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Albert Winkler
Brigham Young University - Provo, albert_winkler@byu.edu

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The Swiss at the
Battle of the Little Bighorn, 1876

by Albert Winkler

The Swiss have made many valuable contributions to the development of the United States, including the westward expansion, and people from Switzerland participated in some of the most significant events and activities in the development of the American frontier. They were involved in treks to the West, were found in many mining camps and in pioneer settlements, and served in the US Army. Among the most celebrated Swiss soldiers was Ernest Veuve, from Neuchatel, who received the Congressional Medal of Honor for driving off an Indian warrior in 1874 after brief hand-to-hand combat. His citation commended him for the "gallant manner in which he faced a desperate Indian."¹ No less bravely, other men from Switzerland also fought in the campaigns of the American West, including the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876.

Often called "the Custer Massacre" or "Custer’s Last Stand," the Battle of the Little Bighorn has become an iconic event in American history, frequently being represented in film, paintings, novels, and histories. The engagement has long been lamented because George Armstrong Custer and five companies of troopers were wiped out, but it has also come to symbolize the last great victory of the native peoples in their attempt to maintain their independence and way of life.² Custer remains one of the most controversial figures in the history of the American West. Flamboyant and nearly fearless, he was an effective cavalry commander during the Civil War, but his campaigns in the West are more questionable largely because his attack at the Little Bighorn led to

² For a compilation of sources on the battle, see The Custer Myth: a Source Book on Custeriana, W. A. Graham ed. (Harrisburg: Stackpole, 1953).
disaster. Custer led the famous Seventh Cavalry regiment in the battle, and twelve men born in Switzerland were assigned to that unit in the early summer of 1876. The purpose of this paper is to examine these men to understand who they were, to assess their motives in joining the cavalry, and to appraise their experience in battle.

A few of the military records relating to these men are unclear leading to possible confusion. All of them were born in the German-speaking areas of Switzerland, but some of them anglicized their names when they came to the United States or when they joined the military. For example, John King was born in Basel, but John King was not a

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Swiss name. Most likely, King was born either Johann or Hans König, but he clearly found it more convenient to be known by an English form of his name.⁵

Some of the records were inaccurate regarding places of birth, probably because the army scribes misunderstood what they were told or were careless in their record keeping. There seemed to be little confusion when the men were born in well-known areas of Switzerland such as the two men born in Bern, Frederick Lehman and Frank Braun, the two men born in Zurich, Robert Senn and John Lattman, and the two men born in Luzern, Joseph Kneubuhler and Vincent Charley. But John G. Tritten was listed as being born in Canton Rune, which does not exist. Ludwig Borter was also listed as being born in DeWalle, which also does not exist, and John Rauter was born in Tyrol, Switzerland. The Tyrol was a province of Austria, but there is little reason to doubt Rauter’s Swiss ancestry. Additionally, Francis Pittet was born in Freibourg, and Edmond Burlis was born in Klingnau.⁶

These men’s appearance was consistent with the German-speaking Swiss. Nine of them had grey or blue eyes, while three had hazel (brown) eyes. Ten of the men had various shades of hair color from light to dark. One of them, John Lattman, had auburn hair and another, Vincent Charley, had red hair. These men were average in height for the men in Custer’s command, and they ranged from 5’ 5” to 5’ 10”, but they were slightly older on average than the other troopers. The average age of the soldiers in the Seventh Cavalry was 25½ years in 1876, but eleven of the Swiss were from 26 to 30 years old, the average age being between 27 and 28. One (Pittet) was 38.⁷ The men were at the height of their physical vigor, and the army in 1876 had few problems with teenage recruits and elderly men as had been the case during the Civil War.

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⁵ Short biographies of the troopers taken from their service records are found in Roger L. Williams, Military Register of Custer’s Last Command (Norman, Ok: Clark, 2009) and They Rode with Custer: a Biographical Directory of the Men that Rode with General George A. Custer, John M. Carroll, ed. (Mattituck, NY: Carroll, 1993).

