Panic, Erratic Behavior, and the Psychological Impact of the Battle of the Little Bighorn on the Soldiers, Including the Swiss Troopers

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Panic, Erratic Behavior, and the Psychological Impact of the Battle of the Little Bighorn on the Soldiers, Including the Swiss Troopers

by Albert Winkler

Introduction

Twelve men born in Switzerland were in the Seventh Cavalry at the time of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Of these, five were on detached service at that time and did not participate in the campaign and battle. The other seven participated in the encounter. Also, many other men in the Seventh Cavalry at that time had at least some Swiss ancestry, and all of them likely suffered from the psychological effects of the battle as did numerous other participants.¹

Combat stress first became a subject of much academic inquiry in the twentieth century, but soldiers certainly suffered from mental problems in the nineteenth century as well as a result of military service and battle, including the Little Bighorn. Recently, P. Willey and Douglas D. Scott have published a ground-breaking study The Health of the Seventh Cavalry, which includes a chapter entitled “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and the Seventh Cavalry.” While this section does much to define PTSD and to describe its symptoms, the study deals more with the nature of the condition than how it affected the troopers at the Little Bighorn.²

The purpose of this study is to examine how the stress of the Little Bighorn disturbed the participating troopers mentally and to present more details on how the men suffered from symptoms similar to combat neurosis such as panic, insanity, and irrational behavior which the men demonstrated during and after the battle.3

Problems and Perspectives

Several factors hamper a proper understanding of how the Battle of the Little Bighorn influenced participants mentally. In the late nineteenth century, the scientific study of mental disorders was only in its infancy, and the medical profession in the United States was incapable of giving Custer’s troopers a proper diagnosis or to treat their problems adequately. According to the historian Michael C. C. Adams, doctors in this “prepsychiatric era” often “misdiagnosed mental wounds as cowardice, character loss, or lack of patriotism.”4

Additionally, the social stigma placed on persons suffering from depression, erratic behavior, or other mental disorders was harsh. Frequently, those with mental problems faced ostracism, criticism, and persecution, and the soldiers could be punished for being weak, insubordinate, or cowardly. Under these circumstances, many men would be reluctant to discuss their mental conditions or even admit they had problems. Likely, the occurrence of mental problems among the troopers at the Little Bighorn was vastly under reported.

Another obstacle in studying the mental impact of the Little Bighorn on the troopers is isolating the causes of the men’s disorders. General health, injuries, prior military service, and medical conditions could influence the men’s mental health. For example, at least nineteen of the men in the Seventh Cavalry had syphilis, including Major Mar-

3 Important compilations of information on the troopers include, Frederick C. Wagner III, Participants in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016); Roger L. Williams, Military Register of Custer’s Last Command (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2009); Richard G. Hardorff, Walter M. Camp’s Little Bighorn Rosters (Spokane: Clark, 2002); and Ronald H. Nichols, ed. Men with Custer: Biographies of the 7th Cavalry (Hardin, MT: Custer Battlefield, 2000).

Panic . . . Impact of the Battle of the Little Bighorn on the Soldiers

Pani cus Reno, the second in command at the battle, which often damaged the men’s mental stability. The historian Louise Barnett has suggested, “that the effects of [his] tertiary syphilis . . . could have contributed to the erratic behavior that characterized the last phase of Reno’s army career,” which probably included his conduct at the Little Bighorn. An additional four men were listed as having had gonorrhea some time in their lives, included the commander of the Seventh Cavalry, George Armstrong Custer.

Perhaps the most significant factor compromising the men’s mental balance was former severe combat experience, including seeing other troopers killed nearby, and men with lengthy military careers could have suffered from the consequences of campaigns before and after the Little Bighorn. Probably, the most trying battle experience for the men prior to the Little Bighorn was the Civil War. Roughly 640 men were with the cavalry and fought at the Little Bighorn. Yet of that number, only 613 troopers were formally in the army. The others included doctors, scouts, and citizen packers. Of the men engaged at the Little Bighorn, about 110 of them also participated in the Civil War. In addition, nineteen of these men also had the trauma of being wounded in that conflict. Also, some of the men had been in the army well before the Civil War began. Professor Michael Adams has argued that men who fought in the Civil War eventually lost their mental stability. Men “often could not face battle because they had been there too often.” Dr. Adams added, “Only in myth do soldiers get used to combat and always stay steady under fire after surviving their first exposure.”

Whatever the origins of these men’s mental problems, the Little Bighorn could only have added significantly to them, and every participant in that battle probably paid a significant psychological price.

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5 Ronald H. Nichols, In Custer’s Shadow: Major Marcus Reno (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1999), 20.
8 Adams, Living H e ll, 111 and 115.
for that experience. Often even single tragic events can trigger mental problems in combatants, and many men witnessed numerous such painful experiences during the two days of intense fighting at the Little Bighorn. However, the experience of combat in the Civil War helped some of the veterans to put the Little Bighorn in perspective. Sergeant John Ryan, who “was in forty-four engagements” and wounded three times in the Civil War, stated, “I served through the Civil War and saw

Figure 1: George Armstrong Custer. Courtesy Library of Congress.
many hard sights on the battlefield, but never saw such a sight as I saw there [at the Little Bighorn].”

