



The Wordchipper

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What was so great about him?

I've always wondered why Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer is buried at the United States Military Academy at West Point and why a large statue stands near his grave, honoring him as a great military leader. While Custer performed a number of gallant acts during the Civil War, resulting in a remarkable amount of publicity and starting him on a life-long quest for more ink, he didn't have the kind of career one would typically hold up as a role model for military students.

The statue in the West Point Cemetery indicates Custer's rank was Major General, which it was, temporarily, during the Civil War, but he was demoted to the lower rank of Lieutenant Colonel at war's end. He was then placed in charge of the newly-formed 7th Cavalry, headquartered at Fort Riley, Kansas, and, from there, took part in Major General Winfield Scott Hancock's expedition against the Cheyenne in 1867. Following the Hancock campaign, Custer was court-martialed at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, for being AWOL after having abandoned his post to see his wife. He was suspended from duty for one year. No exemplary behavior there, it seems to me.

In 1873, Custer was sent to Fort Abraham Lincoln, Dakota Territory, about 15 miles from a budding Missouri River town called Bismarck. Much of this portion of Custer's career is documented in an excellent new book published this year by Da Capo Press. This fast-moving, carefully sourced treatise is entitled *The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull, and the Battle of the Little Bighorn*, authored by Nathaniel Philbrick. What? Yet another book on Custer and the annihilation of the 7th Cavalry in Montana? Yes! And it's a good one. Even if you've read a number of accounts of this historic battle at the Bighorn River, you'll find this one compelling in the way Philbrick *details* what happened on June 25 and 26, 1876. A number of different times I've driven past the I-94 exit to the battlefield and national monument, about 600 miles from Fargo-Moorhead, but this book has greatly intensified my desire to stop. I will do so the next time I go west.

Custer led a force of about 600 officers and soldiers, plus some 30 Indian scouts and civilians. He and his troops faced over 2,000 warriors—maybe 3,000 or more, according to some estimates. In the end, 16 officers, including Custer, and 242 troops were killed, along with 10 scouts and civilians, including Mark Kellogg, a reporter for the *Bismarck Tribune*. Fifty-five were wounded. The combined Indian force, composed of warriors from the Lakota, Sioux, Northern Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, suffered 36 killed with 168 wounded, according to one estimate. The actual number of warriors engaged remains disputed.

Part of the fascination of Philbrick's narrative is the vivid, close-up account of the confusing, brutal, and even wildly crazy action on those blazing-hot summer days on the Montana plains. For example:

Almost all Native American accounts of the battle claim there was one soldier who almost escaped...a soldier on a powerful horse suddenly bolts from the hill and miraculously breaks through the Indians and makes for open ground. Several warriors take off in pursuit, but the soldier's horse is strong, and it begins to look like he will actually get away. Then, just as the Indians give up the chase, the soldier pulls out his pistol and shoots himself in the head.

Those two days of combat were filled with many stories, recounted by Philbrick, as unusual as that of the suicidal rider. You'll learn of Custer's arrogance and bravado and how a number of his officers despised him. I was left with the feeling that this battle may have been totally unnecessary; certainly, it shouldn't have been fought the way Custer decided to fight it.

Custer, it seems, didn't know what he was getting into and then didn't know what to do when he got into it. This is not unlike some of the mistakes we've seen in recent history, needless wars launched by thoughtless leaders in this country who care nary a twit about sending young people to die, when more brain power should have been applied in finding a solution. Custer's battle cry, reported to have been uttered shortly before he was killed, was: "Hurrah, boys, we've got them! We'll finish them up and then go home to our station!" These words and this book leave me wondering why they think so much of Lt. Col. Custer on the campus of West Point. If you know the answer, let me know.