⁶ Williams, Military Register, pp. 43, 46, 51, 67, 178, 179, 187, 189, 243-4, 249, 269, 291.

The Swiss probably joined the military for various reasons. Some likely sought adventure or wanted to demonstrate their patriotism for their adopted country, but most of them probably enlisted for financial reasons, because they were having trouble finding employment. Most of these men were likely down on their luck due to the Panic of 1873 in the United States, which led to a lengthy economic depression, and as much as one third of the work force could not find a job. As one prominent historian has stated, "For workers, the depression was nothing short of a disaster ... [and] widespread unemployment appeared in the major urban centers."

Many of the Swiss were little more than semi-skilled workers before enlisting, and they probably were unable to find a job. Three listed their occupations as farmer (Senn, Charley, and Borter) and two as laborer (Braun and Lattman). The more skilled included: one saddler (Tritten), one butcher (Rauter), one carpenter (Pittet), one upholsterer (Lehman), one horseshoer (King), and two musicians (Burlis and Kneubuhler).

While five of the Swiss were already in military service before the economic depression struck, seven of them joined in 1873 and 1875. The term of enlistment was five years. Three men enrolled on Oct. 4, 1873: John Lattman and John Rauter in Philadelphia and Ludwig Borter in New York. John Tritten had left the service in 1871, but he reenlisted on Dec. 22, 1873. John King entered the army on Sept. 22, 1875 in Cincinnati, Ohio, and Frank Braun and Robert Senn joined the following day in Philadelphia. Edmond Burlis, Vincent Charley, and Frederick Lehman had joined in 1871. Charley reenlisted in 1876 before the Little Bighorn campaign, but the term of enlistment of the other two did not expire until after the June 1876 battle.

There were many hardships for the men in the army, including fatigue and boredom, and the pay was poor. A private made only $13 each month, and the highest pay for an enlisted man was $23 a month for a Sergeant Major. In contrast, the salary for a Second Lieutenant was $125 each month, and Lieutenant Colonel Custer made $250 a month.

Nine of the Swiss in the Seventh Cavalry in 1876 were privates. Two

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9 Williams, pp. 43, 46, 51, 67, 178, 179, 187, 189, 243-4, 249, 269, 291.
10 Ibid, p. 397.
others were listed as blacksmiths (Charley and King), and only one had the higher rank of saddler-sergeant (Tritten). Fortunately, the recruits had few expenses. Their jobs were secure, and they usually had tolerable food and shelter.

Sometimes the men were held in derision, and one historian has stated that the army "recruiters largely ignored mental and physical requirements. If a man could mount a horse and carry a gun, he was good enough for the cavalry." 11 Such negative assessments were much exaggerated, and many recruits clearly had attributes to admire. For example, the commander's wife, Elizabeth Bacon Custer, who had an eye for handsome men, saw their good qualities. "The soldiers, inured to many years of hardship, were the perfection of physical manhood. ... Their resolute faces, brave and confident, inspired one with a feeling that they were going out aware of the momentous hours awaiting them, but inwardly assured of their capability to meet them." 12

These men came largely from disadvantaged circumstances, and they knew how to work hard, face hardship, and do without many comforts. The foreigners were also far away from family, friends, and their native culture. The troopers often demonstrated the most impressive stamina, and they frequently showed remarkable tenacity and courage under the most trying conditions. The disdain at times expressed for these men probably had little to do with their character but had much to do with the dislike many Americans had for foreigners. While 57% of the men in the Seventh Cavalry were born in the United States, the remainder came from foreign countries—most prominently the Irish at 15% and the Germans at an additional 15%. 13 The Swiss were often associated with the latter group.