Major Marcus Reno was the second in command of the Seventh Cavalry at the Little Bighorn, and he was also an experienced soldier having graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1857. He had participated in some of the heaviest fighting in the Civil War including the battles of Antietam and Cold Harbor, and he also placed the fighting at the Little Bighorn in a special category. Reno reported on the intensity of firing on the morning of the second day of battle, June 26, 1876. “I heard the crack of two rifles. This was the signal for the beginning of a fire that I have never seen equaled. Every rifle was handled by an expert and skilled marksman, and with a range that exceeded our carbines and it was simply impossible to show any part of the body before it was struck.”

Custer’s Mental Condition

George Armstrong Custer may have been among the men who had already experienced psychological damage before the Little Bighorn, and he could have suffered from some kind of mental disorder, which was either caused or made worse by his military service. The psychiatrist, Vincent J. Genovese, has argued that Custer may have suffered from either “a bipolar disorder” or “manic depression.” Charles K. Hofling, M.D., also a psychiatrist, has stated that Custer “exemplified a form of narcissistic personality disorder.”

Not only did Custer have extensive combat experience in the Civil War, but he was also wounded at least three times in that conflict, which could have contributed to his mental condition. Custer worked

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9 John Ryan, *Ten Years with Custer: a 7th Cavalryman’s Memoirs* (Terra Haute, IN: AST, 2001), 305.
to extinguish a fire over a creek, and “burned his hands in doing it.” He suffered a wound to his shin bone from a “shell fragment [which] killed his horse under him.” But his most serious injury took place in March 1864 when “Custer was thrown from his carriage when it collided with a horse and rider . . . [which] threw Custer over the dashboard, rendering him insensible for ten or twelve hours. . . . Custer was up and around five days later, though not perfectly well. He recalled nothing of the accident or his subsequent delirium.”

The severe concussion Custer suffered in 1864 could have caused brain damage and other long-term problems, as recent studies on American football players have demonstrated, and he might have lost some of his mental strength and judgment by the time of the Little Bighorn. This mishap could have caused Custer’s famous sharp temper, rapid speech, talkativeness, stuttering, and stammering, and it is also noteworthy that some of the most brutal actions of his career took place after the accident. This included his participation in the murder of prisoners of war in the Shenandoah Valley in September 1864 and his brutal treatment of his men in 1865 and 1867.

Lieutenant George Wallace saw something different in Custer at the very beginning of the Little Bighorn campaign. After receiving some instructions from their commander on the evening of June 22, 1876, Lieutenant Edward Godfrey recorded, “I walked back with Wallace who said that he believed Genl Custer would be killed as he had never heard him talk as he did, or his manner so subdued.” In his diary of the campaign, Sergeant Charles White (Henry Charles Weihe) stated that Custer was “insane.” Red Feather, a Sioux warrior, had a
similar opinion. “We have always thought Custer was either crazy or drunk to attack us without knowing more about our camp.” If these assessments are accurate, Custer was lacking in mental vigor at the beginning of the campaign, which could help explain some of his failures in judgment at the outset of the battle.

Some Premonitions

Recent studies of premonitions have often associated such precognition with mental disorders. In the case of the men in the Seventh Cavalry, premonitions may be associated with extreme fear, and some of the men with Custer’s command were so anxious about the campaign that they had premonitions of their deaths. As Otto Durselew said to Stanislas Roy, “Roy we have bin good friend and we had our hardships together and I want to tell you that I am going to be killed and don’t expect to even see you again holding out his hand to me which I took saying Dureslew what is coming over you, for I knew him to be anything but a coward the tears was in his eyes.” Durselew survived the Little Bighorn, but he was killed at Snake Creek on September 30, 1877.

Daniel Newell saw Henry M. Cody’s diary the day before the battle. Newell stated, “What in the hell are you thinking about, you don’t count on dying do you?” He said to me, “Dan if anything happens to me notify my sister Mary.” Newell added, “I think he had a premonition . . . in less than 24 hours, he was lying dead.” Charles Reynolds reportedly “lost his head” and became “unnerved” before the battle. He told Frederic Girard “that he had never felt so [worried] in all the days of this life and he felt depressed and discouraged.” He also said, “that he had a presentment of his death, that he would never return from the

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18 Red Feather, Indian Views, 118.
20 Stanislas Roy to Walter Mason Camp Dec. 8, 1909 in the Camp Collection in the Office of Special Collections at Brigham Young University Provo, Utah.

Published by BYU ScholarsArchive,
expedition.” Reynolds was killed in the valley fight at the outset of the battle on June 25, 1876.

