

GEORGE ARMSTRONG CUSTER

“American Hero or Just a Fool?”

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Introduction

George Armstrong Custer was arguably the best known of all general officers of the US army in the 19th Century or, rather, “Custer the Legend” was. Star of many motion picture epics, known more for his death than his life, standing Under the flag of the 7th Cavalry, pistol and sabre in hand, long golden hair blowing in the wind, his blue eyes facing the encircling hostile Indians and finally “to die with his boots on”. He was a most controversial man.

In researching the life of George Armstrong Custer you find that what has been written of him is equally controversial, what is fact - what is fiction? Even his detractors who detested him have never denied that he was vigorous and gallant. He did seem, however, to have been fortuitously noticed by his superiors, many of whom saw in him a vain, ambitious, dynamic, charismatic, but fearless fighter.

In this paper I have not attempted to answer the question in the title of the address:

“American Hero or Just a Fool?”

Rather, I have presented facts as researched and will leave readers to reach their own conclusions.

Just who was George Armstrong Custer?

His Early Childhood

Custer was born in New Rumley Ohio on December 5 1839, the eldest son of Emanuel and Maria Custer, both in their second marriages and was six years older than his next brother Tom. He was known by many names. The family and friends called him Armstrong or by his baby name *Autie*, gained from his mispronunciation of Armstrong. At West Point he was called *Fanny* and *Curly* because of his shoulder length reddish blonde locks he wore at times.) The Cheyenne called him *Hi-es-tsie*, which means Long Hair; others *Ouchess* and *Creeping Panther*. The Crow called him - *Son of The Morning Star*. - *Who Attacks at Dawn*.

His troopers had better names: - *Hard Ass*, *Iron Butt* and *Ringlets*. He was a genius at self-promotion, journalists and reporters called him “*The Boy General with the Golden Locks*.”

The Kusters came from Europe’s Rhineland, migrating to the New World in the 18th Century and anglicised their name to Custer. He sprang, therefore, from the blue-eyed, long nosed, Germanic race that once trotted arrogantly through the Black Forest. When he was a child his father would dress him in a velvet suit and take him to watch military drills. There, clutching a toy musket, he watched as soldiers trained for war with Mexico. He once cried out

“*My voice is for war.*”

It is no surprise, therefore to read what Custer wrote from Virginia in 1863;

"Oh, could you but have seen some of the charges that were made! While thinking of them I cannot but exclaim Glorious War! I gave the Command Forward! And I never expected to see a prettier sight. I frequently turned in my saddle to see the glittering sabres."

Though Custer was born in Ohio, much of his boyhood was spent with his stepsister Lydia and brother-in-law David Reed at Monroe, Michigan and educated there at the New Dublin School. Hence the mistaken belief that he was a Wolverine (a resident of Michigan). Following his education Custer returned to Ohio as a teacher at Beech Point School.

In 1856 Custer approached Congressman John Bingham (Ohio) for nomination to the United States Military Academy, West Point. Though unsuccessful in 1856 he was selected for appointment the following year. It is frequently and confidently stated, though difficult to prove, that he owed his appointment to West Point through support of the father of a young lady who wished to get him out of his neighbourhood.

West Point

His attendance at West Point was again fortuitous as his class of June 1861 was cut short, due to the outbreak of war just two months earlier. The expanding Union Army was desperate for officers, otherwise it is generally believed that he would not have graduated at all. Given to pranks and lapses in scholarship, he graduated at the bottom of his class (34/34). He had accumulated 726 demerits, which placed him comfortably behind Cadet George Watts who graduated second last with 695 demerits.

Patrick Henry O'Rourke, the top graduate, might have become famous but for the fact he was killed at Gettysburg.

Assessed as a below average cadet Custer was considered profane, libidinous, alcoholic and according to a classmate:

"It was alright with him whether he knew his lessons or not; he did not let it trouble him. West Point had never been afflicted with a less promising pupil".

Custer himself stated that future cadets might study his days at West Point as an example to be avoided. Just prior to graduation, while as duty officer, he failed to break up a fight between two cadets. He was subsequently Court Martialled and was under detention at the time of his graduation and did not attend the ceremonies.

