to probe deeper into the events of that day--a day that hastened the development of the West.

James V. Schneider
Fort Wayne, Indiana

QUESTION: Wasn't the 7th Cavalry just part of a larger force that was supposed to be here?

The Sioux Expedition of 1876, under the command of General Alfred Terry, was comprised of three different units which were to act in concert against the Indians which were believed to be concentrated in southeastern Montana. This military action was to begin on April 5, 1876, but, due to delays of various natures, the columns did not leave their stations until April-June.

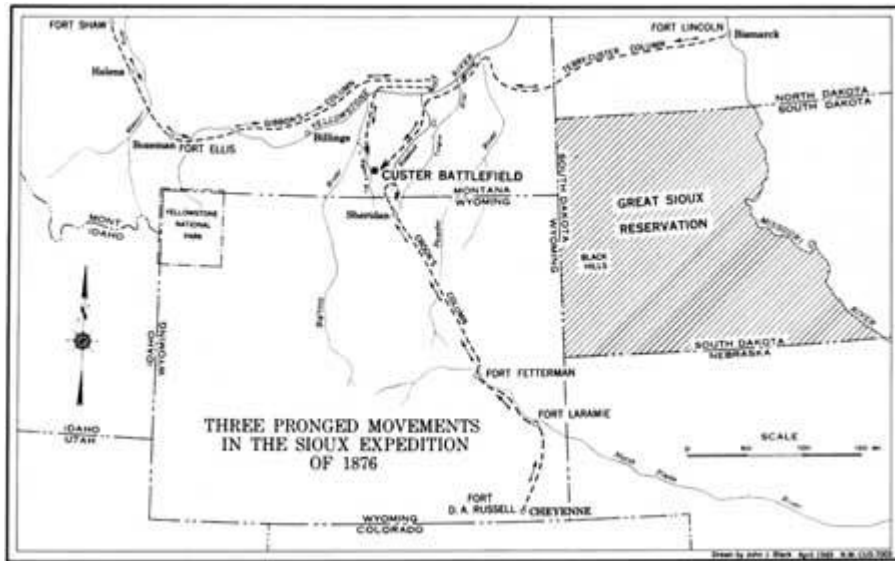
The "Montana Column" (comprised of 477 men of the 2nd Cavalry and 7th Infantry under the command of Colonel John Gibbon) left Fort Ellis, Montana Territory, on April 1st. The "Wyoming Column" (made up of 1,248 cavalry and infantrymen, 250 mules and 106 supply wagons under the command of General George W. Crook) left its camp on Prairie Dog Creek, Wyoming, on June 6th. It had originally been stationed near Fort Fetterman, also in Wyoming. The "Dakota Column" (comprised of 52 officers and 879 enlisted men under the command of Generals Terry and Custer) left Fort Abraham Lincoln, near present-day Bismarck, North Dakota, on May 17th.

It had been decided that the three columns should meet in the vicinity of the Little Big Horn River Valley on June 26th, and it was hoped that the Indians would be caught in this pincers movement and forced back onto their reservations. The plan might have succeeded except for two things: each of the three columns, acting independently of each other, had no real communications with the other two. It was almost a case of one hand not knowing what the other was doing.

The other reason for the plan's failure was an event that took place on Rosebud Creek, in southeastern Montana, on June 17th. On that date, Crook's "Wyoming Column" met the very same Indians who eight days later were to wipe out Custer at what has become known as the Battle of the Rosebud. After fighting for the better part of the day over vast areas of open ground, the Indians left the area leaving Crook in command of the field. Out of the 1,248 men who had entered the fight, Crook had suffered 9 men killed and 23 wounded. Instead of going on to the Little Big Horn and *without* sending messengers to the other two columns, Crook did an "about face" and marched his men back to their base camp at Goose Creek. He and his men arrived there on June 19th and were encamped there throughout the rest of June and most of July. They spent most of their time fishing for trout! The largest single column in the expedition was now out of action and *neither of the other two columns knew about it*. There has been some speculation that Crook did indeed send a messenger to Terry, but this has neither been proved nor disproved.

On June 21, 1876, Terry, Gibbon and Custer had their final conference aboard the steamship *Far West*, which was anchored at the mouth of the Rosebud River. The decision to arrive in the Little Big Horn Valley on the 26th was made after Major Marcus A. Reno had taken a scout (against Terry's orders) up the Rosebud, discovering fresh Indian signs leading towards the Little Big Horn.

Custer and the 7th arrived in the Little Big Horn Valley on the 25th; Terry and Gibbon did not make it until the 27th and Crook never made it at all. Had Custer waited another day before entering the valley, it would have made no difference--the 7th would still have had to fight the Indians located there by itself.

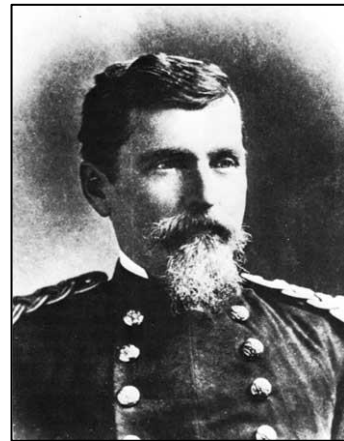


Three Pronged Movements in the Sioux Expedition of 1876
Courtesy of the National Park Service



General George Crook

Crook was commander of the “Wyoming Column.” On June 17, 1876, just eight days before Custer’s last battle, he suffered a major defeat at the hands of the Sioux at the Battle of the Rosebud.



Colonel John Gibbon

Gibbon was commander of the “Montana Column.” Leaving Fort Ellis, Montana, in April 1876, he led his cavalry to Fort Shaw, Montana, where it was joined by a force of infantry. This column then moved east down the Yellowstone River.



General Alfred H. Terry

Terry was commander of the Department of Dakota. He gave Custer his final orders on June 22, 1876.

QUESTION: Is it true that Custer disobeyed General Terry's orders?

