



THE CORINTHIAN
The Journal of Student Research at Georgia College

The Corinthian

Volume 5

Article 5

2003

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Recommended Citation

Reonas, Nick (2003) "Archaeology and the Changing View of Custer's Last Stand," *The Corinthian*: Vol. 5 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian/vol5/iss1/5>

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Archaeology and the Changing View of Custer's Last Stand

Nick Reonas

Perhaps no event in the course of American history has generated as much controversy and conjecture as the battle of the Little Bighorn. The battle was of little national significance, as the Native Americans were eventually slaughtered or forced onto reservations, but the mythical status of George Armstrong Custer was indelibly imprinted on the American psyche by this tragic affair. Today the popular conceptions of the battle are being dramatically altered by new archaeological methods. With these novel techniques of investigation, a more accurate picture of the events of that hot Montana Sunday so long ago is finally being painted. The buffalo grass and the dry dusty ridges and ravines along the Little Bighorn River are slowly revealing the secrets of a battle that shocked a nation and still captivates it to this day.

In the over one hundred years since the battle, the public has been inundated with dramatic portrayals of Custer and his doomed Seventh Cavalry. One of the best examples is the film *They Died With Their Boots On*, which featured the dashing Errol Flynn as Custer. Historian Brian Dippie, author of a book on Custer and the Little Bighorn in the American media, feels that it is “unquestionably the most influential version of the Custer story ever filmed.”¹ On another tack, the film *Little Big Man*, produced in the political and social turmoil of the late 1960s, shows, according to Dippie, “the ultimate ugly Custer,” portraying him as “the hero of absurd mythology.”²

On the other hand, numerous artists portrayed the battle in a conspicuously heroic manner. These paintings invariably featured Custer, surrounded by his troopers, swinging his sword defiantly at the oncoming savages. Perhaps the most popular of these was a lithograph commissioned by Anheuser-Busch in 1896, which sold over two hundred thousand copies and graced hundreds of bar walls throughout America. Mostly, these portrayals were fanciful propaganda, a feast for the American public to prey upon, which they have. The conception of Custer's last stand as a gallant and heroic affair, a fight to the last man, was created from these popular

depictions. Today, however, the archeological evidence recovered from the battlefield has completely debunked this portrayal.

The year 1983 was very dry on the high plains, a region that on average receives only ten to twelve inches of rain a year anyway. On August 9, a grass fire burned one hundred acres of land north of the Little Bighorn Battlefield before being contained. Overnight, the wind kicked up smoldering embers east of the Calhoun Hill area of the battlefield, and the fire spread quickly. Park rangers and employees saved the visitor center and National Cemetery, but the rest of the battlefield was scorched.³ This could have been a disaster, but James Court, superintendent of what was then known as Custer National Monument, saw the potential presented by the lack of brush and grass, which before the fire had grown so thick on the battlefield that any in-depth archaeological studies had been prevented.

At the Court's request, archaeologist Richard Fox spent ten days walking the battlefield "to determine whether the fire had eliminated enough of the knee-high grass and brush to permit a productive archaeological study of the battlefield."⁴ Fox found enough artifacts on the surface to surmise that a "systematic, controlled archaeological survey of the area would be fruitful" and might help solve many longstanding mysteries about the battle.⁵ Accordingly, digs were conducted in 1984, 1985, and again in 1989. While these excavations have helped dispel many of the myths surrounding the Custer fight, they may have also stirred up controversy. This mere footnote to what has already been written does not purport to offer any kind of explanation to those controversies but rather to act as a guide to Custer's most likely movements based on the evidence collected.

On the morning of June 25, 1876, Custer's Seventh Cavalry, part of a three-pronged assault to round up hostile Native Americans in the Dakota Territory, had spotted the Indian village in the valley of the Little Bighorn River in what is now southern Montana. Rather than wait for the other two columns as ordered, and ignoring the advice of his Crow and Arikara scouts, who told him that this village was much larger than any they had ever encountered, Custer decided that he must strike to keep the hostiles from escaping. He divided his regiment, sending three companies under Major Marcus Reno across the river to strike the southern

end of the village. He sent another three under Captain Frederick Benteen on a reconnaissance to the south and west, to cut off any avenues of escape in that direction. Another company would guard the mule train of extra ammunition and supplies, while Custer, with five companies, would strike the northern end of the village.

