

Battlefield Profiles

A Day in the Career of the Chief Historian

By Joe Creaden

Although we have so many fond memories of former Chief Historian John Doerner and his work at Little Bighorn Battlefield, we would be hard pressed to place one accomplishment at the head of his impressive work at our beloved Battlefield. During his enduring legacy at the park certain qualities were always visible: His love and devotion to the Battlefield and his heartfelt respect for the soldiers and warriors who fought on the remote Montana hills over the Little Big Horn River.

John's commitment was never more evident than on June 23, 2007 during the CBHMA Field Trip. With the temperature at 95 degrees, he stayed with us every step of the way. He delivered a moving talk on Reno Hill speaking of the markers honoring the Arikara scouts who died in Major Marcus Reno's Valley Fight. He also spoke eloquently about the markers for the Reno dead in the valley. He also expressed his wish to move the Arikara markers and place them in their proper locations in the valley.

Near Deep Coulee, John oversaw dedication of the marker for Corporal John Foley. During this moving ceremony one could not avoid experiencing the deep feelings of heroism and desperation exhibited during the course of this event in the Battle of the Little Big Horn known as "Custer's Last Stand." All those present better understood that the battle was fought by many ordinary human beings, not just famous officers and chiefs. [See "*Foley's Last Ride*," Fall 2007 **Battlefield Dispatch**.]

Finally at Last Stand Hill John addressed a crowd of CBHMA members and visitors explaining what the end of the Battle must have been like for the soldiers and warriors. He spoke with great emotion of soldiers shooting their beloved horses, a final desperate act of survival. He recalled warriors defending their families, sacrificing their lives to protect them. Looking around the Hill as he spoke, one could not help but notice how many people had tears in their eyes. John had captured the emotions of the crowd and made them understand that the Battle of the Little Big Horn was not just an historical event. It was a true human tragedy impacting many lives.

Anyone who was there on that hot June day will never forget John's talk. After each of these moving ceremonies John would sound *Taps* in honor of *all* who fought in 1876. Despite the heat you could feel a chill go up your spine as he played with the conviction that can only come from deep within a person's heart and soul.

We meet many people in the course of our lives but some are never forgotten. John Doerner is one of those people who, once you meet them, leave a mark that endures.

We hope that John enjoys retirement but will often return to Little Big Horn Battlefield and attend our annual gatherings where his countless friends will be waiting to see him.

John Doerner, we salute you!