This is an issue that has been debated for over 100 years. To answer this Question, it is necessary to quote in full the written instructions that Terry gave Custer on the morning of June 22nd:

The Brigadier General commanding directs that, as soon as your regiment can be made ready for the march, you will proceed up the Rosebud in pursuit of the Indians whose trail was discovered by Major Reno a few days since. It is, of course, impossible to give you any definite instructions in regard to this movement, and were it not impossible to do so the Department Commander places too much confidence in your zeal, energy, and ability to wish to impose on you precise orders which might hamper your action when nearly in contact with the enemy. He will, however, indicate to you his own views of what your action should be; and he desires that you should conform to them unless you shall see sufficient reasons for departing from them. He thinks that you should proceed up the Rosebud until you ascertain definitely the direction in which the trail above spoken leads. Should it be found (as it appears almost certain that it will be found) to turn toward the Little Horn, he thinks that you should still proceed southward, perhaps as far as the headwaters of the Tongue, and then turn toward the Little Horn, feeling constantly, however, for your left, so as to preclude the possibility of the escape of the Indians to the south or southwest by passing your left flank. The column of Colonel Gibbon is now in motion for the mouth of the Big Horn. As soon as it reaches that point it will cross the Yellowstone and move up at least as far as the forks of the Big and Little Horns. Of course, its future movements must be controlled by circumstances as they arise, but it is hoped that the Indians, if upon the Little Horn, may be so nearly inclosed by the two columns that their escape will be impossible.

The Department Commander desires that on your way up the Rosebud you should thoroughly examine the upper part of Tullock's Creek, and that you should endeavor to send a scout through to Colonel Gibbon's column, with information of the results of your examination. The lower part of this creek will be examined by a detachment from Colonel Gibbon's command. The supply steamer will be pushed up the Big Horn as far as the forks of the river if found to be navigable for that distance, and the Department Commander, who will accompany the column of Colonel Gibbon, desires you to report to him there not later than the expiration of the time for which your troops are rationed, unless in the meantime you receive further orders."

Much has been written concerning the term "sufficient reasons" in attempting to answer this question. Just what Custer thought were the sufficient reasons went to his grave with him. There is a key word (in italics in the following passage) that made it impossible for Custer to have disobeyed his orders: ". . . you should conform to them unless *you* shall see sufficient reasons for departing from them" [emphasis added]. Terry thus empowered Custer to act as the sole judge in any situation he might encounter. Custer, and only Custer, had the authority to make a decision about what his command might face. As historian John Gray has stated in his monumental work, *Centennial Campaign*, "One may quarrel with Custer's judgement, but not his authority to judge. Custer's obedience is therefore neither debatable, nor relevant."

QUESTION: Why did Custer order Major Reno and his men to attack the village when he knew there were so many Indians there?

The answer to this question, simply put, is inadequate intelligence of the enemy. During the meeting aboard the *Far West* on the 22nd, Terry, Gibbon, and Custer discussed the number of Indians that they might have to face. The War Department had estimated that 1,000 warriors were at that time "hostile" (roaming freely). This figure was agreed upon by the three commanders although Lieutenant Edward S. Godfrey later stated that Custer told his officers that he expected to find closer to 1,500 warriors. The point is this—no one knew just what to expect other than, as one scout with Custer stated, ". . . a damn big fight."

Added to this must be the fact that the entire plan that Terry had proposed was based on the assumption that the Indians would run as they usually had in the past when confronted by a large number of mounted troopers. Terry, Custer, and Gibbon did not know that these Indians would not run, that they felt secure in their numbers, and that their morale was extremely high after having defeated Crook on the Rosebud. They were not going to run from anyone or anything. Up to the very last minute, the evidence that Custer had gathered seemed to indicate that the Indians were indeed in flight; it also concealed the true strength of the village from him.

Why didn't Custer keep the entire regiment together? He tried to, but to achieve this would have caused a delay of action and it was not in Custer's personality to delay when so near an enemy. He had sent men to hurry the pack train along, but they did little good. Benteen, contrary to direct orders and common sense, kept his men out of the action. What might have happened had the regiment remained as one cohesive unit can only be guessed at. As John Gray states:

. . . [S]ince fewer Indians had stopped Crook with more troops, only a week before, no one can defend anything better than a check instead of a checkmate.

Custer's decisions, judged in the light of what he knew at the time, instead of by our hindsight, were neither disobedient, rash, nor stupid. Granted his premises, all the rest follows rationally. It was what neither he, nor any other officer, knew that brought disaster.



Major Marcus A. Reno

Reno opened the fighting at Little Big Horn when he, along with Companies A, G, and M, was ordered to attack the village in the valley.

QUESTION: Do we know anything of the tactics that were used in this fight?

Since Custer and his entire command were killed in this fight, we can only speculate as to what he tried to do after separating from Major Reno.

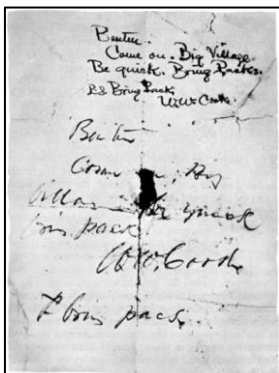
Some historians feel that Custer was attempting to use the same maneuver, or tactic, that he had successfully used on the Washita River in 1868. Known today as a "double envelopment," it is simply the division of a command into two basic units and striking the objective from two sides at the same time. To be successful, both sides must engage the objective at the same time. When Reno retreated to the bluffs after fighting in the valley for approximately 45 minutes, the Indian warriors were then free to go upstream and meet Custer's half of the envelopment. An important point to remember is this: Custer never knew that Reno had retreated. This tactic, if indeed it was the one that Custer attempted to use, is a good one. It is still studied at West Point and it was used as recently as the Vietnam War.

Although Custer may have attempted this "double envelopment," one must remember that the regiment had actually been divided into four columns: Custer's column (Companies C, E, F, I, L), Reno's column (Companies A, G, M), Benteen's column (Companies D, H, K), and the pack train escorted by Captain Thomas McDougall's Company B. Only two columns, Reno's and Custer's, attempted attacks.

Another possible tactic that is widely accepted today is the "Corridor Theory" proposed by Dr. Charles Kuhlman in his masterpiece on the Custer fight, *Legend into History*. Dr. Kuhlman contended that Custer's entire five companies reached what is now known as Last Stand Hill having suffered very few casualties. When Custer saw Captain Thomas B. Weir's men on what is now called Weir Point, he believed they were Benteen's men coming in response to the famous "last message" [see photograph below]. He then, according to Kuhlman, sent Companies F, I, and L along "Battle Ridge" and Companies C and E down towards the river. This made a rough corridor for the rest of the command (Reno, Benteen and the pack train with its escort) to come through. Thus, the entire 7th would be re-united in one spot. Dr. Kuhlman believed that once the various companies had been sent, the Indians, who had concealed themselves in the gullies and ravines, easily picked off the troopers, leaving only the small group atop Last Stand Hill.

