

# THE GHOST OF MAJOR ELLIOTT AT THE LITTLE BIG HORN

by

DR. BRUCE A. ROSENBERG

(Editor's Note: *Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of interest in America's Indian minority—in their history, culture, and long struggle for justice and equality. In the last issue of Parameters (Vol. III, No. 1, 1973), Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall in his article "Wounded Knee Revisited" undertook a reexamination of the vexed question of where lay responsibility for that bloody encounter in 1890 between the Sioux and the US Seventh Cavalry. He concluded that blame could probably be attached to both sides. In the following article by Dr. Rosenberg, the spotlight shifts to an earlier, more famous action involving the Sioux and the Seventh Cavalry—Custer's last stand at the Little Big Horn. In a fresh interpretation of events leading to Custer's fall, Dr. Rosenberg demonstrates anew how the human factor remains the great imponderable of battle.*)

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Events cast their shadows before them. Or do they? A sophisticated rereading of that old piece of homely wisdom would have it that later events really cast their shadows back over earlier ones. So a new aphorism is born for our particular perceptions. But the matter is worth another look. The event we will want to examine in this new-old light is Custer's 1868 raid on Black Kettle's village on the Washita River in western Oklahoma, particularly its effect upon the battle of the Little Big Horn in Montana eight years later. The Washita raid is famous in the history of

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the West and has been well documented, so that we have enough detail to know how the participants reacted to it. Many of the men of Custer's Seventh Cavalry rode into both battles; Custer appears to have employed the same tactics for the reduction of both villages. At the Little Big Horn in 1876, the men of Custer's regiment could not escape the dark shadow cast by the Washita episode of 1868.

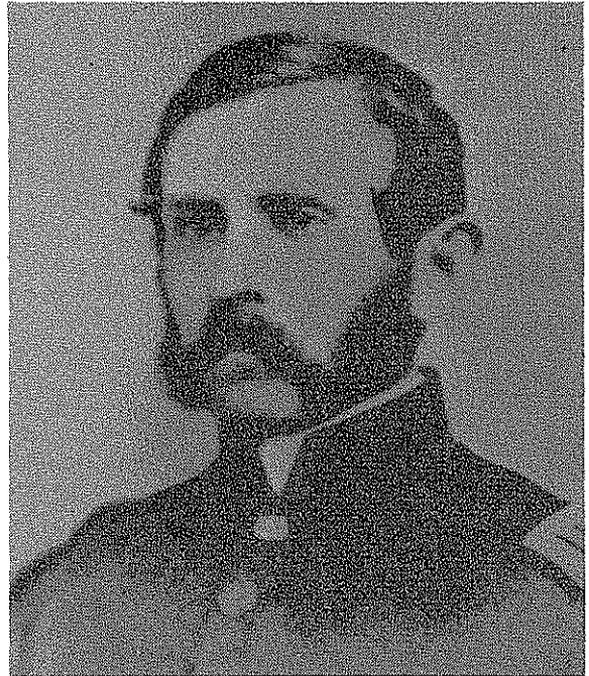
## A BRIEF DETOUR TO FETTERMAN'S LAST STAND

At first glance the archetype of the Little Big Horn should be "Fetterman's Last Stand," fought just beyond Ft. Phil Kearny, Wyoming, in 1866. Eighty-one men were

lured by several Indians into a trap sprung by upwards of 2,000 Sioux in the first major victory of Red Cloud's war. That Brevet Colonel William J. Fetterman was in clear and flagrant disobedience of orders by being where he was when he was ambushed is beyond debate.<sup>1</sup> Custer has been similarly accused, though the evidence in his case is not so clear. Both men felt an arrogant disdain for their commanders in part related to their brilliant Civil War records. Fetterman was dashing, gallant, and, unfortunately also like Custer, impetuous and overconfident. He was, in many respects, of the same mold from which Custer was cut. Fetterman, however, who knew nothing about fighting Indians (Ft. Kearney had been his first plains assignment), had nevertheless boasted that "with eighty men I could ride through the Sioux nation."<sup>2</sup>

Superficial as these personal similarities may seem, they are what led to the death of each man. And the events attending their respective "Last Stands" bear a much closer resemblance. In disobedience of orders (or at the very least an exercise of poor judgment in disregard of them), Fetterman and his small group were overwhelmed in a time so brief that most of the options of defensive maneuver were taken from them. The final defense in both cases was made upon a ridge, after beginning on lower ground. As was usual in Indian warfare, nearly all the soldiers were robbed and mutilated, making identification difficult; and as was also usual in the tactics of the time, a relatively large group of dead was found in a defensive circle near the top of the ridge. As at Custer's last stand the lone survivor was a badly wounded horse—greatest of all coincidences—although unlike Comanche at Little Big Horn Dapple Dave was mercifully shot by the relief column.