Promotions

Much has been said and written about his rapid rise through the officer ranks however, this was not uncommon during the Civil War. Upon graduation Custer was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant into the 2nd Cavalry Regiment and later 5th Cavalry Regiment. He was detached from the Regiment to the Headquarters of the Army Commander, Lieutenant General Winfield

Scott to carry dispatches to General Irwin McDowell who was at that time at Centreville preparing for the battle of First Manassas.

Custer was subsequently transferred to the staff of General George B McClellan for duty as a topographical engineer. His academic career at West Point would normally have precluded him to such an appointment. In 1862, however, nothing was "normal". Trained engineers were few and far between and a West Point graduate, regardless of his academic standing, was better than no engineer at all. 2Lt Custer was placed under command of General William (Baldy) Smith where his first detail was digging graves. Civil War maps did not need to be terribly accurate as the armies fought opposite each other. What was of considerable importance was the ground, the woods, pastures, cornfields, the direction and size of watercourses and roads, as well as the location and size of enemy forces. McClellan's cautious siege-like tactics in his Peninsular Campaign in the spring of 1862 had a special need for engineers. Here Custer showed all the characteristics of a natural born topographer. This appointment would stand him in good stead for his future. Historians point out that the love of earth invigorated Custer, as it did another great Civil War General, William Tecumseh Sherman. It has been said: -

"They both loved the earth as a sailor loves the sea."

Throughout his career, Custer had a marvellous sense of topography. Noted as a superb pioneer and guide, he led columns from the front and had an instinctive, uncanny sense of direction, as well as a knack for locating practical routes of march, the result of his initial appointment as a topographical engineer.

On one reconnaissance ride with General John Cross Barnard, McClellan's Chief Engineer, the general remarked he would like to know depth of the Chickahominy River to see if it could be forded. His staff not responding, Custer plunged in, rode across and called out:

"That's how deep it is, General"

Custer then picked his way across to the opposite bank. The mission complete, but notwithstanding - he then crept through the bush until he located Rebel pickets guarding the river crossing. He surprised them, captured them, hopped back on his horse and retraced his steps with his prisoners to the surprised and impressed Barnard.

General McClellan hearing of Custer's exploits spoke to the wet and dirty Second Lieutenant. Instantly; McClellan took a liking to the young officer and offered him a posting on his headquarters as an ADC in the temporary rank of captain in the Regular Army. As a consequence Custer, although a substantive Lieutenant only ever wore the gold bar of a Second Lieutenant and never the silver bar of a First Lieutenant. On the 5th June 1862, just twelve months after graduation, Captain Custer's meteoric rise to fame had commenced.

Following General Meade's replacement of General Hooker after the Chancellorsville debacle. Meade advised General Halleck in Washington that he would shake up the command of his cavalry in the hope of improving its efficiency. After consulting the Cavalry Commander General Pleasanton and accepting his recommendations. Meade wired Halleck an unheard-of request: -

"To promote - in one jump - three brilliant young officers from the rank of captain to that of brigadier general".

These officers were:

Elon J. Farnsworth, 8th Illinois Cavalry
Wesley Merritt, 2nd US Cavalry and
George A. Custer, 5th US Cavalry.

Either Halleck approved in record time, or else Meade went ahead without his permission, for within a matter of hours Pleasanton had three new generals. Custer and Farnsworth were assigned to brigades of the Third Division to be commanded by Brigadier General Judson Kilpatrick, who was known more for his reckless bravery than his brains.

Custer's promotion to Brigadier General, United States Volunteers, to date June 29 1863, two years after graduation, was even more unusual in that he was in fact only a substantive lieutenant. Brigadier General George Armstrong Custer aged 23 was at that time - the youngest General officer in the Union Army.

Custer's orderly Joseph Fought wrote:

"Custer approached with a paper in his hand and said: 'I have been made a Brigadier General, how am I going to show my rank?'"

'Well'. Fought said 'the Rebels have been through here and have robbed and threatened every body. But I will see what I can do.'

'Late that night' he said, "I found an old Jew and in his place he had box of clothing and uniforms and stars. Together we made up a uniform and sewed on the stars. I went back and found the captain in his room at the headquarters. He was so excited."

It would appear that he could not wait to wear his new general's uniform and lead his troopers into action."