There are other theories that are also widely accepted concerning the tactics that were used here. The fact remains that we will never know for sure exactly what Custer was trying to do.

The Famous "Last Message"



Hurriedly written by Custer's Adjutant, Lieutenant W.W. Cooke, it read:

Benteen
Come on. Big
village. Be quick
Bring pack.
WW Cooke
P. bring pacs

Later, Benteen transcribed the message in his own handwriting in the upper right hand corner.

QUESTION: How long did the fighting last?

We do not know precisely how long the fighting lasted on the Custer portion of the field, the range of estimates being extremely wide. Members of the 7th Cavalry testified at the Reno Court of Inquiry in 1879 that the fighting by Custer's command lasted anywhere from fifteen minutes (Lieutenant Edgerly) to two hours (Fred Girard). Most of the times given at the inquiry would have the Custer battalion wiped out before Captain Benteen joined Reno's forces on the bluffs. This, according to some modern historians, conveniently took Benteen "off the hook" for not going to Custer's aid, even though he had received written orders to do so.

Indian accounts are almost as widely varied as the soldiers' estimates. Their statements on the length of time it took to annihilate Custer's five companies range from fifteen minutes to one hour. One Indian warrior has been quoted as saying that the fighting on that portion of the field lasted, ". . . as long as it takes a hungry man to eat his dinner."

These "guesstimates" have only taken into consideration the length of the fighting done by Custer's five companies. The actual battle began with Major Reno's attack around 2:55 p.m. on the afternoon of the 25th. It did not end until the Indians withdrew, due to the coming of the Terry-Gibbon column, on the afternoon of the 26th. We could, therefore, state that the fighting technically lasted for the better part of two days.

QUESTION: How many troopers fought here? How many were killed?

When the 7th Cavalry left Fort Abraham Lincoln on May 17, 1876, it consisted of 33 officers and 718 enlisted men or a total of 751 men. Accompanying them were 35 Crow and Arikara Indian scouts, 13 quartermaster employees, and 2 citizens. These raised the total force to 801 individuals. Between June 10 and June 22, 2 officers and 152 enlisted men (including the regimental band) were placed on detached service. This left 647 men (31 officers, 566 enlisted men, and 50 others) entering the valley of the Little Big Horn.

Due to assignments to the pack train or as couriers or for special duty, Reno made his initial charge with but 175 men; Custer attacked with 221 troopers and the remaining 249 men never participated in the attack.

As for the 7th's casualties, the two days' fighting left 263 killed (210 with Custer [after subtracting the 11 who were sent back or straggled back to Reno Hill] and 53 with Reno) and 59 wounded. These figures are probably as close to the exact numbers as we will ever be able to come. They are based on individual company returns and testimony of the various members of the burial detail.

QUESTION: Who were the Indian leaders here? Did Sitting Bull take part in the fighting?

The Indians at Little Big Horn were from two basic tribes, the Sioux and Cheyenne. The Uncpapa Sioux were led by Gall, Crow King, Rain-in-the-Face, and Sitting Bull. The Ogallala Sioux were led by Crazy Horse and Low Dog. The Sans Arc Sioux were led by Spotted Eagle and the Minneconjou Sioux by Hump. The Cheyenne were led by Two Moon and Lame White Man. There were also members of the Blackfeet, Arapahoe, and Gros Ventres tribes who participated in the fighting, but they were relatively minor combatants.

It should be stated here that the term "leader," when applied to the Indian concept of warfare, is somewhat misleading. A warrior chief was followed as long as it was thought that his medicine was good. If a particular chief's medicine was not good on a particular day, his warriors would follow someone else. Evidently most of the warrior chiefs had strong medicine on June 25, 1876.

Sitting Bull did not take part in the actual fighting. He was, at this time, no longer a warrior chief but the spiritual leader of the Sioux. It was his charismatic personality that held the various tribes together. By his own account, he did not arrive on the Custer portion of the field until after the majority of the warriors went to renew the fighting against the Reno-Benteen battalions.

QUESTION: How many Indians fought here against the 7th Cavalry?

It would seem that this is a question which can never be answered to everyone's complete satisfaction. As Dr. John Gray has stated in *Centennial Campaign*:

One of the most baffling puzzles of the Battle of the Little Big Horn has been the strength of the village that so decisively defeated the 7th Cavalry. You may choose any number between one and forty thousand and find that it corresponds to someone's estimate of lodges, warriors, or persons.

In all of the white (soldiers') estimates, there seems to be an escalation of figures that corresponds to the amount of time following the fight. Captain Benteen, for example, estimated that there were 1,500-1,800 warriors on June 27th; three years later, in 1879, he stated that he believed there had been between 8,000 and 9,000!

We have previously seen the figures that both the War Department and Custer, himself, estimated. It now seems that maybe these figures were not so far off after all. Using the records from the various Indian agencies to calculate both the summer and winter migrations of the various tribes, Dr. John Gray has come up with a logical (and highly plausible) figure for the size of the Indian village.

According to these agency returns, the Little Big Horn village would have contained 1,000 lodges and a total population of 7,120 individuals. Of this number, there were only 1,780 adult males. It was Indian custom to have the older boys fight if the women and children were seriously threatened and this may have swelled the number of Indian participants to around 2,000. The Indians around Custer Hill thus outnumbered the troopers ten to one. On Reno Hill where the troopers had entrenched themselves, the odds were only about four to one.

Would it be possible for less than two thousand Indian warriors to so soundly defeat the best regiment of cavalry in the United States Army? There is no reason to doubt it. On June 25, there were only 566 enlisted men in the regiment and, as we have seen, Custer had divided his force into four columns which were spread too far apart. Dr. Gray concludes:

There is no longer any excuse for grossly exaggerating the Indian strength in order to account for so decisive an outcome. The real marvel is that so large a village could have remained together long enough to be ready at the critical moment. It remained intact only briefly, but fate timed the encounter perfectly for the Indian.

QUESTION: How many Indian losses were there at Little Big Horn?

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We honestly do not know how many Indian casualties there were at the Little Big Horn; estimates range from a low of 30 killed to over 300. The reason for this is really quite simple: the Indians tried never to leave their dead on the field of battle.

One must remember an important fact concerning the Indians who fought here: they were a religious people. Granted, their religion was different from our present-day standards, but they were, nevertheless, religious. One aspect of their religion was the belief in an "after life," or "happy hunting ground" as Hollywood has chosen to call it. Actually, very few tribes referred to it by the movie term. In any case, they believed that a body or corpse entered the "after life" in the same condition that it was on this earth. If a dead warrior's body was left on the field of battle, there was a distinct possibility that it would be desecrated or mutilated by the enemy. If this happened, that warrior's body would enter the "after life" in that condition.