Of the twelve men from Switzerland in the Seventh Cavalry, five of them were absent from that unit during the Little Bighorn campaign, and they escaped the hardships of the campaign and the misery of combat. The two Swiss musicians in the regiment, Joseph Kneubuhler and Edmond Burlis, were not present because Custer left his band behind. 14 Ludwig Borter, a Swiss, joined the army in 1873, but he deserted in

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13 Scott, Whilley, and Connor, *They Died with Custer*, p. 90.
14 Williams, pp. 51, 179.
1875. He was arrested on June 13, 1876, and he was in confinement at the time of the battle. He escaped again in August.\textsuperscript{15} Francis Pittet was on detached service at Fort Rice in the Dakota Territory starting in May 1876, and he was not with the Seventh Cavalry during the campaign. While he was considered to be a valuable carpenter, Pittet drank too much, which hurt his effectiveness as a combat soldier. John Tritten, an important saddler, was placed on detached service on June 14, 1876 at camp Powder River, Montana, and took no part in the campaign and battle.

The remaining seven Swiss, who were with the regiment during the engagement, were assigned to various companies. Two were with company C (Rauter and King), two more were in company M (Braun and Senn), and one each was in companies D (Charley), G (Lattman), and I (Lehman). Frank Braun and Robert Senn were both 27 years old. They joined the service on the same day, Sept. 23, 1875, at the same place, Louisville, Kentucky, and they both joined company M on Oct 21, 1875. They were likely close friends who chose to serve together.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} They Rode with Custer, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{16} Williams, pp. 43, 46, 51, 67, 178, 179, 187, 189, 243-4, 249, 269, 291.

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\textit{Map on preceding page: Lt. Godfrey's map of the Battlefield. [Credit: Century Magazine, 1892]. Point "A" in the center of the map was the hill where Custer was seen by some of Reno's men during the fight in the Valley; this was also the point reached by Reno's advance after the retreat from the Valley from which he fell back to the position in which he was besieged. Point "B" was where Keogh's and Calhoun's troops dismounted and advanced along the ridge to where the bodies of their commands were found. Point "C" was where a few bodies, mostly from the commands of Yates and T.W. Custer, who for the greater part died with General Custer on the hill above, now known as Custer's Hill. Point "D" is the ravine where many bodies of Smith's troops were found who had formed in line on the ridge between Custer's and Keogh's position; Lieutenant Smith's body was found on Custer Hill. Point "E" is the hill where Sergeant Butler's body was found with empty cartridge shells lying about him. He belonged to Captain Custer's troop and may have been carrying a message to Reno.}
The Battle of the Little Bighorn was part of the Great Sioux War of 1876-7, which started when the US government tried to negate the Treaty of Fort Laramie of 1868. According to the agreement, large sections of what is now Nebraska, Wyoming, Montana, and South Dakota would belong to the native peoples forever, including the Black Hills of South Dakota, the most sacred lands of the Sioux. The treaty stated that, no white person “shall ever be permitted to pass over, settle upon, or reside in the territory.”

When gold was discovered in the area during Custer’s Black Hills Expedition of 1874, the federal government pushed aside the Treaty of Fort Laramie, starting the largest Indian war in the history of the American West, costing many hundreds of lives. When the Sioux refused to sell the lands at a pittance, the Department of the Interior ordered all Sioux to report to their reservations by Jan. 31, 1876 or face military action. This ultimatum was a virtual declaration of war. Many Indians did not get the message until it was too late to trudge through the snow to meet the deadline, and those who did arrive were soon hungry because

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the agencies had too little food for them.\textsuperscript{18} The Sioux had no choice but to leave the reservations and be considered hostile.

Ben Arnold, a keen observer and a participant in the war, assessed the situation well. He stated that all the “fighting the Indians did was in self-defense.” He added, “Of all the wars in which the United States has been engaged, the least justification is found in the Sioux War of 1876. The Interior Department can never wash its hands of this crime.”\textsuperscript{19}

In the early summer of 1876, the army planned to crush the Sioux and Cheyenne Indians between three columns. General John Gibbon marched east, General George Crook marched north, and General Alfred Terry advanced west. Terry was soon joined by the Seventh Cavalry. Custer took the Seventh Cavalry and left Terry’s column at noon on June 22, 1876, and the commander pushed his men hard in the attempt to catch the Indians before they could scatter. In disdain, his men often referred to Custer’s impressive stamina by calling him “iron butt” and “hard ass” because of his ability to stay in the saddle for long marches.\textsuperscript{20}