On April 15 1865, just one week after Lee's surrender, he was brevetted to the rank of major general, USV, for his outstanding and gallant service at Appomattox Court House. Virginia. At the age of 25, he was, and still is, the youngest man to be appointed to the rank of major general in the United States Army

Civil War Battles

In summary, Custer saw action in the first two years of the War on the staffs of Generals McClellan and Pleasanton. He saw action in the Peninsular, Antietam, and Chancellorsville campaigns. Upon promotion to general rank he was assigned to command the Michigan Brigade and with it took part in the Gettysburg , Bristoe and Mine Run campaigns. At Gettysburg he remained with General Gregg east of the town to face JEB Stuart's threat to the rear. In Grant's Richmond drive in 1864, Custer participated in the fight at Yellow Tavern where Stuart was mortally wounded. Transferred to the Shenandoah Valley with his men, he played a major role in the defeat of Jubal Early's army at Winchester and Cedar Creek where he commanded the division. Returning to the Army of the Potomac in early 1865, he fought at Five Forks and at Appomattox.

It was during the summer of 1862 while serving with the 5th Cavalry commanded by Colonel Averill at White Oak Swamp, that it is believed he killed his first man.

Custer began chasing a Confederate officer mounted on a thoroughbred. In a letter to his sister he confided that it was the most exciting sport he had ever known. They jumped a rail fence and Custer became more excited, he yelled at the Rebel to surrender but receiving no response, he fired. Nothing happened, so he fired again. The Rebel reeled in his saddle and fell to the ground. Custer rode past him and saw the riderless horse, which he recognised by a red Morocco breast strap - A magnificent animal! "I have him yet and I intend to keep him." He

wrote to his sister. An officer who witnessed the shooting said; the Confederate officer got to his feet, turned around and fell, blood gushing from his mouth. Custer wrote to his sister; "It was his own fault; I told him twice to surrender."

His Michigan Brigade was placed under command of General Phillip Sheridan. The fiery Sheridan took a liking to the dashing young Custer. It was the beginning of a long and lasting friendship. During the cavalry fight on Brock Road during the Wilderness campaign, Custer, leading his Brigade, successfully repulsed continual frontal attacks by General Fitz-Hugh Lee's Confederate cavalry, commanded by Custer's room mate from West Point, Brigadier General Thomas (Tex) Rosser.

Possibly Custer's biggest disappointment in battle came at the hands of his dearest friend and one-time classmate, it was during the battle of Trevilian Station. Like many Southerners at West Point, Rosser, a Virginian, had spent many years living in Texas. Before being defeated at Trevilian Station, Rosser had already defeated Custer once at the battle of Buckland Mills where the disorganized Federal rout became known to the Confederate forces as the "Buckland Races." In October of 1864 at Cedar Creek, while commanding a Division for the first time, and again fronting Tom Rosser¹, the tables were turned as Custer overran Rosser's troops at Tom's Brook and chased them for over 10 miles, for no tactical reason at all. It was great victory; the Rebels had been forced out of the Shenandoah forever. The Union forces called this the "Woodstock Races." Rosser's supply train, ambulances, and private wardrobe wagons were captured. Custer thought it would be amusing to try on Rosser's uniforms, which did not fit, as he knew they would not, because Rosser was a larger man. Soon a message arrived;

"Dear Fanny

You may have made me take a few steps back today, but I will be even with you tomorrow. Please accept my good wishes and this little gift - a pair of your draws captured at Trevillian Station.

Tex"

After shipping Rosser's gold-laced confederate grey coat to his wife, Elizabeth, Custer replied:

"Dear friend,

Thanks for setting me up in so many new things, but would you please direct your tailor to make the coat tails of your next uniform a trifle shorter.

*Best regards
G.A.C."*

On April 9 1865 it was Custer's Division that captured the Rebel food trains at Appomattox Station and went on to capture the enemy camp at Appomattox Court House, virtually surrounding the Confederates. That evening Robert E Lee called together his generals to discuss what General John B. Gordon called "the long dreaded inevitable."

¹ Custer and Rosser crossed paths again in the West after the War, when the Northern Pacific Railroad was laying track and promoting Western land. The New York Tribune published a piece by a former military officer who said the land was practically worthless. The chief engineer of the railroad asked Custer to write a rebuttal, and he responded with a widely circulated letter that viewed the area's future optimistically. It was a task Custer relished. The person who disparaged the West was Colonel William Hazen, who was the officer who arrested Custer at West Point in 1861 before graduation. The chief engineer of the railroad was his old classmate and rival Tom Rosser.

