Close-Order Combat at the Battle of the Little Big Horn: The Use of the Model 1873 Colt Revolver

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Scholars have paid much attention to the use of the Model 1873 Springfield Carbine at the Battle of the Little Big Horn, which was designed to be used in combat at relatively long distances, and the nature, reliability, accuracy and rate of fire of this weapon has been frequently examined. Yet many other weapons were involved in the battle, including those wielded at close quarters. At critical junctions in the fight, these firearms were important in the progress of the contest and contributed significantly to the final outcome of the battle. The purpose of this paper is to assess the weapons used at close quarters, to demonstrate their effectiveness, and to appraise their impact on the encounter.

Indian Weapons

The warriors who faced Custer’s men at the Little Big Horn wielded a variety of weapons. This included rifles, pistols, bows and arrows, war clubs and lances. The lance must not be confused with javelins or spears because the lance was used for thrusting not throwing. The rifles and bows and arrows could be effective both at short and at long ranges. Yet pistols could only be effective at relatively short distances, and clubs and lances had to be used when the Indians were within reach of their adversaries. Clearly, the rifles and pistols were devices manufactured by the white culture, and they were designed to be effective and easy to use. The use of metal cartridges also enhanced the ease at which the weapons could be loaded and fired.

However, the other weapons used by the Indians were handcrafted which meant they took relatively a long time to make, and the bows and arrows required much skill to use effectively. These hand-made weapons also had some cultural significance for the Indians. This was especially true of the lances that much resembled coup sticks, which warriors often used to “count coup” on their adversaries by touching them in an act of bravery. The bow could also be used as a means to count coup, and some of the warriors facing Custer’s men wanted to get close to their adversaries and to demonstrate their courage in battle.

Cavalry Weapons

While a few of the soldiers with the 7th Cavalry and the auxiliaries, who accompanied them, carried a variety of firearms, the standard issue to the troopers included the .45 caliber Springfield Model 1873 Trapdoor Carbine and the Model 1873 .45 cali-
A practiced person can fire this arm from 12 to 13 times per minute..., it has been fired at the rate of 23 times per minute..., by an experienced person.¹

While the Springfield was intended for use by the cavalry at a distance, it could certainly be used effectively at close range, but it was not designed as a close-order weapon that might include hand-to-hand combat. As a point of comparison, the cavalry version of the Springfield was nearly identical to the infantry model, but had simple modifications designed to make it effective at close quarters. The cavalry carbine had a shorter barrel (or bore) at 22 inches, while the infantry model’s barrel was 32.6 inches in length. Also, the wood forend (front end or forearm) of the infantry model was almost as long as the barrel, while the forend of the carbine was much shorter than the barrel. The infantry model was also designed to accommodate a bayonet, so it could be used effectively to jab into an enemy, while the cavalry carbine had no such capability. After it had been discharged, and if there was little time to reload the weapon, the carbine could only be used like a club in close combat. As such, it was a very cumbersome device and would only be used in that manner in times of complete desperation.

On the other hand, the .45 caliber Colt revolver used by the cavalry was designed for close-order combat. It was a single-action pistol, meaning its hammer had to be cocked and the trigger had to be pulled each time to fire the weapon. While the cavalry carbine was a single-shot weapon the pistol carried six rounds, so it was often called a six-shooter, and thus the gun could be fired much faster than the carbine. Its main drawbacks were the fact that it could only be reloaded slowly and was largely inaccurate, and therefore ineffective, at long distances. After the pistol had been fired, each spent cartridge had to be manually ejected from the cylinder one at a time, and each new round had to be inserted into the chamber individually. This was a slow process, and it was often impractical to reload the revolver while riding a horse at a gallop or under conditions of intense combat.

Ironically, the army also tested the Schofield Smith & Wesson Revolver in 1873 at the same time it examined the Colt revolver for effectiveness. While the Schofield was also a single-action device that had to be cocked every time it was fired, it could be reloaded much faster than the Colt because the Schofield had a top-break design which allowed all six spent cartridges to be ejected at the same time with one movement of the wrist. Also, all six rounds could be more rapidly loaded without turning the cylinder.