The column advanced 75 miles from June 22 to June 24, but the tired troopers were allowed little sleep that evening, and they were again on the march at 11:30 PM. After covering another 10 miles, they were allowed a brief rest at 2 AM. Captain Benteen stated that the men were “going into the fight, after an almost continuous march of 84 [85?] miles.” But the advance continued at dawn on the morning of June 25, 1876, and the men progressed another 10 miles before Custer gave the orders for the deployment of his forces for battle. Even then, the cavalry still had to march several miles to the Indian camp. Benteen complained that he had not slept at all during the first two nights of the campaign and very little on the third.\textsuperscript{21} Major Reno agreed that the march was challenging, and it “had been harder on the men than on the horses. The men were badly in need of sleep because they had been up in the


The men were exhausted just when their endurance would be sorely tried by two days of battle.

Estimates by contemporary observers on the size of the Indian village vary considerably, but the camp was doubtless very large. There were likely between 1,000 and 2,000 lodges in the encampment with about two warriors to every dwelling, meaning that the available Indian manpower was between 2,000 and 4,000 men. After a thorough discussion of the sources on the number of warriors, Edgar Stewart concluded, "The probability is that there were not more than four thousand warriors, and possibly not that many."  

The night before the battle F. F. Girard, an interpreter for the Indian scouts with the cavalry, gave Custer a reasonable estimate of the numbers of his adversaries. The commander "asked me how many Indians I thought he would have to fight and I told him not less than 2500." If accurate, Girard's estimate meant that the Seventh Cavalry...

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23 Stewart, Custer's Luck, pp. 309-12.  
24 F. F. Girard, "Testimony," in Reno Court of Inquiry, pp. 35, 42.
was outnumbered about four to one. According to a careful calculation by Roger L. Williams, the cavalry numbered about 566 enlisted men, 26 officers, 29 Indian scouts, and 19 armed civilians for a total of 640 men. Custer had boasted that his men could defeat any number of warriors, and this assessment was soon put to the test.

Custer and his men arrived in the hills above the Indian camp at the Little Bighorn too late in the day on June 25 to stage a surprise attack at dawn, but the commander thought he could still strike the encampment before the Sioux and Cheyenne had time to flee, if he moved quickly and decisively. He never seemed to believe that his adversaries would stay and fight. The commander thought he could apprehend the Indians by converging on them in three separate groups. Half-Yellow-Face, an Indian scout with the cavalry, begged Custer not to attack the village. “Do not divide your men. There are too many of the enemy for us, even if we all stay together. If you must fight, keep us all together.” When the commander refused, the scout warned Custer

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that they would be killed. "You and I are going home today, and by a trail that is strange to us both."26

Custer ignored this warning, and he recklessly divided his command in the face of a numerically superior force. He gave Captain Frederick Benteen a battalion comprising three companies D, H, and K, and Custer vaguely ordered the Captain to ride away from the main column and "pitch in" to any target he might find.27 Custer gave Major Marcus Reno another battalion comprised of companies A, G, and M, while the commander kept the largest force under his personal control, which was companies C, E, F, I, and L. Custer ordered Reno to advance across the Little Bighorn River and strike the Indian encampment. At the same time, the commander would take his troops to attack the village farther down the stream. Reno’s men galloped down a ravine and crossed the river. The Major sent company M on the left flank, which included two Swiss, Frank Braun and Robert Senn, while company G with one Swiss, John Lattman, was on the right.

Reno advanced with about 130 men in the three companies, but he realized that charging a huge village on horseback with such a small force was nearly suicidal, so he ordered his men to dismount, create a skirmish line, and advance on foot. This disposition stabilized their position for better defense, but it also meant that one trooper in four was detached to hold the horses, reducing the effective fighting force to less than one hundred men.28

The Indians soon responded to the troopers’ advance, and hundreds of warriors swarmed out of the encampment to attack the soldiers. Reno’s left flank was badly exposed, and he ordered his men to fall back toward the river into the trees. The situation of the troopers was soon desperate as the Sioux closed in, and Reno later admitted, “I knew I could not stay there [in the trees] unless I stayed forever.” The soldiers ran to their horses to mount them and escape when possible, but others were not so fortunate, and they were forced to flee on foot. The scout, F. F. Girard, later stated that the men “were in a great hurry to get out—no order at all; every man was for himself.” The soldiers ran back across

28 Many of the accounts of the officers in Reno’s and Benteen’s battalions are found in Reno Court of Inquiry.
the Little Bighorn and went up the opposite bank to create a defensive position on a bluff later known as Reno Hill.  