Unbeknownst to Custer, however, Reno's assault bogged down when he ordered his men to dismount and form skirmish lines. His men were forced back across the river by scores of mounted warriors to the high bluffs beyond where they were soon joined by Captain Benteen. Custer continued to ride north, however, expecting to be supported by Reno and Benteen. Neither was in a hurry. Reno wanted to hold onto his wounded, and Benteen was not fond of his cavalier commander. The stage was set for tragedy.

It is generally agreed that Custer divided his five-company battalion into two wings. The wing configuration theory has been a matter of controversy, but the evidence leaves only one configuration as a possibility. The left wing, under the command of F Company's Captain George Yates, consisted of E and F Companies. The right wing, commanded by I company's Captain Myles Keogh, contained the remaining three companies, C, I, and L. However, many historians are at odds with this division, because it would have made the left wing smaller than the right. One point of speculation is that C Company may have split into two platoons, one going to each wing to equalize the strength of the two. However, Richard Fox, an archaeologist and noted expert on the frontier army, clearly illustrates that this is not necessarily true in his book, *Archeology, History, and Custer's Last Battle*. "Tactical prescription," he said, "did not require equal strength wings in a battalion."⁶ Citing the U.S. Army's Cavalry manual of the period, he is able to show that "in a five-company battalion, one wing could be expected by design to have an additional company."⁷

Another point which some historians have pointed out is that C Company commander, Captain Thomas Custer, was likely serving on the headquarters staff with his brother on June 25. This, they say, would have altered the wing configuration, as it was based on rank and seniority of the company commanders. Second Lieutenant Henry Harrington, who would have been left in command of C Company in Tom Custer's absence, did not have seniority over any of the other company commanders in Custer's battalion. However,

Fox shows that "tactics allowed a company to maintain its (prescribed battalion position) in the absence, usually brief, of its commander," and that Tom Custer, "if with the command staff, was technically not absent."⁸ Fox's citation of these tactically prescribed methods make arguments for any other division of the battalion seem less likely, and the archaeological data will also substantiate this configuration. While the discussion about deployment of troops has little to do with archaeology, it is important in understanding the course of the battle.

At the head of the Medicine Tail Coulee, the left wing moved down to the river and the right wing moved north along Nye-Cartwright and Luce Ridges, just east of Battle Ridge. Evidence of fighting on these two ridges suggests tactical stability in the early stages of the battle. In 1928, J. A. Blummer found seventeen army casings strung out along the east side of Nye-Cartwright Ridge over a distance of about one-hundred and fifty yards.⁹ This is about nine yards between casings, which indicates that mounted skirmishing occurred there. Searching Luce Ridge in the 1940's, E. S. Luce, battlefield superintendent, found forty-eight shells at three to four yard intervals, indicative of a dismounted skirmish line.¹⁰ In all, over four-hundred and eighty .45/.55 caliber army casings for the Springfield Trapdoor carbine were found in this area, an astounding find considering the relative dearth of artifacts elsewhere on the battlefield.¹¹ Perhaps since no casualties occurred along these so-called east ridges, it was not an area that was extensively studied until Luce and Blummer discovered evidence of a cavalry presence there. The firing likely was in response to harassing fire by the few warriors in the area at that time. The popular view of hordes of savages is correct in that there were great numbers of warriors facing Custer's battalion later in the fight, but "these masses accumulated over a period of time (not quickly) and primarily through infiltration tactics rather than an onslaught."¹²

The firing conducted along Luce and Nye-Cartwright Ridges shows that the right wing was not being driven or forced back by the hostiles, but rather that they replied to the Native American fire briefly by forming mounted and dismounted skirmish lines, perhaps while they waited for orders from Custer. Fox makes the argument clear when he states that "indications of defensive behavior during

the right wing movement are entirely absent,” and that the movement “from Luce Ridge across Nye-Cartwright to Calhoun” was, by all appearances executed “with military precision.”¹³