¹ For the sake of this example, let's assume a practice firing rate of 12 to 13 times per minute for the Springfield carbine, and 23 times per minute for the experienced Colt revolver.
Greasy Grass 2020

These advantages greatly increased the speed at which the pistol could be reloaded, a critical factor in its use during times of intense combat. Despite the Schofield’s advantages, the army selected the Colt and issued it to the troopers in Custer’s command.²

The cavalrymen typically went into battle with their Colt pistols fully loaded with a round in each cylinder. As 1st Sgt. John Ryan stated, the soldiers carried “24 rounds of pistol ammunition.”³ This was a perfect number of rounds for the men to be able to load their revolvers completely four times. There was no necessity of leaving one chamber of the cylinder empty under the hammer for safety reasons because the weapon had a “Safety Notch,” so that an accidental discharge of the device was highly unlikely. As the manual describing the basic features of the weapon stated, “Besides the full-cock and half-cock notches, there is also a Safety Notch, which is the first one felt in cocking the pistol.”⁴ When the hammer was cocked in the safety position, the weapon could not be discharged.

On July 11, 1876, only 15 days after the Little Big Horn, Major Marcus Reno reported on the number of rounds used by the army in the battle:

\[ Amt. \text{ Ammunition exp’d.} - \]
\[ \text{Carbine}, 38,030 \text{ rounds} \quad \text{[Amt. Ammunition exp’d.]} - \]
\[ \text{Pistol}, 2,954 \text{ [rounds].}^5 \]

Clearly, the soldiers used the carbine more extensively than they did the pistol, but the revolver was still very important to the outcome of the battle especially at critical junctures in the engagement.

Many troopers in the 7th Cavalry took pride in their unit and in their weapons, including the pistols. As Pvt. Charles Windolph, stated:

"You felt you were somebody when you were on a good horse, with a carbine dangling from its small leather ring socket on your McClellan saddle, and a Colt army revolver strapped on your hip; and a hundred rounds of ammunition in your web belt and in your saddle pockets, You were a cavalryman of the 7th Regiment. You were part of a proud outfit that had a fighting reputation, and you were ready for a fight or frolic."⁶

The range of the army Colt 1873 revolver was demonstrated at the Little Big Horn in a dramatic fashion. This occurred when Lt. Winfield Edgerly saw Maj. Marcus Reno acting erratically after his force retreated from the valley fight to take up positions on Reno Hill, “He [Reno] was in an excited condition. As we came up he turned and discharged his pistol towards the Indians.” According to Edgerly, the Indians were “about a thousand yards” away which was “nine hundred yards beyond any effective range” of the pistol.⁷

From my own observations, I can confirm Edgerly’s assessment on the range of the cavalry pistol. I have an exact replica of the army Colt Model 1873 .45 caliber revolver carried by the men in the 7th Cavalry. Using modern ammunition, I have tested the accuracy and range of the pistol many times, and I’m convinced that the revolver could be effective at 100 yards and perhaps lethal at some greater ranges. Yet its relatively low muzzle velocity, as compared to the Model 1873 Springfield Carbine, meant that the accuracy of the pistol beyond 100 yards would be uncertain at best, and its penetrating power would be much reduced as well at long distances. Additionally, the weapon’s sights are only designed for short-range firing. Even a very good shot would have trouble hitting a mark over 100 yards away, and striking a target at greater ranges would involve more luck than skill.

Close Order Combat in Reno’s Valley Fight

However, the pistol was effective at close range, which was first demonstrated early in the battle. The cavalry initially encountered the Indians when Maj. Reno’s command crossed the Little Big Horn River and advanced on the Indian village. This detachment included about 140 men in Companies A, G and M, and according to Lt. Wallace, “There were 22 scouts” including auxiliaries with the detachment.⁸ These men never reached their objective because hundreds of warriors swarmed from the encampment and threatened Reno’s column forcing them to stop their advance.