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29 Reno and Girard as cited in *Reno Court on Inquiry*, pp. 214 and 41 respectively.
Two Swiss, Frank Braun and Robert Senn, escaped to the summit, but the other Swiss, John Lattman, was left behind in the trees during the retreat. Lattman and another man, probably John Sullivan, tried to get to Reno’s defensive position, but they were chased to the bank of the river where the Swiss saw Sullivan shot from his horse and killed. Lattman managed to evade the warriors, and he finally rejoined his company on Reno Hill after midnight.\(^\text{30}\)

While Reno’s men were fighting for their lives, Custer had taken his five companies to strike at the encampment farther north. When the commander got his first good view of the camp, he was very impressed by its size, and he realized that he had sent Captain Benteen in the wrong direction. Custer immediately sent a note to Benteen ordering him to return, “Benteen, Come on, Big Village, Be Quick, Bring [ammunition] Packs. P.S. Bring Packs.”\(^\text{31}\) When Benteen arrived at Reno Hill, he saw that the situation was dangerous and helped organize the defense. Many of the warriors then withdrew, probably to meet Custer’s threat to the village, and the troopers at Reno Hill heard the sounds of battle in the distance. The soldiers did not know what this meant, but Custer’s men were probably being annihilated at that time.

Custer’s battalion numbered about 220 men, and these men rode on the crests of a number of hills later known as Battle Ridge. While many aspects of the battle are still obscure, these men had little chance when many hundreds of warriors struck. The troopers were badly outnumbered and faced superior arms as well. The Indians used many kinds of weapons, and hundreds of them wielded lever-action Henry or Winchester repeating rifles. These rapid-fire weapons gave the warriors a big advantage because these rifles could fire much more rapidly than the single-shot Springfield carbines used by the cavalry.

The model 1873 Springfield rifle was a single-shot device that had to be reloaded every time it was fired, but the greatest weakness of the rifle was its tendency to jam. When the weapon became hot after several shots were fired, the copper casing used in the cartridge often became soft and failed to eject. At that point, the soldier had to pry it out of the breech

\(^{30}\) Walter M. Camp’s Little Bighorn Rosters annotated by Richard G. Hardorff (Spokane, Clark, 2002), pp. 32, 72, and 138. See also Williams, p. 187.

of the rifle to load another round. Each trooper also carried a six-shot revolver, which was only effective at very close range because of poor accuracy. While the hand guns could be fired rapidly, they could only be reloaded slowly, and the weapons made little difference in the battle.

Custer’s command was rapidly overwhelmed and wiped out. When further resistance seemed futile, a few of the troopers were unwilling to risk capture and torture, so they killed themselves. The Sioux and Cheyenne took the clothing and anything of value from the corpses, and, consistent with Indian culture, they mutilated the bodies. The Native Americans often cut up their dead enemies believing that those adversaries would not have a complete body to use against them in the afterlife.

The two Swiss in Company C, John King and John Rauter, were killed with the other men in that unit along Battle Ridge. Frederick Lehman was the lone Swiss serving with Company I, which was sometimes known as the “Wild I” because of the men’s rowdy behavior. The bodies of many of these troopers were found on the eastern side of Battle Ridge. The corpses of these Swiss were not identified, and the places where they fell are unknown, so little can be surmised about how these men died.