Meanwhile, the left wing moved down Medicine Tail Coulee to the Little Bighorn. There is much speculation as to what actually occurred here. Was the left wing attempting to cross the river and attack the village, or was Custer trying to relieve some of the pressure on Reno at the other end of the village? Historian John S. Gray argued that “an attack on the Indian women and children should draw the warriors from Reno’s endangered battalion, allowing it to regroup in safety.”¹⁴ Whatever Custer’s intent, some portion of his command approached the river via Medicine Tail where they met light resistance. This is substantiated by the small number of casings found at the ford and up Deep Coulee, through which the left wing most likely retired towards Calhoun Hill and Keogh. In the 1950’s, Jesse W. Vaughn and park historian Don Rickey, Jr., found seventeen items, including shell casings, near the ford, and eleven more shells a short distance up Deep Coulee.¹⁵ These indicate only skirmishing, and not a prolonged effort to cross the river or hold a large number of warriors at bay. In all probability this movement was, as Gray suggested, intended not as an attempt to cross the river but more to allow Reno and Benteen to link up and keep hostiles from using the coulee as an avenue to cut off the approaching reinforcements and ammunition.

However, there were few Indians at the crossing, and little firing was done. This dispels the belief held by many, including historian Robert Utley, that Custer was actually killed at this phase in the battle and carried from there to his final resting place on Last Stand Hill.¹⁶ However, Utley’s belief was based on Indian narratives, and it does not appear to be that credible because, as stated, there is no real indication of heavy firing at the ford. Also, the bodies of the regimental staff, including the adjutant, First Lieutenant W.W. Cooke, were found near Custer on Last Stand Hill. If Custer had been killed at the ford, the adjutant and staff would have been with the battalion’s second in command, Captain Myles Keogh.

The left wing retired but was not driven towards the right wing, which had deployed to the east ridges and then Calhoun Hill to cover Yates’ foray to the river and to “seize a holding position...where it could wait a little longer for reinforcements and

ammunition.”¹⁷ The two wings reunited briefly on Calhoun Hill before the left wing continued up Battle Ridge. The archaeological record becomes much clearer for this portion of the battle. On Calhoun Hill, the right wing deployed to cover the left wing's rear as it advanced up Battle Ridge and to keep open an avenue for Reno, Benteen, and the pack train. Keogh most likely deployed L Company on the hill, and held his other two companies, C and I, in reserve some distance up the ridge. Burial parties later identified the bodies of many L Company members on Calhoun Hill including its officers, First Lieutenant James Calhoun, for whom the hill is named, and Second Lieutenant J. J. Crittenden. Keogh deployed only one company to the hill to skirmish probably because the threat level at this point in the battle was still low supporting the belief that the numbers of warriors amassed over an extended period of time, and not all at once. Fox pointed out that skirmish lines are suggested by the linear patterns of government cartridge cases found on the hill, first facing south, and then west.

The first skirmish line is roughly one-hundred yards long, and given the number of casings found, it “is sufficient to accommodate an under strength company of 40 or so, excluding one or two reserve squads and horse holders.” The change in direction, from south to west, probably resulted from the movement of warriors up Calhoun Coulee. Military tactics dictated that, whenever possible, led horses should be placed under cover, and L Company's probably were placed in a draw west of Calhoun Hill, near Calhoun Coulee. When warriors began moving up the coulee, probably to frighten, stampede, or capture L Company's horses, Keogh reacted by sending C Company down the coulee to counter this new threat. L Company shifted fire from south to west to cover the foray.

However, this left Calhoun's left flank open to pressure from Indians who moved into the Henryville area when the troopers shifted their fire to cover C Company. Individual weapon signatures on the casings recovered at Henryville show that at least twenty-three Henry and Model 1866 Winchester repeating rifles were used there, as well as one Smith and Wesson revolver, two .44 caliber rimfire revolvers, and seven unknown weapons of .50/70 caliber. This evidence shows that a substantial amount of firepower was being brought to bear on Calhoun's position from Henryville.

In the coulee, C Company also encountered heavy fire. This was from Indian sharpshooters who had positioned themselves on Greasy Grass Ridge. Artifact finds in this area, as at Henryville, suggest a massive amount of firepower aimed at Calhoun Hill and the surrounding area. Twenty-two individual .44 caliber rimfire lever-action weapons were identified, along with thirteen .50/70 caliber guns, two Spencer repeating rifles, and one model 1873 Winchester. This substantial firepower is probably what routed C Company and sent them retreating in panic towards Calhoun Hill.