**Custer’s Battle Plan**

After Custer’s men located the Indian village on June 25, 1876, the commander of the Seventh Cavalry divided his forces in an attempt to encircle the camp and to attack its inhabitants from several directions. He sent Captain Frederick Benteen with a battalion comprised of Companies H, D, and K over some hills to the left of the main column with vague orders to “pitch in” when the opportunity arose. Additionally, he gave Major Reno the command of another battalion comprised of Companies A, G, and M, while Custer led the largest battalion including Companies C, E, F, I, and L. The commander also ordered Company B to remain behind to protect the pack train with its additional supplies and ammunition. While all of these units were heavily involved in the battle, only Custer’s column was wiped out. Most of the rest of the men survived the battle.

**Erratic Behavior in Reno’s Valley Fight**

Custer ordered Reno to cross the Little Bighorn River and advance on the village while the commander took his battalion to strike the village farther down the stream. The troopers in Major Reno’s column were the first to engage the Indians in the battle when his force crossed the river and advanced on the Indian village. There were three Swiss soldiers in his command. This included Private John Lattman, who was in Company G, and Privates Frank Braun and Robert Senn, who were both with Company M. These Swiss troopers soon faced the ordeal and potentially the mental problems of all the men involved in this advance on the village.

Major Reno clearly became mentally unhinged during this attack. Aside from the possible effects of syphilis, Reno had also participated in at least twenty engagements in the Civil War, and his mental state might

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22 Girard “Testimony” Reno Court of Inquiry, 88 and 127.
have already been compromised even before the battle began. The immediate cause of Reno’s loss of mental equilibrium at the Little Bighorn was apparently the death of men near him including Bloody Knife, an Indian scout with the cavalry. George Hernedeen stated, “I was near to Major Reno and knowing that Bloody Knife was killed near to where we were in the timber, I asked him [Reno] if he remembered anything about that fact. . . . He said, ‘Yes, his blood and brains spattered over me.’” Herendeen added, “I thought at the time it demoralized him a good deal when Bloody Knife was killed in front of him, and that [another] soldier was killed and hollered. The Indians were not over thirty feet from us when they fired. When the soldier was hit, he cried out, ‘Oh, my God! I have got it!’ This scared a good many of the men.”

Lieutenant Charles F. Roe stated, “In that emergency, Major Reno lost his head; an officer told me that he gave the command to mount and dismount three times in quick succession. Finally he [Reno] said, ‘Get back to the top of that high hill and every man for himself.’” Lieutenant Mathey later testified that he heard other officers including Lieutenant DeRudio state that “Major Reno lost his head” during the battle.

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24 George Herendeen, “Testimony,” Reno Court, 284.
26 Charles Francis Roe, Custer’s Last Battle (New York: R. Bruce, 1927), 9.
27 Mathey “Testimony,” Reno Court, 551.
Other troopers showed signs of mental instability in the valley fight. As Herendeen testified, “I saw one man throw his gun away as he was going out of the timber. He got left behind and I don’t supposed he knew what he was doing.”²⁸ Another trooper, Henry Petring, was so frightened and confused that he contemplated suicide. When he fell back to the trees with most of Reno’s command, he wondered if it would be best “to shoot myself.”²⁹

The Indian accounts of the fight with Reno’s column also maintained that some of the troopers in that engagement became erratic. White Bull stated that the warriors pursued two of Reno’s men. “The Indians killed one and the other killed himself.”³⁰ As Red Horse

²⁸ Herendeen, “Testimony,” Reno Court, 256.
stated, “The soldiers were very excited. Some of them shot [helplessly] into the air.” 31 Soldier Wolf affirmed, “Reno’s men were frightened and acted if they were drunk—as I think they were.” 32

The Indian accounts for Reno’s valley fight and the other parts of the battle frequently state that the troopers had been drinking when they described the soldiers’ erratic or unexpected behavior. Some of the men in the Seventh Cavalry may have been at least partially inebriated during the battle, but the Indians were inclined to believe that alcohol was a big factor in the soldiers’ unstable conduct, while panic or confusion were equally likely explanations.

At the end of Reno’s valley fight, when the troopers retreated from the valley, the Swiss, John Lattman, got separated from the rest of the command. He faced a very challenging ordeal trying to hold out when he was surrounded by the enemy which caused him great fear and anxiety before he was able to survive and find his way to the top of Reno Hill where he joined the command once again. 33 The other two Swiss with Reno’s command, Frank Braun and Robert Senn, had already successfully retreated to Reno Hill.

Panic in Custer’s Battalion

While Reno’s men were under attack, Custer’s battalion of five companies advanced toward the village farther down the river. This group included three Swiss: Frederick Lehman in Company I and John Rauter and John King both in Company C. These three men faced the same trials and similar experiences as the rest of Custer’s column who were annihilated when the Indians counterattacked in large numbers.