In the aftermath of Fetterman's "Massacre Hill" debacle, as after the Little Big Horn, stories of lone survivors abounded.<sup>3</sup> Also, because Captain Ten Tyck had not gone directly to Fetterman's aid but had detoured slightly at first to reconnoitre the ground, he (like Custer's subordinate Major Reno) was publicly and privately accused of cowardice. The careers of both men ended pathetically, Ten Tyck's in alcohol amidst whispers which



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*Captain Wm. J. Fetterman, who in 1866 as a Brevet Colonel experienced his own "last stand."*

made his life a horror, Reno's in a court-martial for conduct unbecoming an officer.<sup>4</sup> And whereas Custer had merely been rumored a suicide,<sup>5</sup> Fetterman and Captain Brown had actually saved their last bullets for each other: their bodies were found on the slope of Massacre Hill, each with a heavily powderburned wound in the left temple.

Of course the Little Big Horn defeat was a repetition of the Massacre Hill debacle as much through circumstance as chance. Custer could not escape historical circumstance: given the fact that he was outnumbered, as army units often were in the plains wars, he was soon put on the defensive. Once he had lost the initiative, he would obviously seek the advantage which high ground afforded. And, as the Indians pressed their assaults with a reckless aggressiveness, he—like Fetterman—would place his men in a defensive ring, shooting his horses for use as barricades. And again, once the soldiers had been overrun, the Indians would, as was their custom, rob and mutilate the casualties.

Some of the other similarities are harder to explain, because human psychology, always

an elusive quantity, was involved; but they were just as inevitable. That lone-survivor stories would proliferate was predictable in the wake of such disasters. They were a tempting means by which newsmen could lend substantiation to their imaginative accounts of the battle. And many people claimed to have been the one person who escaped from what became a "famous" event, thus gaining a portion of fame for their own lusterless and banal lives. The lone survivors have their counterparts in the people today who tell about cancelling their reservations at the last minute on the fated jet airliner which afterward crashed with the loss of all the passengers and crew.

So too with the matter of the "cowards," Major Reno and Captain Ten Eyck. A just evaluation of their behavior would be an extremely complex matter; nevertheless, given the impetuous, dashing, and fearless qualities of their commanders, any behavior which appeared to be less dashing, or less brave, was bound to suffer by contrast. The human mind has a great predilection for contrasts. The American people could not think that the

subordinates of Custer and Fetterman were effective while exercising caution, if Custer and Fetterman were themselves effective only while exercising a hell-for-leather abandon. The unhappy facts were that both battles were losses; losses demanded scapegoats; and the caution of Reno and Ten Eyck had to appear as overcaution as a result. Overcaution was but a thin line removed from cowardice; and cowardice was but a short step to treason.

The misconception that Custer killed himself is more complex still. Fetterman had actually done it, so the idea was available. And as a "suicide" Custer would be obeying the alleged "Law of the West," thus rising above the circumstances of his defeat. "Suicide" implied that the Indians did not defeat him personally, that in the last desperate moments of the battle he deprived his enemies of the final satisfaction of their victory. The legends of many of the heroes of our civilization do not permit the enemy this triumph: Roland is untouched by Saracen weapons, Saul falls on his own sword, Siegfried is killed through treachery, while Harold is slain at Hastings by a chance arrow.<sup>6</sup>



*Captain Tenodor Ten Eyck.*

#### ELLIOTT'S LAST STAND AT THE BATTLE OF THE WASHITA

The battle of the Washita is quite another kind of battle. In retaliation for the depredations of several braves, Custer's Seventh Cavalry had been ordered to punish the Indians, and the Indians Custer chose were Black Kettle's Cheyennes, encamped on the Washita river in Oklahoma.<sup>7</sup> He decided to attack at dawn in the midst of winter, the most likely time to surprise the village. So it was that early in the morning of 27 November 1868, the regiment was divided for its assault. Major Joel Elliott and three companies moved to the east and closed upon the village from that direction; Major Myers, with two companies, was ordered to check the hostiles from the west; Colonel Thompson, with two more troops, moved further to the west and south to block any refugees escaping in that direction. Custer, with a striking force of four companies reinforced by platoons of

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*Custer's charge into Black Kettle's village at the Washita.*

sharpshooters and scouts, was to deliver the pulverizing blow from the north, crushing the Cheyennes in a vice that allowed no escape.