Many survivors of the 7th Cavalry at the Little Big Horn gave high Indian casualty estimates in order to allow the regiment to "save face." The truth of the matter is, however, that we will never know for certain what the Indian losses were.



Indian Burial Scaffold

The Indians quite often placed the bodies of fallen warriors on scaffolds such as this to keep wild animals from desecrating the bodies.

QUESTION: Why aren't there any markers for the Indian casualties?

The answer to this question is that we simply do not, except in the case of the Cheyenne chief, Lame White Man, know where the Indians fell or how many of them were killed.

The National Park Service and the staff of Custer Battlefield National Monument have long had a policy of trying to have relatives of the Indian warriors who fought here come and relate their oral history as to who fell here and where. Most of the time, these requests have been ignored.

It would be possible to place a memorial marker for the Indians who fell here, but two questions would first have to be answered. First, what would constitute a fitting design? Second, where would the marker be placed? As one old Indian gentleman once told a Custer Battlefield Seasonal Ranger, "We don't need a memorial marker here. Just look at those markers for the troopers; they are, after all, memorials to Sioux and Cheyenne marksmanship."

QUESTION: Is it true that the Indians were better armed than the cavalry at Little Big Horn?

The 7th Cavalry had been issued two basic weapons at the time of the fighting here: the 1873 model Springfield .45 caliber "trap door" single-shot, breech-loading carbine and the Colt, model 1873 single-action Army revolver, caliber .45. Prior to the engagement, troopers were issued 100 rounds each for the carbine and 24 for the revolver. 50 of the carbine cartridges were carried on their person and 50 in their saddle bags. Each revolver was loaded with 5 rounds (the hammer resting against the empty chamber to prevent accidental discharge) and the remaining 19 cartridges were carried in either pouches or belts.

The Springfield .45-.55 (or .45-.70 depending on the cartridge used) was a reasonably accurate weapon; Sergeant Windolph of Company H claimed up to 600 yards. It weighed 7 pounds and could be fired anywhere from 7-12 times per minute. It could be fired up to 1,200 yards, but at that distance, it was not too accurate.

The main faults of the carbine were its ammunition and extractor mechanism. The cartridge was copper cased and inside-primed. These casings were thin and, at that date, there was no uniformity in their manufacture. It was found that during periods of rapid fire, these casings would swell and jam the breech mechanism. The extractor would then either tear the head off of the casing or cam over the rim, leaving the trooper with an inoperable weapon.

Much has been made of these malfunctions as being a major contribution to the annihilation of Custer's immediate command. While some malfunctions must have occurred, they probably were few in number—only a few jammed carbines were reported to have been found on the Custer portion of the field. Major Reno reported on July 11, 1876, that only 6 out of 380 carbines had been rendered unserviceable. No such problems occurred with the Colt revolver.

There were some officers, including Custer, who carried weapons of their choice instead of the Army issue ones. This was permissible as long as the officers purchased these weapons themselves. Custer carried his 1875 model Remington .50 caliber sporting rifle and two "Bulldog" double action pistols; Tom Custer had his 1873 Springfield Officers' Rifle; Captain Thomas French preferred a .50 caliber Springfield rifle (the "Long Tom") and Sergeant John Ryan used a 15 pound Sharps telescope rifle, caliber .45.

Custer refused an offer of three Gatling guns prior to his movement down the Rosebud. Many modern-day historians question this, arguing that the outcome of the battle might have been different had he taken them. These weapons could, after all, fire 150 rounds per minute. These people forget two very important facts: these weapons, mounted on cannon-like four-wheeled carriages and cranked by hand, were pulled by four condemned cavalry horses. They lacked maneuverability and would probably never have made it over the broken country which the 7th traversed. Secondly, the terrain itself above the Indian encampment would have rendered these weapons almost totally useless. If a person stands atop "Last Stand Hill," he will realize that the Gatling guns would have torn up a lot of ground, but as far as inflicting casualties upon the Indians, they would have done little damage.

It is difficult to accurately document the Indian weapons at Little Big Horn since they kept nothing closely resembling white men's records. It is known that they did possess some Spencers (.50 and .52 caliber), Henrys (.44 caliber) and Winchester repeating rifles (.44-.40 caliber). Basically, however, the most common Indian gun was the old-fashioned muzzle-loading trade musket with a flintlock ignition. The reason for this is really quite simple: the muzzle-loader required no cartridges; it could fire anything, even small stones! A modern weapon usually became useless when the warrior ran out of cartridges. Sergeant Windolph stated:

It has been generally accepted that all the red warriors were armed with the latest model repeating Winchester rifles and that they had a plentiful supply of ammunition. For my part, I believe that fully half the warriors carried only bows and arrows and lances, and that possibly half the remainder carried odds and ends of old muzzle-loaders and single shot rifles of various vintages. Probably not more than 25 or 30 per cent of the warriors carried modern repeating rifles.

That the Indians obtained some modern weapons by illicit means or from the government cannot be reasonably refuted. However, most of their modern weapons used in this engagement came from the 7th Cavalry itself. After defeating Custer's immediate command, they took from the field and from the captured horses, almost 200 Springfield carbines and their ammunition. These were then used against the Reno-Benteen contingent. Captain J.S. Poland, 6th U.S. Infantry, reported to the Assistant Adjutant General on July 24, 1876, that, "... a report from another source says the Indians obtained from Custer's Command 592 carbines and revolvers."

Were the Indians better armed than the 7th Cavalry at Little Big Horn? Probably in one way and one way only—they used the bow and arrow. This weapon allowed the warriors to launch literally thousands of arrows upon the exposed troopers while they themselves remained out of sight. The 7th simply did not have much to shoot at from Custer Hill.

Standard Cavalry Weapons, 1876



The Springfield model 1873 "Trap Door" carbine, caliber .45-.70.



The Colt model 1873 single shot revolver, caliber .45.

QUESTION: Why didn't the Indians "finish off" the Reno-Benteen commands after so thoroughly routing Custer?

The answer to this question is three-fold. First of all, while the vast majority of Indian warriors were fighting against Custer and his command upstream, the 367 men on the bluffs had some time to "dig in" (almost one hour) before the pack train arrived and the movement to Weir Point was initiated. This entrenchment, done with any available implement, was further accomplished during the night of the 25th. Thus, the Indian warriors were fighting an entrenched foe who was much harder to hit. In fact, only twelve troopers were killed in the Hill Top fight; forty-seven were wounded.