Evidence of tactical stability is not apparent among the markers along Calhoun and Finley Ridges, where most of C Company was surrounded and wiped out while fleeing towards Calhoun. The markers' linear alignment has raised questions of a skirmish line in this area, but the paucity of government casings suggests that the men of C Company didn't stop to fire as they moved up the ridge towards Calhoun Hill, and that they "offered little resistance to an Indian attack." As C Company was being overrun, L Company, alone on the hill and pressured from the front, left, and rear, now began to lose tactical stability as well. One aspect of combat that becomes evident is the tendency for soldiers under extreme duress to "bunch up." Clusters of .45/55 shell casings show that "men forsook tactical rigor and drew close together as pressures mounted." With their horses dead or stam-peded and a great number of their comrades dead or incapacitated, what remained of L Company bolted up Battle Ridge towards Captain Keogh and I Company.

Apparently, the Battle Ridge phase of the fight was devoid of any kind of tactical stability. This was due not so much to pressure applied by the enemy, as at Finley Ridge and Calhoun Hill, but from the infectious nature of panic that spread through I Company as the remnants of the right wing reached them. These kinds of speculations run counter with the fatalistic view offered by many authors and scholars, though. For example, Robert Utley wrote that Keogh's command disintegrated because of a ferocious attack, and that his men, "from dismounted skirmish, laid down a heavy fire." Archaeological research does not support this claim. The few casings located in this area suggest that the mere shock of the C and L Company survivors reeling back through their position sent I Company into a state of disorder within a very short period of time.

The lack of casings from either adversary seems to indicate hand-to-hand combat. While he agrees with this conclusion, Fox also believes that any hand-to-hand struggle was most likely “individualistic and without unified purpose.”

Another explanation for the lack of shell casings could be that there was not time to reload the cumbersome Springfield carbine or to fire six rounds from the Colt pistol carried by each man. If this is the case, it shows how quickly cohesion deteriorated in this sector. The bunching of soldiers was commonplace here, attested to by the scattered groups of casings. Captain Keogh died in one such group, surrounded by about ten of his men. Not very much of a fight was put up by the remnants of the right wing as they streamed northward towards Custer. The Native Americans sensed this panic and cut most of them down before they could reach the apparent safety of the left wing companies.

While the right wing was fighting on the southern part of Battle Ridge, the left continued north. This is where archaeological finds have deviated substantially from what is commonly believed to have transpired: that Custer's command never passed the crest of Last Stand Hill before being overwhelmed. However, the left wing passed over the hill, and onto Cemetery Ridge beyond it before preceding across an area known as “The Flats” towards the Little Bighorn. Just what Custer hoped to accomplish remains a mystery. Historian Gregory F. Michno believes that he may have been “verifying another avenue of operations, either for advance or retreat, keeping his options open.” He may have been looking for another spot to cross and strike the village to draw pressure off of Reno downstream. The two companies found a viable crossing near the mouth of Squaw Creek but then turned around and rode back across “The Flats,” deploying in skirmish formation on Cemetery Ridge, E Company on foot with F Company in reserve. Indian warriors tried to stampede E Company's led horses, and “young Lakota warriors raced forward and scattered some of the mounts,” but E Company held them in check.

When Calhoun and Keogh were overrun in the south, E and F Companies pulled back to Last Stand Hill to cover the survivors of the right wing who were fleeing towards their position. Indian snipers kept the troopers on Last Stand Hill pinned down while mounted warriors stampeded most of their horses. Only about twenty troopers from the right wing made it to Last Stand

Hill. Combined with the left wing, this gave Custer about one-hundred men. E Company, about forty men, mounted and dashed to the west towards the Little Bighorn. Whether this was an attempt to relieve pressure from that direction, or simply an escape, the troopers were diverted into a ravine by warriors and subsequently killed.

The fewer than fifty men left on the hill sought whatever cover they could as they were picked off one by one. On Last Stand Hill, "there is no evidence for stable, tactical formations such as skirmish lines," as was demonstrated on Calhoun Hill, and an artifact map shows fewer than forty army cartridges and bullets located on Last Stand Hill. There may have been another attempt by approximately twenty men to escape the hill in the last moments of the fight. Today a line of marble markers, from Last Stand Hill to the upper reaches of Deep Ravine, indicates what many survivors from the Reno and Benteen battalions thought was a line of skirmishers. The remaining troops on Last Stand Hill were most likely dead at this point. The battle ended not in the dramatic Hollywood fashion but rather quietly.

