

# Giovanni Martini: An Historical Odyssey

By Leonardo Solimine

Custer's Last Stand at the Little Bighorn River in 1876 retains a special place in American history. The nearly complete annihilation of Lt. Colonel George Custer's last command at the hands of mostly Sioux Indian warriors provides an endless source of study and debate for historians and scholars alike. One of the lesser known participants from that fateful day is Custer's orderly-trumpeter, John Martin (born Giovanni Martini). He endures in American history as the last white man to see Custer alive.

Yet Giovanni Martini's role at Little Bighorn is only one chapter of a life rich with historically significant experiences. He not only rode with Custer and the Seventh Cavalry, but also marched with Giuseppe Garibaldi in the Italian Wars of Unification, fought in the Spanish-American War, worked in New York City's subway system at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and ultimately honored by the US Army at Arlington National Cemetery.

According to a 1906 newspaper account, Martini was born in Sala Conizalina, Italy, in 1847. His birthplace and year, however, remain in dispute as Apricale, Liguria and Romagna continue to claim that honor. Even his birth year is unclear with dates ranging from 1841 to 1853. In his youth, he served as a *tamburino* (drummer boy) with Garibaldi in the Trentino campaign of 1866 against Austria in *Risorgimento*. By 1873, Martini left Italy for the United States and landed in Brooklyn, New York. As often occurred with immigrants in their effort to "fit in", he anglicized his name to John Martin.

His arrival in Brooklyn coincided with a severe national recession. Immigrants to America had few employment choices in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the U.S. Army opened its arms to recent arrivals in search of employment. Italy, in particular, endured decades of revolutionary activity and intermittent war in the period preceding unification. The almost constant strife produced battle-hardened men anxious to prove their worth and earn a living in their new country. Martini was no different, and in 1874, with few options, he enlisted as a trumpeter and received an assignment to Company H of the U.S. Seventh Cavalry. He was not alone, however, and other Italian-Americans served in the U.S. Army including Charles Camillus DeRudio (Count Carlo Camillo Di Rudio), John James (Giovanni Casella), Frank Lombardy (Francesco Lombardi), and Felix Vinatieri (Felice Villiet Vinatieri).

By early 1875, a geological study discovered gold in the Black Hills, then considered part of the Department of Missouri. Although still legally Indian territory, anxious prospectors flooded the Black Hills as treaty talks lingered on until ultimately failing. Within a year of the gold discovery, thousands of white men had arrived. While most of the Plains Indians resigned themselves to life on the government Reservations, others – encouraged by Sitting Bull - banded together determined that war was their only recourse.

Alarmed by the increasingly hostile actions of the Indians, the US Secretary of War deemed military intervention the only resolution and assembled troops under the leadership of Brigadier

General Alfred Terry to handle the situation. Included in the expedition was the renowned Indian fighter and Civil War hero, George Armstrong Custer.

Impetuous and often reckless, Custer sought glory and a quick end to the Indian problem. Custer's regiment located Sitting Bull's immense Indian camp on the Little Bighorn River (Montana) in the late afternoon of June 25, 1876. Neglecting his general orders to wait for General Terry's main column, Custer opted for an immediate attack. Severely underestimating the Indian warriors' numerical superiority and resolve, he divided his 647 men into three smaller battalions.

As Custer's five companies (roughly 210 troopers) rode towards the enemy camp, the other two columns attempted to circle around to block any escape. Moments before launching his attack, Custer sent John Martin off to locate Captain Frederick Benteen - leading one of the remaining two columns - requesting immediate support and ammunition. Buglers often served as messengers during campaigns. Apprehensive about Martin's poor English, Lieutenant W.W. Cooke (Custer's Adjutant), hurriedly penned and signed the infamous order:

*Benteen*

*Come on. Big Village.*

*Be quick. Bring packs.*

*W. W. Cooke*

*P.S. Bring Packs.*

Before Martin departed, Custer rode up and 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."

As he rode to deliver the message, Indians fired upon Martin, wounding his horse in the process. Finally locating Benteen, a relieved Martin handed him the message. Scanning it quickly, Benteen asked for Custer's location with Martin replying that they were three miles away.

"Is [Custer] being attacked or not?" implored Benteen. Martin tersely responded, "Yes, [he] is being attacked." Martin's response provokes historical debate. Eyewitnesses to this encounter report that an exhilarated Martin added - in a heavy Italian accent - that the Indians were 'skedaddling' (army slang for retreating). In a 1908 interview with Walter Camp, Martin denies using the word "skedaddling" although it is generally acknowledged to have been part of the troopers' lexicon in that era.

Instead of deploying immediately to support Custer's attack, Benteen moved to a nearby bluff to reinforce the third battalion. Led by Major Marcus Reno, this column suffered savage attacks and was likely saved from destruction by Benteen's timely arrival. These troops remained on the bluff for another two days fending off attacks, vainly hoping for Custer to relieve them. Although they occasionally ventured out to reconnoiter or obtain water, they were unable or unwilling to locate Custer's column.

It would have made little difference, however, as Custer's forces were swiftly surrounded and annihilated within an hour. Two long days passed before the main US Army force arrived, led by General Terry. After examining the battlefield, he ordered the dead – many of them stripped and mutilated – buried where they had fallen. Gathering up Reno and Benteen's surviving troops, Terry retreated to the mouth of the Bighorn River, eventually arriving at Fort Abraham Lincoln (in present day North Dakota). Reinforcements were ordered and over the next few years, Federal troops streamed into the Black Hills. Indians were either rounded up and shipped to government reservations, or hunted down and killed.

John Martin's wartime experiences did not end with Custer's defeat, however, and he eventually participated in the Nez Perce campaign (1877), and the Spanish-American War (1898-1899). Promoted to Sergeant in 1900, Martin retired from the Army in early 1904 after nearly 30 years of service, the last few with the Coastal Artillery. Eventually settling in Brooklyn, Martin worked as a ticket-taker at the 103rd Street Station for the New York City subway system.

Martin never forgot his Indian Wars experiences and was very proud of his service, and particularly of his role in the Battle of Little Bighorn. He supplemented his income by appearing in New York City stage productions, often playing bugle calls between acts or telling war stories. As his small fame began to grow, he readily traded in his subway job for a better one at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where he spent the rest of his working days.

In late December 1922, he was severely injured by a beer truck and passed away at his home on Christmas Eve; John Martin was laid to rest in the nearby military cemetery at Cypress Hills. His services were recognized and honored more recently by the Arlington National Cemetery's "Taps Project"; established in 1999, this permanent exhibit pays tribute to nine famous buglers in U.S. Army history.

From Garibaldi to Custer, San Juan Hill to the 103<sup>rd</sup> Street Station, and finally Arlington National Cemetery, Giovanni Martini lived an historical odyssey, and his experiences may likely remain unparalleled. For most, however, Martini's life and experiences are summed up in one statement: The last white man to see Custer alive.