When Custer’s column was overwhelmed, many of the Indians stated that the troopers panicked and seemed to become erratic

32 Soldier Wolf, Lakota and Cheyenne, 52.
Figure 4: All Four Shooting in the Air by Standing Bear. Courtesy, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

in their behavior. Flying By observed, “[in the Custer fight] soldiers [became] excited and shot wild.”34 The Indian named Lights stated that “the soldiers in running away, became so demoralized that they would fire in the air, making them easy victims when they were caught.”35 White Bull added that a trooper was unable to focus his attention on his enemies, “[There was] a soldier on foot and pointing gun in all directions.”36 Low Dog stated, “A great many of their shots went up in the air and did us no harm.”37 Thunder Bear added, “Many soldiers shot wild into the air.”38

Standing Bear’s drawing of the destruction of Custer’s column depicts thirty-four soldiers. Of these, four troopers, three with pistols and one with a rifle, were firing their weapons directly up and harmlessly into the air. Standing Bear also drew a picture of six men apparently trying to escape by running to “Deep Ravine.” Some of these men carried a weapon in each hand, and they were depicted as firing eight

35 Lights “Interview,” Lakota Recollections, 169.
37 Low Dog in Indian Views, 65.
38 Thunder Bear in Indian Views, 91-2.
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Red Horse observed, "The soldiers became panic-stricken, many of them throwing down their arms and throwing up their hands. No prisoners were taken. All were killed; none left alive even for a few minutes." Other troopers showed signs of panic. As Iron Hawk stated, "I think they were so scared that they didn’t know what they were doing. They were making their arms go as though they were running very fast, but they were only walking. Some of them shot their guns into the air." Two Bulls added that "it was like fighting boys,

39 Standing Bear’s drawing of the Custer fight is on display in the American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. See also Standing Bear in Rodney G. Thomas, Rubbing out Long Hair, Pehin Hanska Kasota: the American Indian Story of the Little Big Horn in Art and Word (Spa­naway, Washington: Elk Plan, 2009), 189 and 193.


the men were so tired, and their rifles so poor.”

Red Cloud and American Horse stated that some of the soldiers were so terrified when they were in battle that they appeared to be paralyzed by fear and offered little resistance before they were killed. Luther Standing Bear agreed, the soldiers “did not shoot at us. They seemed so panic-stricken that they shot up in the air. Many of them lay on the ground, with their blue eyes open, waiting to be killed.” Kate Bighead saw a soldier “just sitting there and rubbing his head, as if he did not know where he was nor what was going on in the world.” The trooper offered no resistance when “three Sioux men ran to him and seized him. They stretched him out upon his back. They went at this slowly, and... Two of them held his arms while the third man cut off his head with a sheath-knife.” Little Knife stated, “In firing their carbines and later their pistols they were wild, and in retreating they fired over their shoulders, killing their own comrades as they went.” These men “fell prey to... the careless and reckless shooting among themselves.”

As was the case when the Indians engaged Reno and his men in the valley fight, many of the Indians believed that the men in Custer’s column were either drunk or their conduct was so erratic as to suggest they were inebriated. Iron Hawk said “Custer’s men in the beginning shot straight, but later they shot like drunken men, firing into the ground, into the air, wildly in every way.” Red Feather stated, “All the soldiers were drunk. They didn’t know what they were doing.” Soldier Wolf affirmed, “The soldiers seemed to be drunk (probably

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42 Two Bulls in Edward A. Milligan, ed., High Noon on the Greasy Grass: the Story of the Little Bighorn by Indians who were there (Bottineau, N.D.: Milligan, 1972), [21].
45 Kate Bighead in Paul Andrew Hutton, ed., The Custer Reader (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1992), 371.
46 Little Knife in Indian Views, 54.
they were panic stricken); they could not shoot at all.”49 Two Moons added, “Something was the matter with his [Custer’s] men. They did not run nor seek shelter, but stayed right out in the open where it was easy to shoot them down. Any ordinary bunch of men would have dropped into a watercourse, or a draw, where they could have fought for a long time. They acted and shot their guns like something was wrong with them. They surely had too much of that whiskey. That bunch of men should have fought for a long time, but it did not take long to kill them all.”50

Wooden Leg also stated that the troopers with Custer’s column had been drinking: “Numerous canteens taken by warriors from the bodies of dead soldiers were found to contain whiskey; and it was believed by many of them that strong drink had so crazed the soldiers as to cause them to shoot each other, or to kill themselves, instead of turning their weapons against the Indians.”51 Turning Hawk affirmed, “Lots of soldiers [were] drunk . . . and shot each other. Some smelt [of liquor] after [their] deaths.”52 Shoots Walking agreed, “Many of the soldiers acted as though they were drunk. Many of them threw their guns down.” The troopers were so confused, “They did not know enough to shoot.”53

Wooden Leg also reported that many of the soldiers in Custer’s battalion were mentally unstable. They “went crazy. Instead of shooting us, they turned their guns upon themselves. Almost before we could get to them, every one of them was dead. They killed themselves.”54 White Bull, Brave Wolf, and Hump stated that “There were several soldiers in the fight who, seeing no escape, shot themselves.” These witnesses added, “One soldier started to run back on the trail, but being cut off, [he] jumped in a ravine and shot himself.”55

49 Soldier Wolf, Lakota and Cheyenne, 51.
51 Wooden Leg, Graham, The Custer Myth, 106.
52 Turning Hawk, Indian Views, 145.
54 Wooden Leg, A Warrior who fought Custer, interpreted by Thomas B. Marquis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2003), 231-3.
55 White Bull, Brave Wolf, and Hump in Indian Views, 46 and 51.
Kate Bighead gave more details on the troopers’ suicides. “Just then I saw a soldier shoot himself by holding his revolver at his head. Then another one did the same, and another. Right away, all of them began shooting themselves or shooting each other. I saw several different pairs of them fire their guns at the same time and shoot one another in the breast.” Yet Lone Bear stated that only “one man committed suicide.” The men who killed themselves likely panicked probably remembering the oft-repeated warning that they should save the last bullet for themselves to avoid the possibility of capture and torture.