Alerted by an Indian woman, Black Kettle himself gave the alarm as the van of Custer's men crashed into the Washita River opposite his encampment, while on the far bank the band played "Garry Owen." Moments later, while trying to escape with his wife on horseback, Black Kettle was shot down. The Seventh achieved its surprise, and the village was easily and quickly taken. Troop casualties were minimal: only one of the attacking force was killed, Captain Hamilton, who was shot in the back, a good indication that the bullet was a stray from one of his own men. Custer later claimed that his men killed 103 Cheyenne warriors; most historians agree that this estimate is bloated, though there is little disagreement about the unfortunate deaths of 16 squaws and 9 children.

Yet, despite the surprise obtained by Custer's charge, most of the village managed to escape, many to the southeast, others

directly east along the banks of the Washita. Elliott and his men had been positioned there to block this exodus; his orders were to charge in support of Custer's assault, but when the main striking force rode through the village Elliott was still some distance from the nearest tepees. Refugees had no trouble getting through the gaps in Elliott's sector, and several of them were soon sighted along a ridge to his south. He then called for volunteers to join him in chasing them down. Shouting to 1st Lieutenant Hale with a prophetic irony he would never appreciate, "here goes for a brevet or a coffin," Elliott at the head of his men dug in his spurs in pursuit.

The Indian stragglers dispersed as best they could in the deep snow, and Elliott's men could only get to two or three of them at a time. Sergeant Major Kennedy was ordered back to the village with several women and children whom the battalion captured, but on the way he was intercepted by several braves and killed. In the meantime, Major Elliott had



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*Major Joel H. Elliott.*

advanced a good distance from his "line" in chase, and as word of the attack spread to neighboring villages, Indian reinforcements began to arrive rapidly. In the village Custer and his men busied themselves throwing the tepees and food stores on a huge bonfire, and then started killing the Indians' ponies; before the end of the day they would slaughter nearly 900 of them.

Several miles to the east Major Elliott and the 15 or so men with him were in a lot of trouble. Under crisp rifle fire, they began to retreat back toward the village and the bulk of their own battalion. More Indians were arriving each minute, and the pressure on the small unit became intense. At an elbow in a creek over a mile from the village Elliott made his fatal mistake: he ordered his men to dismount, and they took refuge in some tall grass in the crook of the elbow, forming a circle. The site was poorly chosen and the situation untenable. Although they were at first hidden, neither could they see the enemy, who now swarmed around them—Kiowas, Arapahoes, and Cheyennes—in a howling, swirling blur.

Some of the men fired blindly over the grass, but they could not hit Indians they

could not see. Several braves dismounted and, keeping to the banks of the creek (later named "Sergeant Major Creek"), crept to within a few feet of the beleaguered defenders. Others stood off at a distance and loosed volley after volley of arrows into the tall grass, secure from the random counter-fire. When the firing from within the circle had been all but extinguished, Tobacco, a Cheyenne (and the slayer of the Lieutenant Kidder party the year before), raced into the midst of Elliott's men, and for his reckless bravery got a bullet in his chest. But he was the only brave killed by these soldiers; and he was avenged seconds later when a general assault on the grassy knoll wiped out the last resistance.

Flushed with this relatively easy triumph, these Indians counted coup, and with the steadily arriving support from allies downstream moved to counterattack Black Kettle's village. Custer defended himself as best he could, got lucky when Quartermaster Bell with just a squad for escort made a dashing charge through the Indians' ring with the ammunition wagon, and thus prolonged the defense. With dusk he wisely decided to return to base at Camp Supply, taking his women and children captives—about 53 of them—as hostages. Major Elliott and his men, long since dead, were abandoned.

This campaign became momentous in Custer's life, quite apart from the "affair" he is alleged to have had with one of his captives, a young Cheyenne woman named Mo-nah-se-tah. The raid got a good press; and while Custer was not one who needed to be spurred by that last infirmity of noble mind, fame, it came to him with even greater abundance after the Washita attack. It was there, more than in any other action, that the Seventh Cavalry and its commander achieved their reputations as Indian fighters par excellence. Consequently, great things were expected of them on the Little Big Horn River.