Yet at least one trooper, Pvt. John H. Meier of Company M, lost control of his mount which took him towards the village. Pvt. Daniel Newell stated that Meier’s “horse got away from him and bolted through the Indian’s line.” The trooper could have been cut off and killed, and he was in a desperate situation, but he pulled out his pistol to fight his way back to the cavalry lines. As Newell reported, “but he got back to us, shooting his way out with his six gun...how he ever did this is a mystery.” No doubt, Meier used his pistol skillfully.⁹

In the valley fight and retreat to Reno Hill, 34 or 35 soldiers and ci-
vilians with the cavalry were killed, many of them at close distances. The discrepancy in numbers, between 34 and 35 deaths, at that part of the battle is due to the fact that no one knew if Pvt. Benjamin F. Rogers was killed during Reno’s retreat from the valley or in the defense of Reno Hill. Either case is plausible. These fatalities give some indication of the intensity of the combat, and many of these men were killed by combat at short distances.

Reno’s valley fight was the first time the cavalry engaged the Indians, and it was also the first instance of combat at close quarters. When Reno saw the large numbers of warriors riding from the village to meet his advance, the commander ordered his men to dismount to face them because he believed his men could fire more effectively and accurately on foot. This reduced the number of troopers on the skirmish line to about 93. [See Sidebar]

Some of the close fighting took place when the soldiers had dismounted to form the skirmish line. However, most of the close fighting took place later, during Reno’s retreat from the timber after the initial encounter.

The Indians soon started to sweep around the left flank of his command, and Reno ordered his men to fall back to the timber rather than face the possibility of being surrounded and cut to pieces. During the movement to the timber the cavalrymen could not use their carbines effectively so the troopers had to rely on their pistols to prevent the Indians from cutting off the retreat to the timber.

Lt. George Wallace of Company G stated that Reno’s men were in a dangerous situation when the Indians closed in, and the soldiers had to fight their way out of a possible encirclement. When Wallace described this critical juncture of the fight, he stated that the soldiers did not have sabers, which was a weapon that could be used at close quarters. At the Reno Court of Inquiry in 1879, he was asked, “Did they [the soldiers] have sabers?” Wallace answered, “No, sir, there was not a saber in the command.” Lt. Charles Varnum also confirmed the fact that there were no sabers in the command, but he did so less enthusiastically. When he was asked, “Did any of the officers enter that fight with sabers or swords?” he answered, “Not that I know of, I almost know there was not a saber in the command.” If the soldiers had brought sabers with them to the battle, they would have had another weapon to use in close-order combat.

Wallace was also asked to explain the use of pistols in the engagement, “Did they [the soldiers] have revolvers?” He replied, “Yes, sir.” The lieutenant was then asked, “After a cavalryman expends the cartridges from his revolver, his revolver is useless?” to which he re-
responded, “Yes, sir.” Wallace gave details on the nature of the combat in the valley fight:

The Indians were in the bottom and we were riding through them and as we would ride along they would either fire or ride along by the men and fire at them [at a close range].

Lt. Wallace stated further:

In getting out of there we had to go through the Indians. There was but one way to get through and that was to charge through.

He added:

The men were in column-of-fours and as they would come up to the Indians the Indians would give way and let them pass through and then fire into them.

Wallace also offered the opinion that the warriors were most effective at close distance, when he testified, “If they [the Indians] had closed in there were plenty of them to have made short work of us.”

Again at the Reno Court of Inquir, Lt. Wallace was cross examined, and he stated that the decision to use pistols was largely left up to the soldiers. At one point, the lieutenant was asked: “You say as you went back the Indians rode up and fired on the cavalrymen who were not using their pistols, what was the reason the men did not use their pistols?” Wallace responded, “Probably they had fired the 6 rounds.” The next question was, “And their pistols were empty?” to which he responded, “Yes, sir.” Wallace was also asked, “Is not the firing of pistols by a cavalryman a matter of discretion?” To which he answered, “Yes, sir.” In his testimony, Capt. Myles Moylan of Company A affirmed Wallace’s statement. When asked:

State whether, under the circumstances, the firing of cavalrmen against Indians that are moving in all directions is not a matter largely of discretion with the individual soldier.

