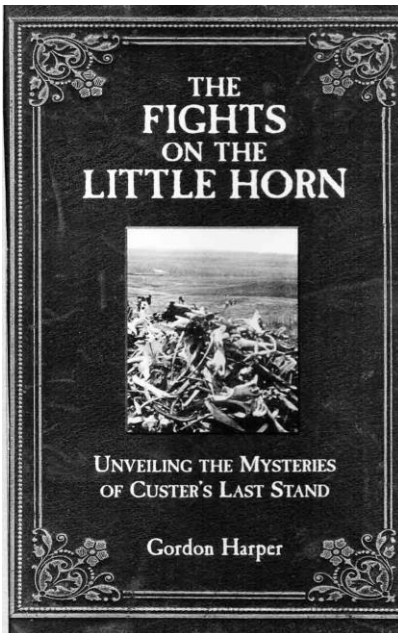


CBHMA Book Review

by Rev. Vincent A. Heier



The Fights on the Little Horn: Unveiling the Mysteries of Custer's Last Stand

By Gordon Harper*

**With assistance from Gordon Richard & Monte Akers*

Philadelphia & Oxford: CASE-MATE PUBLISHERS, 2014 Pp. x, 386, contents, foreword, prologue, analyses, epilogue, maps, bibliography, index, hardcover, \$33.00

The late G. Joseph Sills (for whom the annual CBHMA Book Award is named) took pride in saying that he was only interested in what happened at the Battle of the Little Big Horn on June 25-26, 1876. Consequently he was not concerned with Custer's Civil War career, the political fallout before and after the battle nor the countless (and endless) trivia that the battle has generated.

Sills would especially have appreciated Gordon Harper's book, particularly its subtitle: *Unveiling the Mysteries of Custer's Last Stand*. Though British, the author did not pursue the subject from afar but lived around Crow Agency, Montana, where he researched sources and interviewed several descendants of warriors who participated in the fight.

Unfortunately, after many years of research, Harper died in 2009. However, we are grateful that his daughter Tori has ensured that we can benefit from his insightful analysis. Publication of his exhaustive research would also not have been possible without the commendable efforts of our British colleague Gordon Richard, who abridged and edited this extensive work (originally over two million words) and

wrote (based on Harper's correspondence) the chapter on the fate of the five companies of the U.S. 7th Cavalry under the immediate command of Lieut. Colonel George Armstrong Custer.

The goal was to relate the story of the Little Big Horn by utilizing first-hand accounts and reports as well as by examining the testimony at the 1879 Reno Court of Inquiry and the extensive notes and correspondence of battle researcher Walter M. Camp. The author was thus able to probe discrepancies in earlier material that was often clouded by blame and recrimination.

This comprehensive endeavor thus illustrates the premise that the exclusive use and critical analysis of primary sources is necessary to study this controversial subject in order to write an accurate, credible rendition that places the story in proper historical context.

"He believed that too much of the legend of the battle," Tori Harper has written of her father's efforts, "was just that—secondary interpretation founded on other secondary interpretation that had grown into common acceptance that would not withstand close scrutiny."

Harper's narrative begins at the divide between Rosebud Creek and Little Big Horn River where Custer separated the 7th Cavalry into four battalions, including that of Captain Frederick W. Benteen. What were, in fact, Custer's orders to this officer? The author notes a significant difference between the captain's official report and letters to his wife soon after the battle and his questionable testimony at the Reno court three years later. Thus "nothing in Benteen's orders, notwithstanding his later statements to the contrary, told him to 'pitch into anything he came across.'"

Analyzing Custer's march from the divide along the stream now known as Reno Creek, the author dismisses the accusation that his actions were rash and insists that the approach to the Little Big Horn was a cautious "reconnaissance in force" or a "search and destroy" mission in modern military terms. Among the controversial incidents scrutinized are the hesitation of the Arikara scouts to follow Custer's order to move ahead and interpreter Fred Gerard's subsequent warning that the Indians were "running like devils!"

Prominent among the many on-going Little Big Horn disputes are Custer's "attack" order to Major Marcus A. Reno and his alleged failure to "support" that officer's advance. Harper's examination of the varied, conflicting and multiple accounts of the order (who? what? when? where?) appears to have resolved such long-standing confusion by concluding that Reno, in effect, received two separate, distinct instructions at two different locations, presumably from two different officers.