The Mosby Killings

Colonel John S. Mosby was the most successful partisan commissioned under the Confederate Partisan Act and one of the greatest guerrilla leaders in history. Raiding behind Union lines in northern Virginia for over twenty-seven months he conducted overnight raids and created false alarms along the Potomac River. He never had more than four hundred men, but Union commanders regularly overestimated his strength and the Union army despatched more than seventy missions to destroy him. Nonetheless, he retained the tactical initiative till the end of the War. In July 1864 General U.S. Grant placed Philip Sheridan in command to destroy Jubal Early's army and advance up and lay waste to the Shenandoah Valley. Sheridan had to contend not only with Early to his front, however, but Mosby in his rear. Here it became clear that behind the pranks and comic behaviour of Custer, rode a killer. Ordered by Grant and Sheridan to execute guerrillas without trial, he obeyed willingly in a slaughter that was to continue for weeks and kept secret for some years. Whilst historians suggest that other units committed much of the slaughter, Mosby believed that Custer was responsible. Mosby sent word to Lee stating that he intended to hang an equal number of Custer's men. Lee replied:

"Respectfully referred to the honourable Secretary of War...I have directed Colonel Mosby, through his adjutant, to hang an equal number of ..."

to which the Honourable Secretary J.A.Seddon replied:

"cordially approved."

At Rectortown, Virginia, twenty-seven prisoners of Custer's command were duly executed. Mosby pinned a note to one of the dangling bodies:

*"These men have been hung in retaliation
For an equal number of Colonel Mosby's men,
Hung by order of Gen'l Custer at Fort Royal.
Measure for measure."*

War's End

In the last weeks of the war, Custer's tenacity in pursuing Lee's retreating army won him plaudits and fame and he had the distinction of being the officer to receive the flag of truce when Lee sought to negotiate a surrender.

Not all were impressed with General James Longstreet biographer relating: -

"On the morning of Palm Sunday, April 9 1865, General Longstreet rang down the curtain upon his military career when that arrogant, obnoxious, upstart, George Armstrong Custer came riding into his lines under a flag of truce to demand surrender. "Old Pete" told him in a few precise, well-chosen words to go back where he came from and stay there, while his betters made the decisions."

Custer was present at the McLean House at Appomattox Court House Virginia when the surrender was signed. He did not steal the table on which surrender documents were signed as is often stated, he stole another table. General Phillip Sheridan purchased the table for \$20 from Wilmer McLean and made a gift of the Appomattox surrender table to Custer and his wife.

On May 23 1865 the Grand Armies of the Republic, commanded by General George Meade, passed in review down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington DC. Custer obviously wanted to make his presence known as he passed the reviewing stand with His long yellow hair whipping in the wind not once but twice. These actions were of little value for upon his decision to remain in the Regular Army after the War, saw him reverted to his substantive rank of captain. Again, fortuitously for him, the government could see a need for experienced officers in the west where the Indians were "misbehaving". Custer he was appointed to command the newly formed 7th Cavalry in the rank of lieutenant Colonel.

Elizabeth (Libby) Custer

One day while walking down a street in Monroe Michigan a very young Custer approached the home of the town's most prominent citizen, Judge Daniel S. Bacon. The daughter of the judge, Elizabeth (Libbie) Bacon, was swinging on the gate and had the audacity to call out,

"Hello, you Custer boy"

then ran into the house before "Autie" could reply. So began the relationship of George and Elizabeth, which would grow into one of the greatest romances in history. It was a love that neither time nor distance could separate. Yet at that time the two young people were poles apart. The Custers were poor by comparison, Custer's father, Emanuel, was a Blacksmith, and Libbie's father, a judge. Libbie was Presbyterian while Custer was nominally a Methodist.

Elizabeth Clift Bacon was born in Monroe Michigan on April 8 1842. Educated at Boyd's Academy in Monroe and graduated valedictorian of her class. Home on leave from his appointment as ADC to General McClellan in 1862 the young Captain Custer was invited to a Thanksgiving Day party at Boyd's Academy at which Libbie was attending. A short conversation and Autie was smitten with her. Never one to do things by half measure Custer set out on a campaign to win her heart. As time passed, Libbie's interest grew but there was one snag, her father, Judge Bacon. The Judge was totally against the relationship. As Custer's fame spread in the northern press, however, and with his promotion to Brigadier General, Judge Bacon relented.