The captain answered:

It is.

Lt. Varnum of Company A gave further information on the Indians using Winchester rifles at close distances during the valley fight when the troopers were falling back from their original position:

As a rule they [the warriors] fire from their horses and they were scampering around pumping their Winchester rifles into us.

He further added:

When I came out there were a good many Indians scampering along with their Winchesters across their saddles firing into the column [of soldiers].

Varnum also gave information on how the troopers met the Indian threat during the retreat by using their pistols at close range:

A great many of the men were using their revolvers.

He added:

If there was a charge to pass through a body of Indians I think in column-of-fours would be a good formation with the number of men at his disposal, That would give the men an opportunity to use their revolvers, they could not use their carbines.

Varnum also indicated that the column-of-fours formation did not
last long in a battlefield situation, "by the time you go 100 yards the men will not be in their places." Moylan also testified that his company had lost its formation and suffered heavy casualties in the retreat in Reno's valley fight:

"I found the rear of my company was very much broken up, as the shooting into it was very severe." Lt. Varnum was also asked if the Indians charged into Major Reno's column during the retreat. He responded:

"They did not charge into it. They would ride some distance off on the flank, some 50 to 100 yards, with their rifles across the pommels of their saddles and would sit there and work their rifles."

Apparently, these statements surprised the court, and an obvious question followed. Varnum was then asked if the Indians brought the rifles to the shoulder to aim and fire, "No, sir," was the response. They "let them lay across their saddles." Sgt. Ferdinand A. Culbertson of Company A agreed with Varnum's observations on how the warriors used their guns.

"They [the Indians] were riding alongside and firing from the pommels of their saddles and some fired pistols as we came along." He added:

"There was great danger in passing out [towards the trees]. The Indians rode along side of us about 8 or 10 deep, firing most of the time into us."

Major Reno affirmed that the Indians shot into the mass of soldiers during their retreat in the valley:

"I stopped at the river a moment.... They were exposed to heavy fire from the Indians and I lost a good many men there. The Indians had Winchester rifles, and the column made a large target for them, and they were pumping bullets into it." Reno went so far as to state that the Indians wielded no other firearms but the Winchester rifle.

"Firing their rifles across the pommels of their saddles only made sense if the warriors were shooting at close range because they had little chance of hitting their targets at any distance. Perhaps the Indians were not aiming specifically at the soldiers but were firing into the mass of troopers hoping to hit either the men or their horses. The lever-action Winchester rifles could be used effectively at close range because a spent cartridge could be ejected and a new round could be sent into the firing chamber of the weapon with a flick of the wrist on the operating lever. The use of Winchester rifles also had a distinct advantage over the lever-action Henry rifle. When a Henry needed to be reloaded, the user had to hold the weapon in a vertical position to drop rounds into the magazine. That would be a very challenging operation on horseback and in battle. The Winchester could be reloaded by pushing rounds into its side magazine when the weapon was in a horizontal position, so the device could be reloaded while the operator was on horseback and under battlefield conditions.

The Acting Assistant Surgeon, Henry Porter, who accompanied Reno's command, refused to carry a weapon, so technically he did not fight in the battle. Yet he was in a position to observe much of the combat. He later testified that the warriors were often very close to the soldiers during Reno's retreat during the valley fight:

"When I got out [retreated from the timber] the men were running and the Indians were running too within a few yards of where I was. There were a few Indians between the command and me and I went out expecting to find the command charging the Indians but instead of that, I found the Indians charging the command." Later, Dr. Porter also stated that many of the Indians fought very close to the soldiers when he was asked if he could estimate the number of warriors in the engagement. He responded by saying that the warriors and soldiers were very close to each other:

"They [the Indians] were mixed up with the troops to the right and rear so that I can not tell [their numbers]. I think there were two or three hundred."