As to the major's mission, the author concludes that Reno was ordered to attack an unconfirmed Indian village on the Little Big Horn—not to pursue a small group of warriors in apparent flight. Harper further argues that Reno had "no compelling reason" to abort his mission in the valley by fighting on foot. "While some participants credit this halt with saving the command, it was, in fact, Reno's first error of commission and the first intimation that he had perhaps been put in a position and circumstance for which he was not very well suited." There was no threat to the command before it halted, according to Indian testimony. Warrior accounts support the premise that the long-range action of Reno's dismounted skirmish line was "short-lived and insignificant."

The author also faults the major's actions (if any) in the timber and his alleged "charge" to the bluffs across the Little Big Horn River. Harper relies notably on the damaging testimony of the civilian witness George Herendeen at the court of inquiry claiming that Reno panicked and that the withdrawal was far

from orderly. He had thus lost, in Harper's view, effective command by the time that he reached what is now known as Reno Hill.

What follows is an excellent analysis of the northward movement by Captain Thomas B. Weir and his company to the promontory named after that officer, again extensively quoting from the Reno court and other primary sources. The examination of the varied statements of those who witnessed the final action on the Custer battlefield from Weir Point is one of the best assessments of this confusing episode, one that *in hindsight* was claimed to have been an attempt (albeit bungled) to "save" a Custer in distress. However, "no one has ever been able to firmly establish what it was supposed to achieve, and at the time there was nothing to indicate that Custer was in trouble or needed saving."

Harper further argues that the northward movement of the five companies with Custer along the bluffs on the east side of the river was *not* prompted by sighting Indians in that direction, as asserted by Sergeant Daniel A. Knipe. Assuming that Reno could "handle things" in the valley, Custer (in Harper's view) attempted to support the major by moving to "another point to threaten or capture the village, the full extent of which was not visible."

Unfortunately Gordon Harper died before completing his book so as to tell us what happened to Custer and his five companies. However, Gordon Richard has been able to glean what his friend had speculated from his letters and Internet postings.

How Richard reconstructs "Custer's Last Stand" in such great detail must be left to the imagination until one reads this provocative book. However, we note that he concurs with the views of Joseph Sills, Richard Fox, Michael Donahue and others that Custer proceeded *beyond* Last Stand Hill with the battalion of Captain George W. Yates to a river crossing where he encountered resistance and withdrew to support the battalion of Captain Myles W. Keogh engaged southward in the Calhoun Hill area.

What is intriguing (if not compelling) about this interpretation is the application of well-known Indian accounts to describe fighting at this northern ford (Ford "D") that has been traditionally attributed to action at "Medicine Tail Ford" (Ford "B"), where *no* action (according to Richard) occurred. Students of the battle must seriously consider this new interpretation (and the evidence) even if it is not definitive.

The book includes several appendices that "analyze" Little Big Horn controversies: Custer's alleged disobedience of orders; the coalescence of the Lakota and Cheyenne bands; the number of warriors; number of recruits and Indian-fighting record of the 7th Cavalry; the location of the dead on the Custer battlefield; military burials and markers; a reconstruction of soldier death sites; and the "enlisted men's petition."

Most of these subjects have been treated in more detail elsewhere with greater authority.

Unfortunately, the author failed to consult archival documents among other original primary sources, a flaw noticeable, for example, in the recruit examination. The appendix on Custer's disobedience, for example, should have noted the pioneering research of the late Jack Manion on the "Mary Adams affidavit."

Nevertheless, we are blessed that Gordon Harper's scholarship is now available. Even though he sometimes relied on questionable sources, overall he did his homework as his extensive bibliography attests. ***Fights on the Little Horn*** may not be for the beginner but it does provide ample food for those who hunger for the serious study of the Little Big Horn, to whom I recommend the book.

This contribution will at least challenge us to reexamine (if not revise) time-honored assumptions and conceptions. The reviewer is certain that it will lead to many more “fights” as we continue the perpetual debate on the subject that Gordon Harper loved so well.

*A related letter to the editor appeared in the Winter 2015 **Battlefield Dispatch**. C. Lee Noyes contributed to this review by Rev. Vincent A. Heier.*