At Reno Hill, Captain Benteen believed that the troopers there were in danger, and he thought it unwise to come to Custer’s aid as he had been ordered. But Captain Thomas Weir took the initiative and led Company D, attempting to reach Custer’s command. He rode to the top of a prominence, later known as Weir Point, where he saw much confusion and dust near the crest of a hill three miles away, probably witnessing some of the action associated with the Last Stand. His troopers soon came under attack by many warriors, and he had to withdraw.

In the retreat, the red-headed Swiss, Vincent Charley, was shot through the pelvis at the hip, and he fell from his horse. His head was cut open where it hit the ground, and the gash began to bleed. The man was severely wounded, but he tried to make his “way to the rear the best

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32 Philbrick, The Last Stand, pp. 177-8, 183.
33 For a compilation of sources by Indian participants, see Indian Views of the Custer Fight: a Source Book, Richard G. Hardorff ed. (Spokane: Clark, 2004). See also The Custer Myth, pp. 3-112.
35 Benteen, 181.
Gunshot wound to Vincent Charley's hip bone.

Courtesy: National Park Service, Midwest Archeological Center, Lincoln, Nebraska.

he could, half crawling on his feet and one hand.”36 Charley “cried out” stating that he was wounded and needed help, and he “implored” the other troopers to rescue him. Lieutenant Winfield Edgerly and Sergeant T. W. Harris were fleeing nearby, and they believed they were in too much danger to help the fallen man. Edgerly told the Swiss “to get into a ravine and out of danger for a while.” Then Edgerly and Harris abandoned the dismounted trooper to his fate. After they rode a distance, the two men looked back “and saw the Indians finishing up [killing] Charley.”37 As Edgerly described, “Vincent Charley was killed and his body, when found afterward had a stick rammed down the throat.”38

Lieutenant Edgerly was troubled because he had abandoned Charley, and he attempted to pass the blame to Captain Weir. The Lieutenant

said he tried to get reinforcements and return to rescue the Swiss, but Weir refused to allow the effort. The Captain stated that he had orders to fall back, and any attempt to save the Swiss was seen as a needless risk. The effort would likely have been fruitless anyway because Charley was probably already dead.39

After the battle, Charley was buried where he had fallen, and the present-day marker at the location erroneously calls him Vincent Charles. In 1903 his corpse was exhumed, and experts examined his remains in 1992. The body was easily identifiable because of its location, the gunshot wound in the pelvis, and its height. Charley’s service record stated he was 5' 10 1/4" tall, and the bones were those of a man 5 feet 10 2/3 inches tall. Additionally, the bones belonged to a man who was between 25 and 30 years of age, and the Swiss was about 27 when he was killed. Charley’s remains give insights into the nature of his wounds and into the condition of his health when he died.40

The gunshot wound in the hip bone (right ilium) left a hole that was 13 mm (.51 inches) by 19 mm (.75 inches). The size of the aperture was consistent with a hole that would have been made by a .50 caliber bullet entering at a slight angle.41 The projectile entered from the back

41 For a discussion of .50 caliber weapons used by the Indians, see Douglas D. Scott et al Archaeological Perspectives on the Battle of the Little Bighorn (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma, 1989), pp. 158-9, 176-81.
right, and the angle of the shot suggests that the bullet probably went through his abdomen where it likely perforated the intestines, releasing bacteria and filth into his bowels. This would have caused peritonitis or an infection in the abdomen that would have caused him to die painfully within a few days.\textsuperscript{42} His wound would have killed him even if he had been retrieved from where he fell. One cut mark was found on the ilium, which likely was the result of the mutilation of the body. Two of Charley’s teeth on the right side of his mouth were broken, which could have happened when the stick was shoved down his throat.\textsuperscript{43}

Charley’s remains show that he was a large, robust man, but he also led a life that was physically challenging. His thigh bones (femurs) had facets on them which suggested that he had done much riding on horseback. There were also numerous lesions in his bones that had been caused by disease. He had suffered from a broken arm (radius), which had healed, and he might have had a broken bone in his foot (metatarsus), which also had healed. Charley suffered from spinal problems, including the breakdown of cartilage in the joints (osteoarthritis), and he had both degenerative disks in his back and in his neck near the skull. His oral health was very bad, and he had suffered from infected teeth. Many of his teeth were lost or had been removed, and he only had seven teeth remaining at the roof of his mouth, which included but one molar.\textsuperscript{44}