Private Edward Davern saw something similar at about the same time, "I looked around..., and I saw the G Company men were mixed up with the Indians." Indian pictographs provide further insights into the nature of the combat in Reno's valley fight. These illustrations often depict combat at close quarters including the soldiers firing their pistols, and the warriors were using pistols, rifles, clubs, lances and bows and arrows, also at close distances.
The warrior, One Bull, later reported that he killed three troopers using a war club in the valley fight, "I followed the soldiers. They were running for the river, I killed two with my tomahawk." He added that he killed another trooper who was retreating to Reno Hill, "I went across the river after the soldiers, I killed one more of them with my tomahawk."32

Close-order Combat at Custer’s Last Stand

When the five companies under Custer’s personal control were annihilated, much of the combat took place at close distances. As Chief Gall stated:

"The soldiers ran out of ammunition early in the day. Their supply of cartridges was in the saddle-pockets of their stampeded horses. The Indians then ran up to the soldiers and butchered them with hatchets."33

Later in an interview Chief Gall was asked, "Did the red men shoot guns or arrows?" The war chief responded,

"Both, we soon shot all our cartridges, and then shot arrows and used our war clubs."

He added,

"They [the troopers] shot away all [the ammunition] they had. The horses ran away, carrying in the saddle pockets a heap more, The soldiers threw their guns [carbines] aside and fought with the little guns [pistols]."34

The Indians affirmed the effectiveness of the cavalry pistol when Custer’s column was overwhelmed. The warrior, Horned Horse, observed:

"As it was, a great number of Indians fell, the soldiers using their revolvers at close range with deadly effect. More Indians died by the pistol than by the carbine. The latter weapon was always faulty. It "leaded" [jammed] easily and the cartridge shells stuck in the breech the moment it became heated, owing to some defect in the ejector. [See Sidebar]"

One must wonder if the outcome of the battle could have been altered if the troopers were wielding the Schofield Smith & Wesson Revolver which would have allowed them to reload their pistols much more rapidly.

Problems with the Model 1873 Springfield Carbine

The problems with the cavalry carbine were affirmed in several accounts. Major Reno stated, "An Indian scout [probably Curley], who was with that portion of the regiment which Custer took into battle, in relating what he saw of that part of the battle, says that from his hiding place he could see the men sitting down under fire, and working at their guns—a story that finds confirmation in the fact that officers, who afterwards examined the battle-field as they were burying the dead, found knives with broken blades lying near the dead bodies."36

Capt. James W. Reilly, Chief Ordnance Officer, explained the problems with the cartridges. They “had become covered with a coating of verdigris [deposit of copper carbonates] and extraneous matter, which had made it difficult to even put them in the chamber before the gun had been discharged at all. Upon discharge the verdigris and extraneous matter formed a cement with held the sides of the cartridge in place against the action of the ejector, resulting in the separation of the head of the cartridge from the body and its ejector alone."37

Lt. Charles DeRudio was asked, "How many rounds of ammunition could the men fire from their guns without heating them?" He testified, "Not a great many, I noticed that the men had to take their knives to extract cartridges after firing 8 or 10 rounds."38 Lt. Edward Godfrey, stated that one of the reasons "why Custer was defeated" was "the defective extraction of the empty cartridge-shells from the carbines...the ejectors did not always extract the empty shells from the chambers, and the men were compelled to use knives to get them out."39

The trooper, Charles Windolph, believed the extractor problems caused the deaths of many men, "When fired rapidly the breech became foul and the greasy cartridges often jammed and could not be removed by the extractor. This meant that the empty shell had to be forced out by the blade of a hunting knife. This very fact was responsible for the death of many a trooper this hot Sunday [June 25, 1876], and may actually have been the indirect cause of the great disaster."40

Another trooper, Pvt. William C. Slaper, said Capt. Thomas French “would extract shells from guns in which cartridges would stick."41
Numerous drawings made by the Indians depict various aspects of the battle. Often, when they portrayed the fighting when Custer’s five companies were overwhelmed, the artists showed the soldiers using pistols and the warriors using pistols, clubs and lances that were clearly being wielded at close distances. Also, depictions of hand-to-hand combat were presented.42