#### CUSTER'S OWN LAST STAND

When in imminent contact with the enemy near the Little Big Horn in 1876, the success



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*Group of captive squaws and children taken at the Battle of Washita.*

he had achieved eight years earlier in Oklahoma must have been in Custer's mind: his initial battle plan had been to rest the regiment during the afternoon and evening of 25 June, then (as on the Washita) to launch a dawn attack the following day.<sup>8</sup> Although Reno and Benteen later said that they were not given a comprehensive battle plan, the division of the regiment suggests that Custer had the Washita tactics in mind: Benteen was sent with three companies well south of the encampment (a mission he later described as "valley hunting *ad infinitum*"), and Reno with three more companies was ordered to attack the southern end of the village, being told that he would be "supported by the whole outfit."<sup>9</sup> Reno assumed that Custer's striking force would also attack in the same direction, but if that was Custer's plan it was changed when, from a convenient bluff, he viewed Reno in action in the valley. With his battalion of five companies Custer rode downstream, possibly hoping to take the village in flank, to the spot where he himself was surrounded and annihilated.

Only when tactical surprise had been

compromised earlier on the 25th did Custer decide to engage the enemy at once during that afternoon. It would not be another Washita after all. But if Washita had been Custer's glory, it was also to be his undoing; for several of the officers, including Benteen, had no thoughts of going to their commander's "rescue" late in that first day of the battle. They thought, first of all, that the five companies with Custer were powerful enough to take care of any force the Indians might field against him; and secondly, that he might well have deserted them to fortune, as

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he had abandoned Major Elliott and his small detachment several years before.



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Custer in the buckskin garb of the Indian fighter.

It is clear to us in retrospect that Reno and Benteen should have thought of Fetterman, and not Elliott. And we can say this even though several of the analogous aspects of Fetterman's and Custer's last battles could not have been known by the men on Reno Hill. Yet despite the vague sense they may have had of Custer's urgency—witness his last message ("Benteen, Come on. Big village. Be Quick. Bring Packs")—they appear to have felt that Custer's anxiety was lest the Indians should escape, and not for his unit's survival. And perhaps, at the moment that the regiment's adjutant scribbled that last note, such was the case. But in their own harried situation, surrounded as they were on a barren and shelterless hilltop by hundreds—probably thousands—of a murderous enemy, they pictured themselves, even though they were more than 300 strong, as sharing Elliott's fate. The officers in the regiment had never forgotten that dark moment on the Washita when their comrade had been deserted; and whether Custer could

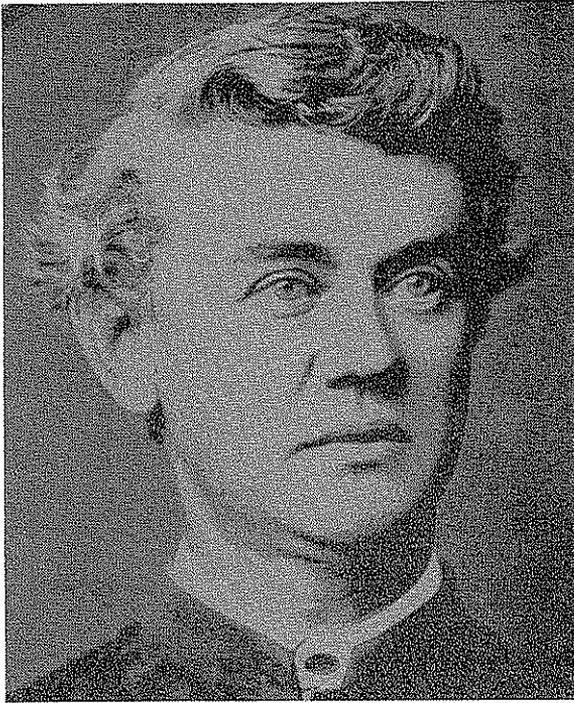
have done anything to save him or not, when Elliott was abandoned some impalpable, ineffable quality of the regiment's morale was abandoned with him. During the intervening years Custer could do little to justify himself to many of his subordinates.<sup>10</sup>

Captain Benteen was one of the most astringent and outspoken partisans in the regiment's family quarrel, and on the subject of Custer (whom he had come to hate) and Joel Elliott (his friend) was not always dispassionate. Those feelings became public when, after the Washita campaign, Benteen sent a lengthy, and acerbic, account of the action to a friend in St. Louis; within a few days the letter had been given to the *St. Louis Democrat*, and shortly after to the *New York Times*.<sup>11</sup> The account sketches the pursuit of the fugitives and the activity in the village: "But does no one think of the welfare of Major Elliott and party? It seems not. . . . There is no hope for that brave little band, the death doom is theirs. . . . But surely some search will be made for our missing comrades.