Charley’s muster roll for May-June 1876 stated that he was in debt to the army $1.14 for tobacco rations, but his teeth showed no signs of tobacco use. They had no stains from smoking or chewing, and they were not grooved by the use of a pipe. The Swiss probably bought the tobacco either to give or to sell to his comrades when they were in need.\textsuperscript{45}

When Captain Weir’s men fell back to Reno Hill, Company K under Lieutenant Edward S. Godfrey tried to keep the Indians at bay. By this time, the various companies were mixed up, and men from Company M, including the Swiss, Frank Braun, were fighting with Godfrey’s


\textsuperscript{43} Scott, Willey, and Connor, pp. 197-202 and Scott and Willey, “Custer’s Men,” p. 22.

\textsuperscript{44} Scott, Willey, and Connor, pp. 197-202.

\textsuperscript{45} Scott and Willey, pp. 21-3.
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The Lieutenant placed the men at five-yard intervals and ordered them to withdraw slowly, but the soldiers soon became unnerved. As Godfrey described, “The bullets struck the ground all about us; but the ‘ping-ping’ of the bullets overhead seemed to have a more terrifying influence than the ‘swish-thud’ of the bullets that struck the ground immediately about us.” When the Lieutenant saw some warriors “making all haste” to get to a hill that “would command Reno’s position,” he sent a detachment of ten men to hold that prominence.46

The detachment was led by Sergeant John Ryan, and Braun was one of the men who accompanied the leader on this dangerous mission, but Lieutenant Godfrey soon got orders from Major Reno to fall back as quickly as possible. The Lieutenant then recalled Ryan and his men, and the Swiss ran back with the rest. The Indians rapidly surrounded the soldiers on Reno Hill, and “soon the firing became general all along the line, very rapid and at close range until after dark.”47 Braun came under fire, and he was hit twice, once in the face and once in the left thigh.48

Braun was probably shot when he was in a kneeling or crouched position with his left thigh parallel to the ground. This allowed the bullet to enter his lower leg and go up his thigh to lodge itself at the head of the unfortunate man’s femur (thigh bone). The lengthy path the bullet took through Braun’s body suggests he was shot at short range when the ball was in a flat trajectory, and when it retained much velocity. The wound was severe, very painful, and it probably caused Braun to lose a lot of blood.49

The siege of Reno Hill started in the afternoon of June 25, and fighting persisted during that night and the following day. The troopers prepared their position for defense as well as possible, building barricades out of saddles and boxes and digging trenches and rifle pits using whatever implements they had, including tin plates and cups. The warriors kept up a lively fire against the soldiers, who had to face additional challenges. For example, the siege took place on hot summer days, and the troopers ran out of water.50 All of the soldiers suffered greatly from

46 Godfrey as cited in The Custer Myth, p. 143.
48 Little Bighorn Rosters, p. 199. See also, They Rode with Custer, pp. 37-8.
49 Scott, Willey, and Connor, p. 119.
thirst, but the agony of the wounded was most severe. When these men bled, their bodies desperately needed water to replace lost bodily fluids, making their thirst and misery even greater.

Many courageous men, while under fire, retrieved water from the river to alleviate the suffering of the troopers. One of the men who bravely carried water was the Swiss, John Lattman. While Lattman was given no commendation for his courage, twenty-four men were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for bravery in the battle, and fifteen of these citations were given to men who brought water to the thirsty. Four men also earned the award for providing covering fire for the men so engaged. One of these marksmen so honored was Sergeant George H. Geiger. A historian of the Swiss in America, Karl Lüönd, has stated that this courageous soldier was a “Schweizer” (Swiss), but the writer was likely mistaken. Geiger was born in Cincinnati, Ohio.