At 6.00 PM, February 9 1864 the young couple were wed at the First Presbyterian Church in Monroe, Michigan. Custer dressed in Blue Frock Coat, Gold Braid, Gold Epaulets and Lightning Rod Pants. Libbie in traditional white. So began their twelve years of marriage. Libbie's honeymoon was spent on the muddy battlefields of Virginia, after that the couple were rarely separated, following him from post to post. He once wrote to her:

"My Dear little Army Crowfollowing me around."

After that tragic day of June 25 1876, at The Little Big Horn River, Libbie had over half a century of life left to live. In 1885 the first of her three books, *Boots and Saddles* was published. Libbie Custer became his press agent and public defender, ready to argue with anyone who challenged his reputation on even the smallest point. She portrayed him as not only a military genius but as a refined and cultivated man, patron of the arts, and a budding statesman, thus misleading an entire nation for many years to come. Probably no man in history had a greater champion than Autie had in his beloved Libbie,

On April 4, 1933, just a few days after her 92nd birthday Elizabeth Bacon Custer passed away at her apartment in New York City. She was to join her husband in death at the military cemetery at the United States Military Academy, West Point.

The Indian Wars

Upon taking command of the 7th Cavalry Custer led an unsuccessful campaign against the Cheyenne in 1867. His troops were mainly newly recruited farm boys and immigrants and were poorly trained and completely unsuited for the rigours of the West. Forcing his troops to extreme marches, causing the death of alleged deserters and subsequently absenting himself from duty, he was arrested, charged on four counts, and tried by Court Martial at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. On 11 October 1867; Brevet Major General George Armstrong Custer, Lieutenant Colonel 7th United States Cavalry, was found guilty on all charges, suspended from rank and command for one year, and to forfeit his pay for the same time.

The evidence given at the Court Martial provided an insight into the unseemly character of Custer. In addition to causing the death of his inexperienced, half starved, troops, it showed a complete disregard for their welfare, while pursuing his own personal interests. Leaving his post at Fort Wallace, Kansas, without approval, fully aware that the Fort may come under attack, he then travelled 275 miles to visit his wife Libbie. In doing so, he unlawfully used government property as transport for this purpose. This is the same officer who had ordered 25 lashes² to hungry soldiers who had eaten stolen apples. The media attention at that time contrasts greatly with such coverage today. Such an offender today could expect the termination of his career. Custer was given sympathetic coverage, however, by the newspapers of the day. He remained at Fort Leavenworth for some weeks before returning to Michigan.

Some months later he received a telegram from his friend "Little Phil" Sheridan stating that on October 1, the 7th Cavalry would be moving against hostile Indians in the Oklahoma Territory. The telegram read: -

"Generals Sherman, Sully and myself, and nearly all the officers of your Regiment, have asked for you, and I hope the application will be successful. Can you come at once?"

Custer redeemed himself in the eyes of the military the following year, on the banks of the Washita River when, on November 27, 1868, in what is now considered a cold-blooded, murderous attack on Black Kettle's unarmed band, consisting mainly of old men, women and children,

The Indian Child

Did Custer have a child by an Indian woman? A question so commonly asked, but not quite so easily answered. That he noticed Indian women, Cheyenne women in particular is undeniable. The story of the child originates from his relationship with *Me-o-tzi*, daughter of Chief Little Rock with whom he unwittingly went through a strange form of marriage. Even more strange in that his men had just killed her father! They lived together throughout the winter of 1868-69. Meotzi had two children from the "marriage." Following the ensuing gossip, Libbie visited and saw the first child, "and saw no resemblance to her husband." The second child was undeniably his, with creamy skin and yellow streaks in its hair who was named "Yellow Bird." Many of his officers, including his brother Tom, had spoken openly of witnessing Custer fornicating with Meotzi. Captain Benteen and others spoke of Custer inviting officers, desirous of availing themselves of the services of a captured squaw, to come to the squaw round-up corral and select one. Custer always had first choice.

² A punishment prohibited by Congress as a disciplinary measure since August 5 1861

George and Libbie, though wanting children of their own, had none. It is known that both the General and his brother Tom had taken the mercury cure for venereal disease while at Fort Sill. It is frequently and maliciously stated, therefore, that Libbie contracted Gonorrhoea from her husband. This has not and cannot be proved

The End

In March 1873, the 7th Cavalry was ordered to the plains and stationed at Fort Abraham Lincoln in North Dakota, where Custer participated in a few small skirmishes with the Lakota in the Yellowstone area and continued writing and finally publishing his book *My Life on the Plains*. (1874)

Never out of trouble, Custer was called to Washington in March 1876 to testify before a Congressional committee probing fraud in the Indian Service. President U.S. Grant was furious when Custer's evidence damaged the reputation of his former War Secretary, William Belknap. Grant was so angry that he deprived Custer of his command. After protests from senior officers, however, Grant backed down and Custer was able to return to command the 7th Cavalry.