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*Captain Frederick W. Benteen.*

No, they are forgotten. Over them and the poor ponies the wolves will hold high carnival, and their howlings will be their only requiem. . . . Who shall write their eulogy?"

#### **HISTORY: FACT AND RECOLLECTION**

Elliott too had made a last stand in miniature. If history is purposeful, here was a symbolic foreshadowing of the famous "last stand" at the Little Big Horn by a battalion from the same regiment: Elliott's disaster prepares us (as though this were carefully plotted literature) for the climax of the drama. Unfortunately, it also prepared Custer's potential rescuer's from within the regiment for the same climax. Ironically so; yet the final irony was not realized: Custer did not desert them, and they would not die in battle, victimized by a callous commander. Instead, they would themselves one day be accused of deserting him. If Custer could have been saved, and that appears doubtful, his own past had conspired against him when his subordinates, thinking themselves deserted, hesitated to ride to his salvation.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

While these three military misfortunes are superficially alike, their underlying causes have little in common. Fetterman's overconfidence allowed him to get his command surrounded; Elliott's poor judgment in the choice of terrain was his fatal lapse; and Custer's mistakes—in military intelligence and in the division of his command prior to combat—are well known and need not be further illuminated here. That Custer failed to make clear to his

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subordinates his plan of action has been frequently noted, but we may pause to stress it again. For the moral is timeless.

Left on their own, Custer's officers thought on their own. As events materialized, they interpreted them not only according to their experiences—which is natural—but according to stereotypes, which is just as natural. Custer, who did not know his men well enough to anticipate how they would react in most situations, had not enough time in any event at the Little Big Horn to contemplate their reactions. But when he failed to instruct Reno and Benteen carefully on his battle plan, he forced them to imagine whatever they chose when the command was divided and each unit was out of contact with the others. And given the factions within the regiment, particularly Reno's and Benteen's hostility, he could not have done worse than when he failed to describe his intentions fully. The battle was lost, in part, because they imagined the worst, in this case themselves betrayed. The battle was lost on the field, certainly; but disaster had been well prepared for on earlier fields.

## NOTES

1. Dee Brown, *Ft. Phil Kearny: An American Saga* (New York: Putnam, 1962), pp. 174-75. This is one of the most complete accounts of the battle between two covers.

2. Brown, p. 150.

3. Brown, pp. 213-14.

4. See John U. Terrell and COL George Walton, *Faint The Trumpet Sounds* (New York: D. McKay, 1966), pp. 295-310.

5. See the statement of LT E. S. Godfrey, "there was no sign for the justification of the theory, insinuation, or assertion that he committed suicide," collected in William A. Graham, *The Custer Myth* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole, 1953), p. 376.

6. See Bruce A. Rosenberg, "Custer: The Legend of the Martyred Hero in America," *The Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 9 (Fall 1972), 110-32.

7. A number of writers, none of them really impartial, have written about Custer's raid, and the "truth" has to be pieced together from their accounts: Charles J. Brill, *Conquest of the Southern Plains* (Oklahoma City: Golden Saga, 1938); George B. Grinnell, *The Fighting Cheyennes* (Norman, Okla.: Univ. of Okla. Press, 1956); Don Turner, *Custer's First Massacre: The Battle of the Washita* (Amarillo, Tex.: Humbug Gulch Press, 1968).

8. William A. Graham, *The Story of the Little Big Horn* (2d ed.; Harrisburg, Pa.: Military Service Publishing Co., 1941), p. 19. The definitive account of the battle is to be found, however, in Edgar I. Stewart, *Custer's Luck* (Norman, Okla.: Univ. of Okla. Press, 1955).

9. Graham, p. 33.

10. See Terrell and Walton, pp. 8-13.

11. Most conveniently collected in Graham, *The Custer Myth*, p. 211.



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*Custer's dawn attack on the Washita.*