Secondly, by many Indian accounts they were running extremely low on ammunition. It is a fact that some Indians were throwing rocks at the troopers during the fighting on the 26th.

Finally, it had been reported by the Indian scouts that another column of troopers was moving into the area from the northwest (Terry and Gibbon). Around noon on the 26th, the frustrated Indians began withdrawing from their positions on the bluffs. Lodges were struck and the immense village began filing down the west bank of the Little Big Horn River to the cheers of the survivors. The Battle of the Little Big Horn was now over.

QUESTION: Is it true that the 7th Cavalry, at the time of this battle, was made up largely of raw recruits?

The foundation for this claim seems to come from the testimony given at the Reno Court of Inquiry in 1879. It was here that both Lieutenants Edgerly and Godfrey stated that the ". . . companies contained from 30 to 40% recruits without prior service."

Military training in 1876 was very elementary by modern standards. Discipline and organization were placed on a higher level than individual combat skills. In fact, the government had ordered the monthly allowance of ammunition per man to be ten rounds! This was lowered even further in 1876 in an "economy move." On top of this, between 1868 and June of 1876, the 7th had seen only limited action against Indians (the Washita Campaign of 1868 and the Yellowstone Expedition of 1873 being the major engagements). Battle experience was thus a rarity.

During the eight months prior to the '1876 campaign, the 7th received two shipments of recruits. The first group, which came between October and December 1875, was comprised of 160 men, 75 (48%) of whom had either five years' previous experience or Civil War service. The other group, consisting of 69 recruits, arrived during the first four months of 1876. Their service records have not, at this time, been checked, but perhaps one-fourth of them had had prior service in the military.

Of the 718 troopers (not counting officers) who comprised the 7th's campaign strength when it left Fort Abraham Lincoln on May 17, 1876, only 7% (50 men) had had less than six months' service. Since many of these were left at the Powder River Depot and detached for various other reasons, only 3% (23 men) of the 566 troopers who entered the valley of the Little Big Horn had had less than six months' military experience. Contrary to many historians' claims, the 7th Cavalry was not encumbered with raw recruits.



Captain Frederick Benteen

It was Benteen who received Custer's last message.
He was in command of Companies D, H, and K.

Photograph by D. F. Barry

QUESTION: Did Custer commit suicide?

When a person studies any historical event, whether it be a Civil War battle or the fight at Little Big Horn, he must apply two criteria to his study: factual knowledge and logic. When we apply these criteria to the above question, we can come up with some fairly interesting and logical assumptions.

It is a known fact that George Armstrong Custer was right handed. It is also known that he had received two wounds (one in the left breast and one in the left temple), either of which would have been fatal but not, according to the surgeon accompanying Gibbon's column, necessarily immediately so. It is also known that the Sioux and Cheyenne never mutilated (scalped or otherwise) a body of a foe whom they thought had committed suicide; they thought that individual had "fought like a woman."

Knowing that Custer was right handed and knowing that he had received a wound to the left temple, one must ask the logical question, "Why would he put his revolver to his left temple?" This would, indeed, have been a very difficult maneuver; he would have had to pull the trigger with the thumb of his right hand. This would have been even more difficult if he had received his chest wound first, as many modern historians claim that he had.

Looking at the markers as they now stand atop Last Stand Hill, one will notice that quite a few officers, including Custer's brother, Thomas Ward Custer, died fairly close to him. It was a common idea in the Indian-fighting army to "keep the last bullet for yourself," and many officers and enlisted men held to it.

It would not, therefore, be too improbable (or illogical) to suggest the following scenario take place: Custer was down; he had been hit in the left breast and was now no longer capable of command. His brother, Tom, or another officer who was close by, realized that the situation had become hopeless. Not wanting Custer to fall alive, even though seriously wounded, into the hands of the Indians, this man took his Colt revolver, placed it close to Custer's left temple, and pulled the trigger.

By almost all accounts, Custer's body had not been mutilated. Could this speculation be the reason why? We will never know for sure. Logic says Custer did not commit suicide, **but . . .**



By Ernest Lisle Reedstrom

QUESTION: Who was Sergeant Butler and why is his marker located where it is?

Sergeant James Butler was First Sergeant of Company L, commanded by Custer's brother-in-law, Lieutenant James Calhoun. He had once served in the British Army and had seen service with the Union during the Civil War. He had been with the 7th Cavalry from its beginning.

The body of Sergeant Butler was found approximately a quarter of a mile from Medicine Tail Coulee, where some historians think Custer attempted to cross the Little Big Horn to attack the Indian village. It was the closest body to the Reno-Benteen position and the farthest from Custer's.

How did Sergeant Butler come to be where his body was found? We will never know for sure, but there are two theories that have today gained wide acceptance. The first of these is that he had been sent by Custer as a messenger to Reno or Benteen to have them hurry and unite with Custer's command. This could have taken place; however, First Sergeants were seldom used as messengers. The second theory is that, as his company's First Sergeant, his position during a march would be at the rear of the company to keep the troopers closed as much as possible. Since it appears that Company L was the last company in Custer's column, he may have lost his horse or been wounded as the column left Medicine Tail Coulee. If this was the case, he was one of the first of Custer's command to die. We do know that he apparently fought well to the bitter end--his several wounds and the many empty cartridge cases found around his body seem to indicate this.

The truth surrounding the location of Sergeant Butler's body will never be known. It is just another of the many fascinating aspects concerning the fight at Little Big Horn.



CUSTER'S LAST HOPE by J.K. Ralston, 1959. This painting, owned by Mr. and Mrs. Don Foote, supposedly depicts Sergeant James Butler riding toward Reno-Benteen for assistance.

QUESTION: Were all of the troopers' bodies mutilated by the Indians?

When the Indians had finished with the five companies under Custer, the Indian women—and some warriors who did not go back to fight against the Reno-Benteen contingent—came to the field to gather the spoils of a great victory. It was at this time that many of the wounded were killed and those who had previously died were mutilated, in many cases, horribly so. Perhaps the worst case of mutilation on the Custer portion of the field was that done to the body of Tom Custer. Both arms and both legs had been removed and the head had been cut off. The torso had been split open and the entrails left on the ground. The only way that the body was recognized was by the tattoo "TWC" found on a near-by severed arm.