The great chief, Sitting Bull, thought that fatigue was a big factor in why the troopers in Custer’s column acted in an unstable manner. “When they rode up their horses were tired and they were tired. When they got off from their horses they could not stand firmly on their feet. They swayed to and fro . . . like the limbs of cypresses in a great wind. Some of them staggered under the weight of their guns.” Sitting Bull added, “They were so exhausted and their horses bothered them so much that they could not take good aim.”

Sitting Bull indicated that Custer became unstable just before he was killed. “He [Custer] killed a man when he fell. He laughed.” The interviewer tried to correct the chief, “You mean he cried out.” But Sitting Bull clarified his statement, “No, he laughed; he had fired his last shot.” Was the shot “From a carbine?” “No, a pistol.” “Did he stand up after he first fell?” The chief affirmed, “He rose up on his hands and tried another shot, but his pistol would not go off.”

Wooden Leg told about the unusual conduct of another trooper shortly before he was killed. When it appeared that all the soldiers had been killed, one of the men raised himself onto his left elbow. “He turned and looked over his left shoulder, and then I got a good view of him. His expression was wild, as if his mind was all tangled up and he was wondering what was going on here.” He held a “six-

56 Kate Bighead, *The Custer Reader*, 369.
57 Lone Bear, *Lakota Recollections*, 162.
Perhaps the most famous example of panic and irrational behavior in Custer’s column took place when a soldier probably had escaped the destruction of the command, but he then killed himself. Red Feather stated that a trooper fled on horseback. “The Indians took after him, and shot and shot at him, but couldn’t hit him or catch him. They saw some smoke and the report of a gun, and saw him fall off his horse. The Indians went over and [concluded] he had shot himself.”

Luther Standing Bear gave a similar account: “In a few minutes every one [of Custer’s men] was killed, all but one man. He had a very fine horse and had started away. Several of our chiefs started after him, but his horse was much faster and better than the Indian ponies, and he was gaining ground. We were beginning to talk of turning back, when this man pulled out his six-shooter, pointed it to his head, and fired.”

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60 Wooden Leg, A Warrior, 238.
61 Red Feather, Lakota Recollections, 86.
62 Luther Standing Bear, My People the Sioux, 83.
away. He was the third Indian to give chase. The soldier rode like the wind and appeared to be getting away from them, when he killed himself." The trooper who thus failed to survive was perhaps Corporal John Foley.

Irrational Behavior and the Defense of Reno Hill

Some of the troopers who took up the position on Reno Hill were initially disoriented. As Herendeen observed, “Everyone was a good deal frightened when I first got there, but we had plenty of time to cool off as nobody was molesting us.” At least one of the troopers who fled to the hill was so frightened and disturbed that he could not speak coherently. As Henry Jones stated, “Gustave Korn joined ‘I’ Co. Packs near ‘Reno Hill’ on the 25th. Sergt. DeLacy accused him of deserting the Company (I) telling him that Capt. Keogh would prefer ‘General Charges’ against him. Korn could scarcely speak when we met him, his voice trembled and seemed to choke when he uttered these words, ‘My horse ran away with me.’”

Captain Benteen’s battalion of three companies soon arrived to aid in the defense of Reno Hill. Among these men was the Swiss, Vincent Charley, from Company D. Charley was one of the first men killed in defense of the hill. He was shot through the bowels. He then fell from his horse, and cried out for help in his fear and anguish. Unfortunately for the Swiss, no soldiers came to his aid, and some warriors soon killed him. As tragic as was his fate, he was spared the ordeal of the remainder of the battle.

When Captain Benteen arrived on Reno Hill with his battalion to aid the defense of that position, he soon noticed that Captain Myles Moylan, a Civil War Veteran, seemed to be losing control of his senses. He was “blubbering like a whipped urchin, tears coursing down his cheeks.” Moylan later conducted himself well at the Snake Creek

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64 Herendeen, “Testimony,” Reno Court, 257.
65 Henry Jones “Letter” to Camp June 2, 1911. Camp Collection, BYU.
Fight on September 30, 1877, and his actions there won him the Medal of Honor.

Lieutenant Edgerly arrived with Benteen’s column, and he saw Major Reno acting erratically. “He was in an excited condition. As we came up he turned and discharged his pistol towards the Indians,” even though the Indians were “about a thousand yards away,” and his pistol only had an effective range of one hundred yards. Edgerly also saw Lieutenant Varnum who appeared on the verge of losing complete control of himself. “He was excited and crying and while telling us about what had occurred he got mad and commenced swearing and called for a gun and commenced firing at the Indians,” also at very long range. Varnum also conducted himself better at White Clay Creek on December 30, 1890, and he was awarded the Medal of Honor for his conduct in that battle.