In 1876, the Sioux and Cheyenne were attempting to resist the advance of white migration. On 17 June 1876 General George Crook and about 1000 troops, fought against 1500 Sioux at Rosebud Creek lasting six hours. This was the first time that Native Americans had united together to fight as one against their perceived invaders

On June 22 1876, Custer³ and 655 men were sent out to locate the village of the Sioux and Cheyenne involved in the Rosebud battle. His scouts discovered a very large encampment just three days later. It was over 15 miles away and even with field glasses Custer was unable to discover the numbers of warriors in the camp. Instead of waiting for the arrival of the rest of the army led by General Alfred Terry, and without further reconnaissance, Custer decided to attack the camp from three different directions. (The same tactics he employed at Washita) One group led by Captain Frederick Benteen was ordered to march to the left. A second group led by Major Marcus Reno was sent to attack the encampment along the Little Big Horn River. Custer's command would seal enemy escape route.

Major Reno was the first to charge the Indian encampment. When he discovered that the camp was far larger than was expected he, retreated to the others side of the river pursued by hundreds of braves. Captain Benteen later joined him and although they suffered heavy casualties they were able to fight off the attack and formed a defensive position for the next two days until relieved.

³ At the time of his final campaign, Custer was thirty-five years of age, weighed one hundred and seventy pounds and was nearly six feet in height. His eyes were a clear blue and deeply set, his hair short, wavy and golden in tint, his moustache was long and tawny in colour; his complexion was flolid, except where his forehead was shaded by his hat, for the sun burned his skin mercilessly. He had marked individuality of appearance; there was a certain carelessness in the wearing of his uniform that gave a picturesque effect, not the least out of place on the frontier. Although others remarked that he looked like a circus rider, he wore boots reaching to his knees, buckskin breaches fringed on the sides, a dark navy blue shirt with a broad collar, red necktie, whose ends floated over his shoulder. On the broad felt hat, that was almost a sombrero, was fastened the mark of his rank. He insisted that his costume, especially the cherry red necktie, had a purpose. He wanted his men to recognise him, to let them know he was with them not cowering behind the lines.

Custer and his men rode north on the east side of the river. The Sioux and Cheyenne saw Custer's men and swarmed out of the village. Custer was forced to retreat into the bluffs where about 4000 warriors attacked him. Custer and all of his 231 men were killed including his two brothers Tom and Boston, his brother-in-law James Calhoun, and his nephew, Autie Reed in a battle lasting not more than ten minutes.

General Terry's troops arrived on June 28 1876; a scene of unbelievable devastation confronted them. All that was left alive was Major Keogh's Horse "Comanche".⁴ A Sioux, "Little Soldier," was to later tell that he saw Major Keogh kneeling and shooting from between the legs of his horse. Keogh⁵ died with the reigns of his horse still in his hands. Because of the intense heat, the bodies were given a hasty burial on the field, the bodies so mutilated they were buried where they were found. Other unidentifiable body parts were interred in a common grave. Only the body of Hi-Es-Tsie (Long Hair) was left untouched.

Badly needing a scapegoat to keep Custer's name clear, General Phillip Sheridan allowed Major Reno to bear the onus of failing to come to Custer's rescue conveniently forgetting that Reno had a battle on his hands. Gossipers reported that the disgruntled Reno was drunk the night before the attack on the encampment. Reno demanded an official investigation. In the spring of 1879 a Court of Inquiry cleared Reno of all allegations. The taint of cowardice and dishonour clung to his name, not least by the efforts of Libbie Custer, until his death in a Washington hospital on March 29, 1889. He is buried in the National Cemetery at The Little Bighorn National Monument, Montana.

Who killed Custer?