Not all of the bodies, however, had had these mutilations done to them. Some had just been stripped of their clothing and scalped. Others, such as Captain Myles W. Keogh and, according to most accounts, Custer had not been touched (save their clothing) at all.

There are possibly three reasons why Custer had not been scalped. First of all, as we have previously seen, the Indians may have thought that he had committed suicide. Secondly, contrary to Hollywood's versions of the Last Stand, Custer's hair was extremely short. He had had Lieutenant Varnum take the horse clippers to it before the column left Fort Lincoln. Finally, Custer was 36 years old at the time of his death and he was going bald on the crown of his head. There was literally no scalp to take from George Armstrong Custer!

When discussing the Indians' mutilation of bodies, one must remember that these people were, as we have seen, very religious. As hard as it may be for us to understand, the mutilations done here and elsewhere were done out of the basic religious beliefs in an "after life" and that a body entered that life in the same condition that it was on this earth. Thus, if a trooper's eyes were poked out, he could not see in the next life; if he had his trigger finger cut off, he could not fire his weapon.

There were, as some Indian warriors later admitted, mutilations done out of pure hatred. Gall, for example, stated that he wreaked havoc on Custer's field (using an axe) because, "My heart was bad." Who could blame him? His wife and young son had been killed during Reno's initial charge up the valley. Whether these were isolated cases will never be known for sure.

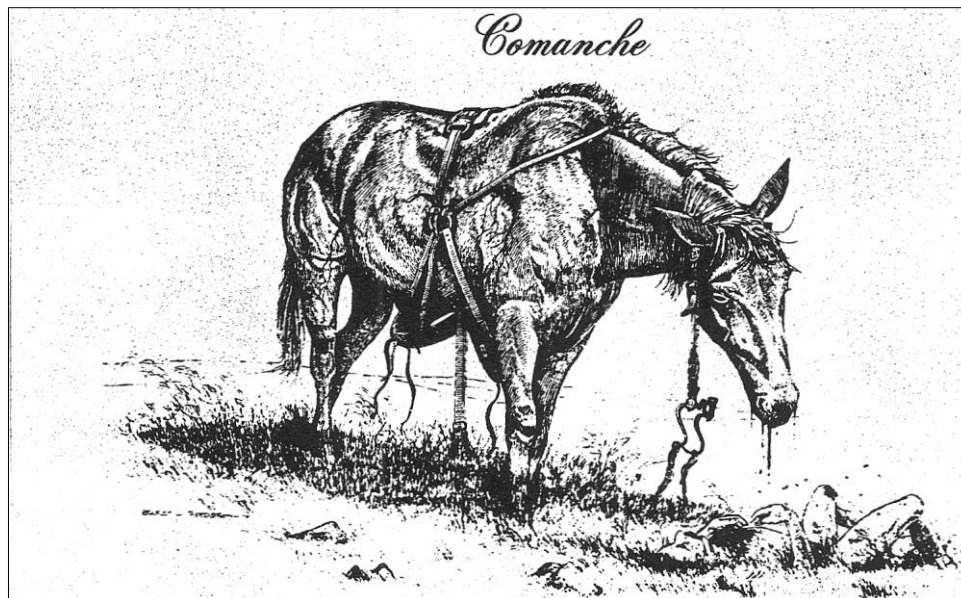


By Ernest Lisle Reedstrom

QUESTION: Was "Comanche" the sole survivor of the 7th Cavalry at this battle? Was he the only living thing found on the Custer portion of the field?

When someone states that "Comanche" was the sole survivor of the 7th Cavalry at the Little Big Horn, he is forgetting that this confrontation was actually made up of three separate fights some four miles apart. The first phase of this engagement opened with Major Reno's charge toward the Indian village; it ended with his inglorious retreat to the bluffs. The second phase was the action that took place on the Custer portion of the field; it ended in the total annihilation of Custer and his 209 men. The third and final phase of the fighting here occurred when the Indian warriors went back to renew the action against the Reno-Benteen commands; it ended, technically, when the Indians withdrew on the 26th, although the troopers stayed atop the bluffs until the arrival of the Terry-Gibbon column on the 27th. The point of all of this is that there were some 355 members of the 7th United States Cavalry that survived the Battle of the Little Big Horn! These men, members of the Reno-Benteen contingent, had fought for the better part of two days and they lived to tell about it.

"Comanche," the mount of Captain Keogh (*NOT* Custer), was probably not the only living thing found on the Custer portion of the field. In some accounts by survivors of the Reno-Benteen commands as well as in accounts by some of Gibbon's men, they state that other horses aside from "Comanche" were also found. These, however, had been so badly wounded that they were put out of their misery. The fact that the Indians took several cavalry mounts from the field for their own use also indicates that horses other than "Comanche" had been found.



By Ernest Lisle Reedstrom

QUESTION: Are the markers scattered across the field the graves of troopers? Do they mark where the men actually fell?

The marble markers found on Custer Battlefield National Monument are not grave sites now. On June 27, 1876, the survivors of the 7th Cavalry, along with members of the Montana Column under Colonel John Gibbon, came here to identify and bury the bodies of their fallen friends. Because of a lack of tools with which to dig decent burial pits, most of the dead were merely covered with sagebrush, rocks, and a few shovelfuls of dirt. Wooden stakes were placed wherever bodies were found and if the identity of the corpse was known, an empty shell casing with that man's name on it was shoved into the dirt under the stake.

In 1877, another burial party arrived on the field. They exhumed the bodies of all of the officers that they could find and shipped them east for re-burial in family plots or national cemeteries. Captain Keogh, for example, is buried in Auburn, New York, while Lieutenant Cooke, the man who penciled the famous "Last Message," is buried in Ontario, Canada. Many other officers are buried at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

In 1879, the field was again visited, this time by soldiers from the recently completed Fort Custer (located near present-day Hardin, Montana). These men did the best they could in remounding the graves. They also placed new wooden stakes at each grave site.

In 1881, another party visited the field and collected all the remains of the enlisted men that it could find. That the job was rather difficult, if not impossible, is shown by the fact that in 1958, three bodies of troopers were found at the Reno-Benteen Defense Site. In any event, a mass grave was dug atop Last Stand Hill and these remains were placed in it. The granite Memorial shaft, with the names of all the troopers who fell here inscribed on it, covers this grave.

In 1890, the marble headstones now covering the field replaced the wooden stakes. These stones have been periodically replaced because of vandalism, weather, etc.