The Swiss, Frank Braun, was among the casualties on Reno Hill on June 25. He was shot twice. Once in the left cheek and another time in the left thigh. The bullet in his thigh lodged in the bone. No doubt, he suffered great physical and mental anguish from his wounds and the subsequent infection. He died early on the morning of October 4, 1876, the last trooper to die of wounds received in the battle.

After fighting ended on the first day, some of the troopers defending Reno Hill were so tired and frightened that they became delusional. As Lieutenant Godfrey stated, “Soon after all firing had ceased [on June 25, 1876] the wildest confusion prevailed. Men imagined they could see a column of troops over on the hills or ridges, that they could hear the tramp of the horses, the command of officers, or even the trumpet-calls.”

After the firing ceased because of darkness on June 25, John Frett, a citizen packer, saw Major Reno approaching. The packer saluted the officer and said, “Good evening.” Reno shot back with the question, “Are the mules tight?” When Frett asked, “Tight? What do you mean by tight?” Reno then lost his composure, became erratic,

69 Williams, Military Register, 46.
70 Godfrey, Graham, The Custer Myth, 144.
and said, "Tight, God damn you!" As Frett later testified, the officer then "slapped me in the face with his hand. Then he took a carbine and leveled it at me and said, 'I will shoot you.'" A fellow teamster, Benjamin Churchill, pulled Frett away and probably prevented a bloody encounter. Frett added that Reno "had a bottle of whiskey in his hand and as he slapped me the whiskey flew over me and he staggered. If any other man was in the condition he was, I should call him drunk."

Even though Reno later denied he was drunk at the time, he confirmed that he had struck and threatened Frett. The major testified that he could not remember the exact words he exchanged with the citizen packer, but Frett's response, "angered me more, and as I thought that was not exactly the time for moral suasion, I hit him, and I may have told him that if I found him there again I would shoot him."

Exhaustion and the lack of sleep could have contributed to the men's mental state, and the soldiers suffered from extreme fatigue during the battle. As Captain Benteen noted on the campaign, "1st night's loss of sleep." He also stated, "2d night's loss of sleep." Benteen gave his opinion on the fatigue of his men. "I judged the condition of the men of my troop somewhat by my own condition; though that is one of almost physical never tire; but not having had sleep for two nights previous to this one, was getting just a trifle weary myself; so up and down the line of 'H' Troop 1st Lieut. Gibson and myself tramped, the night of June 25th & 26th, doing our very best to keep the sentinels awake, but we just could not do it. Kicking them; well, they didn't care anything about that. However, we two kept awake on our end of the line." He added that he was short "three nights of sleep."

Major Reno agreed that the men were exhausted. "It had been harder on the men than on the horses. The men were badly in want of sleep because they had been up in the saddle." Lieutenant Edward Mathey later testified that he "was so tired that I went to sleep standing

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71 Frett, Reno Court, 505.
72 Reno, Reno Court, 576.
73 Benteen, Graham, The Custer Myth, 178-9, 182.
74 Reno, Reno Court, 569.
up” in the evening of June 25. Lieutenant Varnum also stated that he was exhausted, “As for myself I was completely exhausted and nothing but the excitement of going into action kept me in the saddle at all.”

According to the trooper, George W. Glenn, Lieutenant Gibson lost his nerve later in the battle. “Lieutenant Gibson was trying to get out of sight in a pit too shallow and was acting so cowardly that he was in the way of men passing back and forth. Benteen got ashamed of him and told the men to run over him if he persisted in lying there.”

During the siege of Reno Hill on June 26, 1876, hundreds of Indians pressed close to the defensive position held by the troopers. The warriors were in a position to overwhelm the soldiers, unless desperate action was taken. In what must have been one of the boldest actions in any of the Indian battles in the American West, Captain Benteen ordered some of the troopers to charge the enemy on foot to drive them off. When the troopers attacked the Indians, one of the soldiers lost his nerve. As Lieutenant Godfrey explained, “And away we went with a hurrah, every man of the troops ‘B,’ ‘D,’ and ‘K’ but one, who lay in his pit crying like a child.” “The one man who did not go out was shot in the head and killed instantly. The poor fellow had a premonition that he would be killed, and had so told one of his comrades.” This trooper could have been Patrick Golden.

In another version of his death, Golden was very frightened after the first day of battle on June 25 and asked a sergeant, probably Thomas Murphy of Company B, if he thought that the Indians would return the next day. The sergeant “said they would probably come back at daylight, when Golden commenced to cry.” The sergeant asked what the matter was, and he replied, “Tom if they come back they will kill me.” The next day, June 26, a bullet hit the crest of the rifle pit where Golden lay, and it “threw dirt over us all and entered the brain of Golden,” who died instantly. “His presentment had been fulfilled.”