This is as controversial as other aspects of Custer's life and death. Custer when found, had three bullet wounds⁶ to his body but no arrows as often portrayed. As he was right handed the head wound leads to the speculation that he shot himself. Subsequently, two Indians testified to the fact they saw Custer shoot himself. Lieutenant James Bradley, 7th US Infantry, who found Custer's body, however, reported that there was no indication by powder burns that this was true. He also noted a mark on his right cheek, most probably put there by a chief as a indication to the squaws that he was not to be touched.

So, who killed Custer? Was it White Bull of the Minneconjous, Two Moon, Harshay Wolf, or Medicine Bear of the Cheyenne, or was it Brave Bear of the Southern Cheyenne? In September 1909 it was decided to settle the matter before a council of elders of the eleven tribes that fought at Little Bighorn. The council unanimously elected Chief Brave Bear to bear the honorary distinction of having slain Long Hair Custer, Son of the Morning Star.

⁴ Within army circles and the press, *Comanche* enjoyed everlasting fame until his death in 1891 being widely known as "the only living thing found on the battlefield of the Little Big horn." The claybank gelding was actually one of the several badly wounded animals discovered by Lieutenant Henry Nolan of the 7th Cavalry, acting quartermaster on General Terry's staff. Unable to move under his own power, Comanche was taken down-river to the steamer *Far West* and was returned to Fort Abraham Lincoln where he finally recovered from his wounds. Never ridden again, draped in black and with boots set backward in the stirrups of his saddle, the little horse was an important part of all regimental ceremonies. After his death at Fort Riley, Kansas, Comanche's body was mounted and exhibited at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, in 1893. It is now in a glass case in the rotunda of the natural science building on the campus of Kansas University.

⁵ Although stripped of clothing, the body of Major Miles Keogh was not mutilated. Keogh, a Roman Catholic was wearing a scapula around his neck.

⁶ One bullet wound was to his right fore-arm, a second to his side and the third to his temple

Summary

Custer's blunder had cost him his life but gained him everlasting fame. His defeat at the Little Bighorn made the life of what would have been an obscure 19th century army officer into the subject of countless books, paintings and films. In life as in death, he is the subject of great controversy. Presented below are some comments about Custer:

"I am not impetuous or impulsive. I resent that. Everything that I have ever done has been the result of the study that I have made of imaginary military situations that might arise. When I become engaged in a campaign or battle and a great emergency arises, everything that I have ever heard or studied focuses in my mind as if the situation were under a magnifying glass and my decision was the instantaneous result. My mind works instantaneously but always as the result of everything I have studied being brought to bear on the situation."

- George Armstrong Custer

"...I regard Custer's massacre as an unnecessary sacrifice of troops brought on by Custer himself."

- President Ulysses.S.Grant

"In a letter to Elizabeth Custer remarked that the object of war is to produce results, a statement which cannot be argued. Even so, Custer lost more men during his berserk charges than most cavalry officers. Wherever he met the enemy he charged like a fighting cock."

- Major General William Tecumseh Sherman

"... I have seen enough of him to convince me that he is a cold-blooded, untruthful and unprincipled man. He is universally despised by all his officers of his regiment excepting his relatives and one or two of his sycophants."

- Major General David Stanley, Commanding, the Yellowstone Expedition

"Had the 7th Cavalry been held together, it would have been able to handle the Indians on the Little Big Horn." He concluded that Custer had made several important mistakes. He argued that after their seventy-mile journey, his men were too tired to fight effectively. Custer had also made a mistake in developing a plan of attack on the false assumption that the Sioux and Cheyenne would attempt to escape rather than fight. His final mistake was to attack, what was probably the largest group of Indians ever assembled on the North America continent."

- Major General Philip Sheridan

“Two soldiers half starved were given forty lashes apiece for butchering a calf. An illegal order, despite the protests from other subordinate officers. This outrage won for Custer the lasting hatred of every decent man in the command.”

- Lieutenant Thomas Cogley, 7th Indiana Cavalry

“...he was an instinctive fighter, not a thinking officer. Obeying orders was for lesser men.

Custer’s general ship was so bad as to defy analysis. Few examples come to mind of so small a force attacking against such odds. Outnumbered ten to one, Custer was facing certain annihilation by disobeying orders and trying to storm the Indian camp. Then to divide his force after the Indians had spotted them was lunacy.

Perhaps his drive for personal glory blinded him, as so often in the past, to his responsibilities.

If anything, the career of George Custer should stand as warning of the need for careful selection procedures in the military profession.”

- The Guinness Book of Military Blunders (Unfit to Lead)