The warrior, Wooden Leg, also related that another soldier was killed using his pistol just 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-shooter” in his hand. An Indian took the pistol away from him and killed him with it.43

Soon after the battle, Lt. Edward Maguire visited the location where Custer’s men were annihilated and later testified that he saw physical evidence that the army used pistols in the battle. “There were government shells and Winchester shells and one peculiar brass shell was found that nobody knew anything about but which was supposed to belong to General Custer’s pistol.”44

Close Combat on Reno Hill

Afterretreating from the valley fight, Reno's men fell back to defensive positions on Reno Hill. The survivors were soon joined by Capt. Frederick Benteen’s command, comprised of Companies D, H, and K. Also, Capt. Thomas McDougall’s Company B, which was protecting the pack train, soon approached.

McDougall could hear the gunfire from the valley fight, and he believed he was entering a battlefield situation, so he ordered his men to advance as though they were attacking. As he explained later, “I told my company we would have to charge that party and get to the command. We drew our pistols. I put one platoon in front of the pack train and one in the rear, and charged to where those persons were.”45

After the men assembled on Reno Hill, the arms used by the men in and with the 7th Cavalry changed slightly because the citizen packers had different weapons and were not deployed in the same way to face the Indians. John Frett, a citizen packer, testified. He was asked “What were your duties as a packer in regard to fighting or anything of that sort?” To which he responded, “We had no orders in regard to fighting, and we had no weapons except revolvers.” He was then asked to clarify that statement, “None of the citizen packers had any weapons except revolvers?” He affirmed, “No, sir.”46

Lt. Edward Mathey of Company M had a slightly different take on the situation when he was asked, “Did you order all of the men with the pack train out on the [battle] line?” He responded, “Yes, sir.” Again, he was asked, “Were the citizen packers armed? If so, with what?” He further clarified the situation, “Some came to me for carbines and I told them to pick them up if any of the wounded men had left them, or anywhere they could find them.”47

Some of the fighting on Reno Hill occurred at closer distances, including one of the most significant junctures in the battle. The fight for the hill started on June 25, 1876, but it ended when the sun went down, and the men on either side could no longer see to shoot well. The battle renewed the next morning. As Lt. Charles DeRudio explained, pistol
shots signaled the renewal of combat on the following day, “About half past four o’clock, that Indian standing at the point fired four shots with his pistol, in the air, which I considered a signal.” He added, “About half an hour after the same Indian fired four more shots in the air and the same Indian that had called out the first time, called out again.”

Benteen’s Company H was in an exposed prominence that protruded from Reno Hill to the south, and the Indians fired into both sides of the position. The most critical point was the “horseshoe” at the end of the line, and it was defended by only eight or ten men. Fortunately, only three of the men in Company H were killed in the battle, but 19 were reportedly wounded, and the battle casualties numbered nearly half of the soldiers in the company. The company was vulnerable from attack on two sides, and if that unit gave way, the entire defense on Reno Hill could collapse.

Benteen got reinforcements from Company M, but the situation was still precarious. The warriors were so close that they “were amusing themselves by throwing clods of dirt, [and] arrows by hand” at the troops. Benteen also asserted that one warrior was so close that he “touched one of the dead men [soldiers] with a coup stick.”

The situation was desperate, and Benteen decided on a bold venture that could easily have been suicidal. He ordered some of his men, no more than a few dozen, to attack their enemies on foot. The captain told how he inspired his men to risk their lives in the attack:

They [the Indians] were making a last desperate effort and which was directed against the lines held by Companies H and M. In this charge they came close enough to use their bows and arrows, and one man lying dead within our lines was touched with the coup stick of one of the foremost Indians. When I say the stick was only ten or twelve feet long, some idea of the desperate and reckless fighting of these people may be understood. 51

Benteen stated that some of the Indians were only “12 feet” from the cavalry position. Capt. Moylan had a similar opinion,

I saw a dead Indian very close to his [Benteen’s] line.... They came up there within 15 or 20 yards. There were a considerable many of them. There was a sufficient number of them to warrant their attempting to turn that end of the line. 53

The situation was desperate, and Benteen decided on a bold venture that could easily have been suicidal. He ordered some of his men, no more than a few dozen, to attack their enemies on foot. The captain told how he inspired his men to risk their lives in the attack:

I walked along the front of my troop and told them that I was getting mad, and I wanted them to charge down the ravines with me when I gave the yell: then each to yell as if provided with a thousand throats.