It is safe to say that E Company was one of the groups that attempted to flee Last Stand Hill. Post-battle identifications, though somewhat uncertain because bodies were mutilated and in an advanced state of decomposition after three days in the Montana sun, account for only one E company soldier on Last Stand Hill, First Lieutenant Algernon E. Smith, the company's commander. Burial details were able to identify at least some E Company troopers in Deep Ravine, thus, it is safe to assume that it was indeed E Company that made some sort of foray from the hill and eventually ended up trapped by the steep headwall of Deep Ravine. Today, however, we do not know where the bodies actually lay after the battle.

Fox believes that twenty-eight men were killed in Deep Ravine and that their bodies have remained there, undiscovered due to erosion and ravine geomorphology. He also believes that only six to ten men died on the upper end of the line, and about thirteen on the lower end, and that misplaced markers there account for the twenty-eight missing bodies. On the other hand, Michno believes that the markers for the South Skirmish Line are valid indications of a line of skirmishers. The reason that no bodies can be found in Deep Ravine, he feels, is because they actually died on the South Skirmish Line, and were interred under the monument on

Last Stand Hill with the rest of their comrades. During the 1985 excavation, a series of holes were drilled with a hand augur to determine if any graves lay deep below the surface, but none were found.

Though no one will ever know exactly what happened at the battle of the Little Bighorn, today much evidence that was once hidden has been brought to light through archaeological investigation. The battle was not a one-sided affair. The troopers of the Seventh Cavalry did offer organized resistance. The skirmish lines on Luce and Nye-Cartwright Ridges and Calhoun Hill prove this. They were not overwhelmed by hordes of Indians but picked off by smaller groups of warriors positioned at Henryville and along Greasy Grass Ridge. Most importantly, the troopers only broke and ran when tactical cohesion disintegrated. The lack of casings or organized fighting on Battle Ridge and Last Stand Hill clearly reveals that soldiers cannot function properly without some form of control. Soldiers are trained to control their fear, but this shows that even the best-trained troops can lose control in dire situations.

Of course, these findings are based, for the most part, on speculation. However, well founded and thoroughly researched speculation is far better than assumption. It will never be known exactly what happened at the Little Bighorn. Thanks to archeology, however, and the insightful minds who analyzed the data collected, a much more accurate picture of the bloody events of that day has become available.

Footnotes

1. Brian W. Dippie, *Custer's Last Stand: The Anatomy of an American Myth* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), 106.

2. Ibid, 115.

3. Gregory Michno, *The Mystery of E Troop: Custer's Gray Horse Company at the Little Bighorn* (Missoula: Mountain Press, 1994), 44-5.

4. Richard A. Fox, Jr. and Douglas D. Scott, *Archaeological Insights into the Custer Battle: An Assesment of the 1984 Field Season* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), ix.

5. Ibid.

6. Richard A. Fox, Jr., *Archaeology, History, and Custer's Last Battle* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 140.

7. Ibid.
8. Ibid, 141.
9. Michno, *Mystery of E Troop*, 46.
10. Ibid, 47.
11. Gregory Michno, *Lakota Noon: The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat* (Missoula: Mountain Press, 1997), 153-4.
12. Fox, *Archaeology*, 280.
13. Ibid.
14. John. S. Gray, *Custer's Last Campaign: Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 360.
15. Michno, *Mystery of E Troop*, 47.
16. Robert M. Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 189.
17. Gray, *Last Campaign*, 361.
18. Fox, *Archaeology*, 104.
19. Ibid.
20. Douglas D. Scott et al., *Archaeological Insights on the Battle of the Little Bighorn* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 126.
21. Ibid.
22. Fox, *Archaeology*, 101.
23. Ibid, 109.
24. Ibid, 162.
25. Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin*, 189.
26. Fox, *Archaeology*, 171.
27. Michno, *Lakota Noon*, 183.
28. Jeffry D. Wert, *Custer: The Controversial Life of George Armstrong Custer* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 351.
29. Fox, *Archaeology*, 195.
30. Ibid, 114; *Battle Related Artifacts from the Little Bighorn Battlefield*, map (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987).
31. Fox, *Archaeology*, 213-14.
32. Michno, *Mystery of E Troop*, 260-262.
33. Sandy Barnard, *Shovels & Speculation: Archaeology Hunts Custer* (Terre Haute: AST Press, 1990), 22.

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