75 Mathey, Reno Court, 523.
76 Varnum, Reno Court, 146.
77 Glenn, Custer in ’76, 136.
Some of the men took grim humor in their situation. When the men in Benteen’s battalion started to make barricades out of boxes containing hard bread, one of the troopers threw himself down to gain some little protection from enemy fire. “He had hardly gotten his head against the box when a bullet came tearing through it, killing the man instantly. Strange as it may sound here, nearly every man who saw this laughed.”

The demanding circumstances challenged many men’s mental abilities. As Godfrey explained, “The excitement and the heat made our thirst almost maddening.” The condition of the wounded was so pitiful that some men found it disturbing. As Theodore W. Goldin wrote, “It was a Scotsman named McVey (sic) [McVay], shot through the hips, and as we laid him down and started to return, the poor fellows all around us, feverish from their wounds, and exposed to the full rays of that hot, June sun, were begging so piteously it almost broke us down.” Some of the men probably felt sorry for another trooper, Julius Helmer, who “was shot through the bowels and died in great agony begging of his comrades to kill him and end his misery.”

The condition of the men defending Reno Hill became so harsh that Cornelius Cowley, a Civil War veteran, became completely deranged. As Stanislas Roy stated, “Cowley went insane from thirst and did not recover for some time. We had to tie him fast on June 26.” The unbalanced trooper suffered from ailments associated with the battle for the rest of his life. “Cowley believed his attack of heart disease was due to over fatigue and exhaustion and the overpowering effect from the vast number of corpses both human and animal, in various states of decomposition and putrefaction lying on the field during and after the battle.” He died in a hospital for the insane in 1908.

80 Edgerly, Gibson and Edgerly Narratives, 13.
82 Theodore W. Goldin, With the Seventh Cavalry in 1876 (Brian, Texas: Carol), 32.
83 Luther Hare, Custer in ’76, 67.
85 Williams, Military Register, 84-5 and Nichols, Men with Custer, 65.
A soldier, only known as Tony from Company A, also showed signs of combat stress. This trooper could have been Anton Seibelder, a Civil War veteran. He “was lying in the place best suited for the shelter and the men called to him to get out of the way. But he never moved. One of the men began to kick him and yelled for him to get up. He struggled to his feet; his face bore tokens of great fear. He said he was sick. A more miserable looking wretch it would be difficult to find. The man was almost frightened to death. He walked a few steps and fell to the ground heedless to the heat of the sun or anything else around him.”

Psychological Problems after the Battle

The distress of the men at the Little Bighorn was demonstrated by how much relief they felt when the battle was over. According to Captain McDougall, when the warriors withdrew, and the Indian camp moved away on the afternoon of June 26, 1876, “We gave them three cheers.” The men were also relieved when General Terry’s command approached the next day. “Genl Terry & staff soon came upon the scene & was greeted with hearty cheers by all. . . . The oppressiveness of our situation was fully realized and tears filled nearly every eye.” Daniel Newell agreed, “When word got around [of Terry’s approach] it seemed as though every man in the outfit broke down and cried.” Edward Mcguire added, “There were shouts and there were enlisted men and also officers crying. That is some had tears rolling down their cheeks and others showed it in their voices.” Even though the men were elated to have survived the battle, for many of them, their mental ordeals were just beginning.

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86 Peter Thompson, Thompson’s Narrative of the Little Big Horn (Stillwater, OK: Cross, 2007), 73.
87 McDougal, Reno Court, 534.
88 Godfrey, The Field Diary, 18-19.
90 Maguire, Reno Court, 12.
A week after the battle, July 3, 1876, Luther Hare wrote a letter to his father and gave an assessment of how the combat at the Little Bighorn had hurt the troopers mentally: “It has thrown us into such a stupor that we can’t yet realize the terrible ordeal through which we have just passed.”\footnote{Luther Hare as cited in, Ray Meketa, Luther Rector Hare: a Texan with Custer (Mattituck, New York: Carroll, 1983), 40.}

Writing to his wife on August 7, 1876, Lieutenant Frank D. Baldwin observed, “Col. Weir is very much broken from the use of liquor and it will not be strange if he soon goes under. Capt. French is also in a very bad fix and unless he soon stops drinking he will go under also.”\footnote{Baldwin in James Willert, March of the Columns: a Chronicle of the 1876 Indian War, June 27-September 16 (El Segundo, Calif.: Upton, 1994), 306.} It is unclear precisely what Baldwin meant by “go under,” but he could have been stating that Weir and French might die, collapse entirely, or go completely insane.