Benteen later admitted he had no “real trust” in the plan’s chances of success, but he thought he had to try something.

The few soldiers who ran forward towards the Indians were probably outnumbered. In doing so, the troopers became more easy targets. If the warriors had stood and fought, the troopers could have suffered serious casualties, but the Indians turned and fled. Benteen said that the attack was such a surprise to the warriors that some of them “somersaulted and vaulted as so many trained acrobats” in their hasty attempts to get away. Trooper Charles Windolph, who went with the attack, also described the scene:

Yelling and firing, we went at the “double quick” and the Indians broke and ran. When we had cleaned them out for a hundred yards ahead of us, we hustled back to our holes. 56

The attack had been a big success, and the Indians never rallied and massed to storm the position again.

The cavalry revolvers could have been a key to the success of Company H’s attack on foot. Even if their rifles had functioned properly, their rate of fire was so slow and the reloading of them so cumbersome as to make them of highly questionable value in the attack. But the men could fire their revolvers rapidly and effectively at close range, making their use
possibly an important aspect of the attack's success.

While the courageous attack by Companies H and M had stabilized their positions and removed the threat of being overwhelmed, the other companies on Reno Hill were still in danger. Benteen was obviously impressed with the success of the charge made by the two companies, and he decided that such an advance by the other companies could have the same fortunate outcome. Hundreds of Indians pressed close to the defensive position held by the troopers on Reno Hill. The warriors seemed to be closing in, and they continued to threaten the soldiers.

Benteen believed that desperate action again needed to be taken to keep the army's adversaries at a distance, and he talked with a number of officers suggesting that their men advance against the warriors. The captain talked with officers in Companies A (Moylan and Varnum), D (Edgerly), K (Godfrey), B (McDougall), and G (Wallace). He also convinced Major Reno that the action was necessary.

Lt. Edgerly of Company D described Benteen's actions at that time:

Captain Benteen came over and stood near where I was on a high point. The bullets were flying very fast there and I did not see why he was not riddled. He was perfectly calm. I remember there was a smile on his face. He said to Major Reno, "we have charged the Indians from our side and driven them out. They are coming to our left and you ought to drive them out."

Major Reno was convinced and said "give the command to charge."

Benteen then turned to the men, "All right, ready boys, now charge and give them hell!"57

Lt. Godfrey listed three units used in the advance,

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.58

Capt. McDougall of Company B gave additional information on the companies involved in the attack:

I was only paying attention to my own company, but on retiring I saw Lieutenants Varnum [Co. A] and Hare [Co. K] and Captain Weir [Co. D].59

The testimonies of Godfrey and McDougall indicated that companies A, B, D, and K were involved in the attack, and Lt. Wallace inferred that Company G participated as well.

The men did not advance far, Lt. Edgerly of Company D, said the men only rushed forward. "Probably 40 or 50 yards."60 Varnum stated that his men did not advance that far:

Then everybody got up and it was a rush, it was not a charge.... We probably went up 15 to 10 yards and everybody [the Indians] scattered out of there. You could see the whole outfit skipping out to the hills beyond.61

Company B under the command of Capt. McDougall advanced a slightly longer distance during the attack. His men went "about 60 yards when the firing was so heavy on my right and rear that I had to retire to our original position."62

The troopers probably advanced with their revolvers in one hand and their rifles in the other. Since they could fire their pistol effectively with one hand, these soldiers likely shot their revolvers as they rushed forward. This meant they could have fired a considerable number of shots, maybe in just a few seconds, which is about the time it would have taken the men to cover from 10 to 60 yards on foot. These five companies in total could have had over 200 men available to participate in the attack, but the actual number was probably less. Yet these troopers had considerable firepower in their pistols, and they could have fired hundreds of rounds in a short time during their advance. The success of these attacks could have depended as much on the rate of fire from the men's pistols as on the Indians' surprise at their advance.