The battle ended when the warriors withdrew on the afternoon of June 26. The Indians had learned that General Terry’s column was approaching, and they retreated rather than face another army. Their departure probably saved the lives of the men defending Reno Hill because the soldiers were running out of ammunition, and they might have been annihilated if the battle had continued, but the cost in casualties was still very high. Reportedly, about 212 or 214 men from Custer’s battalion were buried shortly after the battle, but there may have been other bodies that were not found at that time. Another 52 men were killed in the commands of Reno and Benteen for a total of about 265 fatalities. An additional 58 men were wounded while fighting with Reno and Benteen, and 6 of them died later of these injuries, including Frank Braun.

The badly-wounded Swiss soldier was taken on the Far West, a steamboat at the mouth of the Little Bighorn River, to Fort Abraham.

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51 Little Bighorn Rosters, p. 138.
53 Karl Lüönd, Schweizer in Amerika: Karrieren und Mißerfolge in der Neuen Welt (Olten, Switz.: Walter, 1979), p. 148. Geiger might have had Swiss ancestry, but I have been unable to verify this.
54 Larry Sklenar, To Hell with Honor: Custer and the Little Bighorn (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma, 2000), 327; Scott, Willey, and Connor, p. 107; and Williams, p. 365.
Lincoln, Dakota Territory, arriving on July 3. Braun’s condition deteriorated because he suffered from infection, and his wound failed to heal properly. Dr. J. M. Middleton, the post surgeon, placed the trooper under ether and operated on Sept. 13. The physician probed and enlarged the wound, and he also made another opening in the leg which caused arterial hemorrhaging. This was probably an attempt to get the infection to bleed out. If so, it was unsuccessful, and Braun died early in the morning of Oct. 4, 1876. 55

Dr. Middleton was so interested in Braun’s wounds that he cut off part of the dead trooper’s thigh and hip bone, and the physician shipped them to the Army Medical Museum, now known as the National Museum of Health and Medicine in Washington, DC, where they remain to this day. They reveal much about the nature of Braun’s wounds, and the bullet which killed him is still lodged in the head of the femur. The specimen showed progress in healing, but some of the bone had died, and it was still infected. The death of the Swiss demonstrated the limit of medical science at the time because the physicians still poorly understood the causes of infection and had little knowledge in curing such maladies. Braun’s death was the tragic loss of a young man, but his bones helped the doctors better understand the infection that killed him. 56

Five of the seven Swiss who were at the battle were killed in that action or died later of wounds. Only two survived, Robert Senn and John Lattman, both from Zurich. Senn had various duties in the cavalry in the years following the Little Bighorn including an assignment as a post school teacher, and he often worked in post kitchens. During that time, he advanced in rank from private, to corporal (Jan. 1, 1878), and then to sergeant (Jan. 21, 1878). He was charged in a general court martial (July 28, 1878) with aiding the desertion of a comrade by giving him advice on the best way to escape, but Senn was acquitted. He left the service at the end of his enlistment on Sept. 22, 1880. He was apparently erroneously referred to as a “private” of fair character at the time of his discharge. The date of his death is unknown.

John Lattman had a number of assignments in the army following the Little Bighorn, and he worked as a gardener on several occasions.

55 Williams, p. 46.
56 Scott, Willey, and Connor, pp. 119-20. Braun was 27 when he died.
He served out his enlistment and was described as a private of excellent character when he was discharged on Oct. 4, 1878. He then reenlisted for another five-year hitch. During that time, he served as a carpenter, gardener, and as a nurse. Lattman left the army on Oct. 3, 1883, and he later homesteaded on 160 acres of land near Rapid City, South Dakota, where he raised cattle. He died on Oct. 7, 1913 at the age of 65.

Many of the cavalry survivors of the Battle of the Little Bighorn enjoyed some notoriety for the remainder of their lives, and they were often praised for their courage in the face of long odds. This was likely true of Senn and Lattman as well. Clearly, all seven Swiss who had participated in the campaign and battle had performed their duties well, and they deserved much adulation. In addition, the five of them who fell in action demonstrated the greatest devotion possible. These Swiss were all fine, young men who had sacrificed much and gave valuable service to support the policies of their adopted country.

- Brigham Young University