The markers that one sees when looking out over Custer Battlefield do represent, on the whole, the locations where troopers fell on that hot June Sunday. They are not, however, totally accurate. For example, the entire "Last Stand Group" (enclosed by the fence) is not exactly as it was at the time of the battle. At that time, the hill was approximately 12 feet higher and met at a point just above the present monument. Lieutenant Godfrey, one of the survivors, stated that at the time of the fighting, there was barely room for a single horse-drawn wagon atop Custer's hill. Due to various gradings for the road and the Memorial itself, the hill has been leveled and all markers placed south of the shaft. In reality, bodies were found ringing the entire crest of the now non-existent hill. Furthermore, if one examines old photographs of the area and compares them with more recent ones, it will be noticed that more markers are standing in that group now than there were originally stakes for.

There are also cases of individual spurious markers. The marker for Lieutenant James Garland Sturgis, whose body was never found, can be located as one descends the trail towards Deep Ravine. Another example of an individual misplaced marker is the marker for Mark Kellogg, newspaper correspondent for the *Bismarck Tribune* and the *New York Herald*. According to almost every account, his body was found down towards the river (50-75 yards from it) below Last Stand Hill. Today his marker may be found north of the road that runs along Battle Ridge close to I Company's position.

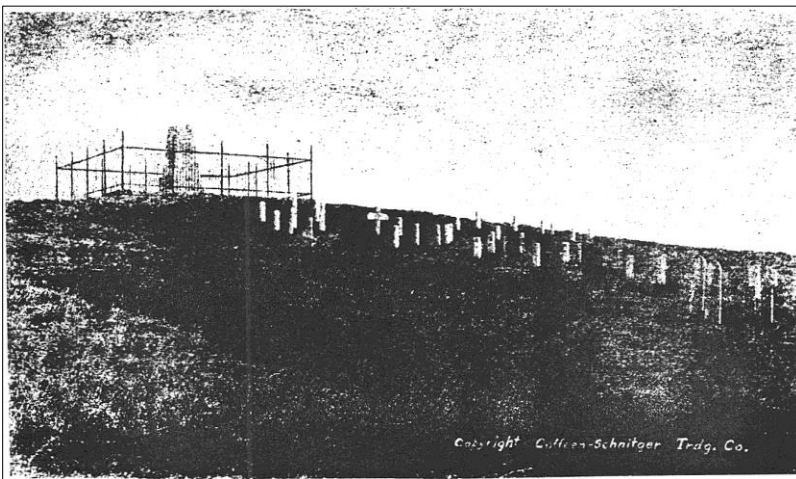
There is also strong evidence that 28 men from Company E fell in what is now known as the Deep Ravine. The markers for these men are not located there; they have been scattered along the route from Custer Hill to the ravine itself.

Why were these markers misplaced? The most likely answer is that they were (and still are) quite cumbersome. They were carried to the field by horse-drawn wagons and, since the terrain made it difficult for this type of vehicle to move effectively, the stones were placed in the most easily accessible locations. This theory readily accounts for the markers for the casualties of the Reno-Benteen contingent being placed at random on the Custer portion of the field. Why drive those extra miles over such rough ground?

Although some of the markers are indeed inaccurately placed, the majority of them are as historically correct as can be determined at this late date. One can get a reasonably accurate picture of the action on this field by noting the location of the markers.



Custer Battlefield
as it appeared in June 1877.



Custer Battlefield
as it appeared in the early 1900s.

QUESTION: Where is General Custer buried?

The body of George Armstrong Custer lies in the cemetery at the United States Military Academy, West Point, New York. This statement, however, needs some clarification.

When the remains of the fallen troopers of the 7th Cavalry were hastily buried two days after the battle, Custer's body received the "best" burial possible; he was placed in a shallow grave 18 inches deep and covered with rocks and sagebrush. When the 1877 burial detail arrived to gather the remains of the officers for shipment to family and national cemeteries in the east, it discovered a ghastly scene. The entire Last Stand Hill, along with the surrounding countryside, was strewn with bones, both human and animal! The weather and various wild animals had desecrated the pitiful graves and scattered the bones everywhere.

The empty shell casing with the name of "Geo. A. Custer" inside it was easily located. However, there were numerous bones where the grave had once been. All of these did not make up a complete skeleton. A few handfuls of bones were gathered up, placed in a coffin, and labeled as the mortal remains of George Armstrong Custer.

But were they? It is entirely possible (and also entirely logical) that this paltry gathering of bones was not the remains of Custer at all; they may have been animal bones, bones of another trooper, or possibly, they were Custer's.

When we say that Custer is buried at West Point, we must honestly say that, at best, he is partially there, but he may not be there at all.

QUESTION: Wasn't Custer known as a "squaw killer" at the time of this fight?

During the 19th Century, there were those individuals who advocated peace with the native Americans at any cost—even to the point of turning their heads when Indians, justified or not, committed depredations against whites. These same individuals were quick to criticize the government's Indian policy whenever the opportunity arose.

After the successful winter campaign against Black Kettle's village on the Washita River in 1868, these critics labeled Custer "squaw killer." It is true that some women and children were killed in the Washita fight, but most of them were killed by the 7th's Osage Indian scouts. Many modern historians seem to forget two important things concerning Indian-Army clashes. First of all, when the Indian and white fought, it was not uncommon for Indian women and even young boys to use weapons against the troopers, especially if their villages were being seriously threatened. At the Washita, this proved to be the case. In any type of warfare, even up through the Vietnam War, the "law of the jungle" applies: you kill before you are killed. A trooper could be forgiven, therefore, for shooting an armed squaw who was taking aim at him.

Secondly, if Custer was indeed a "squaw killer," why did he have his men round up some 53 women and children and put them into a large tepee where the Osages could not get to them? Why were these same individuals taken back to Camp Supply where they would have to be fed and taken care of?

It is always sad when innocent human beings are killed, but to state categorically that Custer wantonly killed women and children is distorting historical fact.



Washita Captives

Some of the 53 women and children taken prisoner by the 7th Cavalry at Fort Dodge, Kansas.

QUESTION: Is it true that Custer wanted to become President?