These attacks on foot, especially if the soldiers showed the firepower of their pistols, could have had a strong mental impact on the warriors facing the cavalry. The Indians fell back, which ended the last real threat to the soldiers' position on Reno Hill. The troopers showed impressive firepower at that time, and they could certainly demonstrate that feat again if the warriors attempted to advance on the cavalry's position. The Indians may have considered this possibility as the fighting diminished in the afternoon.

Conclusion

Close-order combat was an essential feature in each of the three major phases of the Battle of the Little Big Horn including Reno's valley fight, the annihilation of Custer's battalion, and the siege of Reno hill. The Indians used war
clubs and lances effectively the first two encounters, and the use of these weapons allowed them to inflict more casualties on the soldiers, but it was the cavalry pistol that helped the cavalry in both the valley fight and in the siege of Reno Hill. In these engagements, the skillful use of the revolver allowed many troops to survive and hold their positions against the Indians.

Endnotes
1 Description and Rules for the Management of the Springfield Rifle, Carbine, and Army Revolvers, Calibre .45 (Springfield, Mass.: National Armory, 1874), 29.
2 Description and Rules, 43-5.
4 Description and Rules, 37.
6 Charles Windolph, I Fought with Custer (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 53, 56.
8 Reno Court, Wallace, 24.
11 Reno Court, Wallace, 28.
12 Reno Court, Wallace, 45.
13 Reno Court, Varnum, 175.
14 Reno Court, Wallace, 45.
15 Reno Court, Wallace, 23.
16 Reno Court, Wallace, 28.
17 Reno Court, Wallace, 51.
18 Reno Court, Wallace, 82.
19 Reno Court, Moylan, 229.
20 Reno Court, Varnum,148.
21 Reno Court, Varnum, 150.
22 Reno Court, Varnum, 151.
23 Reno Court, Varnum, 152.
24 Reno Court, Moylan, 218.
25 Reno Court, Varnum, 184.
26 Reno Court, Culbertson, 369.
27 Reno Court, Culbertson, 383.
28 Reno Court, Reno, 565.
29 Reno Court, Porter, 190.
30 Reno Court, Porter, 210.
31 Reno Court, Daven, 349.
33 Graham, The Custer Myth, Gall, 89.
34 Graham, The Custer Myth, Gall 91.
35 Horned Horse in Richard G. Hardorff (editor), Indian Views of the Custer Fight: a Source Book (Spokane: Clark, 2004), 41-2.
38 Reno Court, DeRudio, 346.
42 Red Horse 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 Plain, 2009), 146-50, 152-56. See also Standing Bear in Rubbing Out Long Hair, 185-193, and While Bull, Rubbing out Long Hair, 246-7. Also, Amos Bad Heart Bull, A Pictographic History of the Oglala Sioux (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska, 1967), 217-45.
43 Wooden Leg, A Warrior who Fought Custer (Lincoln, Nebraska, University of Nebraska), 238.
44 Reno Court, Maguire, 9.
45 Reno Court, McDougall, 529.
About the Author

Albert Winkler is the retired history librarian at Brigham Young University, but he is currently an adjunct history instructor at Utah Valley University. Dr. Winkler has a Ph.D. in history and three master’s degrees in history and library science from Utah State University, the Catholic University of America and Brigham Young University. Over six hundred students in the Social Sciences College of UVU voted him teacher of the year in 2010. He has published 11 books in German on the Indian Wars of the American West, and he has published 30 additional articles dealing mostly with the Indian Wars as well. This includes a half a dozen articles in the Battle of the Little Big Horn. Dr. Winkler has received two awards from the Utah Historical Society for the best scholarly articles published in the Utah Historical Quarterly for articles dealing with the Indian Wars in Utah.