Captain Thomas Weir was a Civil War veteran who, according to his physician Dr. Orten, suffered from “physical and nervous exhaustion presumably due to the exposure and fatigue of that summer’s campaign” at the Little Bighorn. The captain “seemed to be suffering form a chronic depression that continued day after day, staying pretty much in his room and avoiding all contacts with other officers.” Dr.
Orten came when Weir suffered his fatal collapse on December 9, 1876. The physician said he “entered Weir’s room just as he died. His death was due to melancholia [mental depression].”\(^93\) Weir’s obituary in the New York Times stated that he died of “congestion of the brain” which was probably a brain aneurysm.\(^94\)

Other troopers at the Little Bighorn also suffered mentally. Louis Baumgartner was discharged from the army in 1894 from “progressive paralysis of insane, contracted in the line of duty.” Reportedly, he later died in an insane asylum.\(^95\) Andrew Conner, a Civil War veteran, died in 1911 in a Washington, DC, hospital for the insane.\(^96\) John J. Fay was diagnosed for being insane in 1877.\(^97\) Henry Haack was diagnosed as having melancholia (mental depression) in 1881 and he died in the Washington, DC, hospital for the insane in that same year.\(^98\)

Joseph Kretchmer was slightly wounded in the fight on Reno Hill, and he later suffered from “epilepsy contracted in the line of duty.”\(^99\) He was also known to have seizures, which are consistent with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. John C. Wagoner was a Civil War veteran and the chief packer with the Seventh Cavalry. He was hit in the forehead by a spent bullet on the evening of June 25, 1876, and he fell unconscious from his horse. He remained comatose until the next day when he finally awoke. Wagoner was treated for his wound on the battlefield, but the bullet remained in his head for years. His wounds could have contributed to his drinking problem and may have been a factor in his divorce. He “died from an overdose of powdered morphine in 1899,” either by accident or suicide.\(^100\)

Thomas F. McLaughlin is another example of a trooper who became deranged after the battle. He had been shot in the forearm on

\(^{93}\) Lawrence A. Frost, *General Custer’s Libbie* (Seattle: Superior, 1976), 236.
\(^{95}\) Williams, *Military Register*, 37
\(^{96}\) Williams, *Military Register*, 70.
\(^{97}\) Nichols, *Men with Custer*, 99.
\(^{98}\) Nichols, *Men with Custer*, 145.
\(^{100}\) Nichols, *Men with Custer*, 343.
June 26. "After the 1876 campaign, McLaughlin was not the same man either in body or mind. On one occasion he struck his wife across the forehead with his saber scabbard, blackening both [her] eyes. He was much troubled with nervousness, all the time talking about Gen. Custer and Indians and would ask do you not see them, there they are. He used to carry the book ‘A Life of General Custer.’ When he saw Custer’s picture he would seem to get excited and talk incoherently, nearly going into spasms over it. His constant talk was about the fight at Little Big Horn, and he would point out on the prairie at some rocks and say there the Indians are, do you not see them. He was sent to the Jamestown Hospital for the Insane in April 1885." He died there one year later.

Frederick Benteen, a distinguished Civil War veteran with extensive campaign and combat experience, also developed mental problems after the Little Bighorn, and he suffered from chronic drunkenness. He was charged with drunk-and-disorderly behavior at Ft. Duchesne, Utah, in 1886, and he retired from the army in 1888 for medical reasons which were “contracted in the line of duty.”

At least seven or eight men committed suicide after the battle. George Blunt died of “gas asphyxia, suicide.” and Charles Fischer

Figure 8: Frederick Benteen. Courtesy, Library of Congress.

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101 The book was probably Frederick Whittaker, A Complete Life of Gen. George A. Custer (New York: Sheldon, 1876).
102 Williams note 33, p. 209. “From statement in various affidavits in pension file.”
103 Williams, Military Register, 39.
104 Williams, Military Register, 41.
also died of “asphyxiation from inhalation of illuminating gas.”  

John R. Steinker killed himself from an overdose of opium, “being found in bed . . . an empty vial of laudanum [opium] in his pocket . . . presented appearance of poisoning by opium.”  

John C. Wagoner died from an “overdose of powdered morphine.”  

John W. Burkman and George Loyd shot themselves.  

Drunkenness was a problem for many of the survivors of the battle, and some men probably drank themselves to death, but their demises were not listed as suicides. The desertion rates also remained high for the 350 survivors of the Little Bighorn, and at least fifty-six men chose this means of escaping military service. A major factor in their decisions to desert may have come from the mental impact from their participation in the battle. The desertion rates could have been higher except for the fact that some of their terms of enlistment were short. Within one year of the battle, eighty-two men were discharged and likely felt no need to leave early.  

Two Swiss survived the battle. They were Robert Senn and John Lattman, both from Zurich. Each of them remained in the army for years. Lattman died on October 7, 1913, but the date of Senn’s death is unknown. Very likely, all of the men who fought at the Little Bighorn suffered mentally from their experience, including Senn and Lattman.  

Conclusion  

The men in and with the Seventh Cavalry at the Little Bighorn faced one of the most traumatic combat experiences in the history of the Indian Wars of the American West. Badly outnumbered, frequently outmaneuvered, and often facing superior weapons wielded by an able and determined adversary, the troopers did their best under the most trying of circumstances. The fact that some of them became erratic in

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105 Williams, *Military Register*, 125.  
109 Winkler, “Germans and Swiss,” 95.
no way reflects negatively on their accomplishments, and the survival of most of the command is ample evidence of their prowess. After an extremely trying ordeal, many troopers simply had reached the end of their endurance, and many of them paid a high price mentally for the rest of their lives. These men did the best they could or perhaps as well as anyone could under the circumstances, and they deserve high praise for what they had to endure and for how well they performed in battle.

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