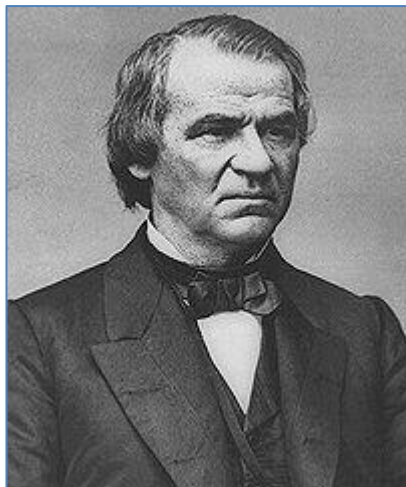
This idea was strongly advocated in a 1966 book by Mari Sandoz titled, *The Battle of the Little Bighorn*. According to Miss Sandoz, Custer knew that news of his victory over the Sioux had to reach the Democratic Convention, then being held in St. Louis, by the morning of June 28th. He therefore had to attack the village on the 25th, a day earlier than planned. To anyone with the slightest knowledge of politics and political conventions, this assertion must seem absurd. Custer had not attempted to garner the support of even one convention delegate and, even today, this must be done well in advance of the opening gavel.

It has been stated that Mark Kellogg, the newspaper correspondent for the *Bismarck Tribune* and the *New York Herald*, had been taken along—against President Grant's orders—to send the victory account back. It was common practice in the frontier army for a commanding officer to take newspaper correspondents on campaigns; both Crook and Terry had them.

What many people fail to realize is that the nearest telegraph office, in Bozeman, Montana Territory, was a three-day ride away. It was almost a physical impossibility for the news, had Custer wished it sent, to have reached St. Louis in time. Furthermore, the news of the disaster did not reach civilization until July 3rd, and it was not publicized until the next day.

Although he did not have any political ambitions, Custer was, nevertheless, interested in politics. He had been a delegate to the 1866 National Union Convention where he had been asked to run for Congress from the state of Michigan. Later, he had been asked to run for Governor of that state; he flatly refused both offers. He had even been a guest of President Johnson on the latter's famous "Swing Around the Circle." He here witnessed the extreme heckling of unruly mobs against the President and this, perhaps, quelled for good any thought of political ambitions.

Custer's own words to his wife, Elizabeth, should put this unfounded rumor to rest. He once told her: "My doctrine has ever been that a soldier should not meddle in politics."



President Andrew Johnson

Johnson became President upon the death of Abraham Lincoln. He invited Custer to go with him on his famous "Swing Around the Circle" in 1866.

QUESTION: What is a "brevet commission?"

A "brevet commission," which no longer exists in the modern military branches of service, was a temporary or field commission. These were usually given by commanding officers to their men who had exhibited outstanding leadership or courage in battle.

A man could be addressed by his brevet title and he could sign correspondence with it. However, he was paid by his regular rank.

George Armstrong Custer was the Lieutenant Colonel of the 7th Cavalry. He had received numerous brevet commissions during the Civil War, the highest being that of Major General. Thus, Custer was known as "General Custer" although he received the pay of a Lieutenant Colonel, his regular army rank.

Below is a compilation of Custer's brevet commissions, most of which are located in the vault at Custer Battlefield National Monument:

July 3, 1863	Brevet Major for Gallant and Meritorious Services at the Battle of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania
May 11, 1864	Brevet Lieutenant Colonel for Gallant and Meritorious Services at the Battle of Yellow Tavern, Virginia
September 19, 1864	Brevet Colonel for Gallant and Meritorious Services at the Battle of Winchester, Virginia
October 19, 1864	Brevet Major General, U.S. Volunteers for Gallant and Meritorious Services at the Battles of Winchester and Fisher's Hill, Virginia
March 13, 1865	Brevet Brigadier General, U.S. Army, for Gallant and Meritorious Services at the Battle of Five Forks, Virginia
March 13, 1865	Brevet Major General, U.S. Army, for Gallant and Meritorious Services During the Campaign Ending in the Surrender of the Insurgent Army of Northern Virginia



Custer as a Major General

Photograph by Mathew Brady, 1865

QUESTION: Has this area changed much since 1876?

As one looks out over Custer Battlefield today, the area is largely the same as it was in June of 1876. The course of the Little Big Horn River has, as is natural, changed a little. The area that now comprises the National Cemetery was, at the time of the fighting, covered with sagebrush, prickly pear cactus, and wild grasses. Last Stand Hill, as we have seen, has also been changed somewhat. Approximately every four years, the entire Battlefield is covered with a bright yellow wild clover that almost hides the markers from view.

Aside from these natural and man-made changes, the area is almost identical to what it was when the Indians won their greatest victory over the U.S. Army in the West.



Custer Battlefield As It Looks Today

The fenced area comprises the Last Stand area.
The museum and National Cemetery are located in the background.

**QUESTION: When was the National Cemetery established?
May persons still be buried in it?**

The National Cemetery was first sanctioned on August 1, 1879, in General Orders No. 78, Headquarters of the Army, as a National Cemetery of the fourth class. Nothing was really accomplished here, however, until December 7, 1886, when President Grover Cleveland issued an Executive Order setting forth the Custer Battlefield National Cemetery.

Custer Battlefield National Cemetery was transferred from the jurisdiction of the War Department to that of the National Park Service, Department of the Interior, in June 1940, under Executive Order No. 8428. The name Custer Battlefield National Cemetery was changed to Custer Battlefield National Monument in March of 1946. It was at this time that President Harry Truman signed Public Law 332 during the 79th Congress. Thus, the present-day cemetery is contained within the boundaries of the National Monument.

Today, the cemetery is officially closed, except for spouses of those already interred here. It would take an act of Congress to enlarge it and re-open it for further burials.

QUESTION: Does the National Cemetery contain bodies of troopers who fell here?

Although most of the troopers' bodies from this engagement were interred under the Memorial atop Battle Ridge, there are a few casualties of the fight buried in the National Cemetery.

When General Crittenden learned of the death of his son, Lieutenant John J. Crittenden, he requested that he be buried where he fell. Until 1932, Lieutenant Crittenden's body was the only known grave on Custer Battlefield proper. In that year, it was removed to the National Cemetery to make way for the road which now runs along the top of Battle Ridge.

Over the years, skeletons of men identified as being members of Custer's command have been found on or near the Battlefield. These have been buried in the Cemetery as unknowns; along with the body of Lieutenant Crittenden, they represent the only casualties of the Little Big Horn fight to be buried here. The remains of three men found in June of 1958 at the Reno-Benteen Defense Site were also re-interred in the Cemetery.

In addition to dead from the Battle of the Little Big Horn, the Cemetery contains dead from the famous Fetterman Fight and the Hayfield Fight. It also contains the remains from the abandoned military posts of Montana, Wyoming and North Dakota. Recent interments include soldiers (both red and white) from the Spanish-American War, World Wars I and II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

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