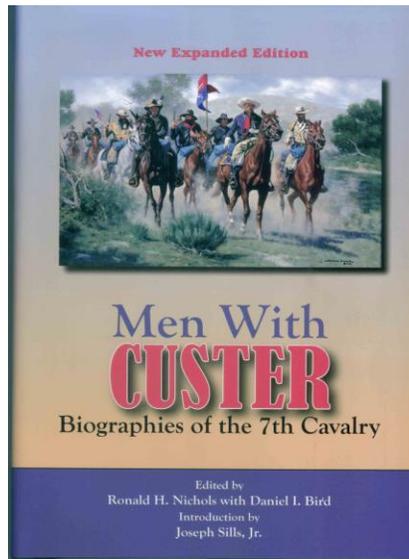


CBHMA BOOK REVIEW

by Peter Russell



Men With Custer: Biographies of the 7th Cavalry

Edited by Ronald H. Nichols with Daniel I. Bird

Hardin, Montana: CBHMA, 2010 Pp. xxvii, 484, table of contents, preface, introduction, photographs, appendices, selected sources and notes, hardcover \$50, softcover \$30

My interest in George Armstrong Custer can be directly traced to a visit that I made to Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument in the late 1990s.

Although initially captivated by the enduring mystery that surrounds the last moments of the five companies under his immediate command and the Battle of the Little Big Horn in general, I soon became equally interested in learning something about the men who served with the 7th Cavalry in June 1876. It was during my second trip at the time of the 125th Anniversary that I purchased a copy of the 2000 revision of ***Men With Custer: Biographies of the 7th Cavalry***, edited by Ron Nichols, which contained exactly the kind of information I was seeking.

Until then I had not fully appreciated just how many members of that famous regiment were born overseas, especially in all four countries of the United Kingdom and the states that formed the newly established German Empire (1871).

Over the next nine years I consulted this informative little volume far more than any other in my ever-increasing Plains Indian Wars collection. In fact, it was so well used (and abused!) that I needed to replace it with a second copy. Not surprisingly, I welcomed the announcement that an updated and expanded edition was to be published in 2010 and eagerly looked forward to seeing what changes it might contain.

In the meantime, I had bought a copy of Roger Williams' scholarly masterpiece, ***Military Register of Custer's Last Command*** (reviewed by this writer in the Winter 2011 ***Battlefield Dispatch***). Although the Williams volume brings an amazing wealth of new material into the public domain, I believe that it complements rather than replaces ***Men With Custer*** as the major source of biographical information. There is certainly room on my bookshelf for both titles.

Unlike ***Military Register***, which is essentially the life's work of one man, ***Men With Custer*** has evolved from the groundbreaking research by Kenneth Hammer in the early 1960s (and the subsequent input of countless Little Bighorn enthusiasts) to the book that we see today.

However, none of this would have been possible without the long-term commitment and editing skills of Ron Nichols, who was ably assisted on this occasion by Daniel Bird. The single column format, minimum use of abbreviations, plain English and the clear presentation of the text make it a joy to read.

Men With Custer also differs from ***Military Register*** by the fact that it contains a concise account of the battle (by the late Joseph Sills, Jr.) and a gallery of photographs of the best-known participants. The front cover art is Michael Shreck's fine interpretation of Custer and his staff shortly before engaging the enemy, entitled "*Valley of the Shadow*."

This expanded edition is offered in two versions: hardcover (limited to 250 copies) and softcover (750 copies), \$50 and \$30 respectively. Either price represents incredible value for money.

As one would expect from the title around 90% of the 484 pages is devoted to the biographies of the officers, enlisted men, Indian scouts and civilian quartermaster employees who were associated with the 7th Cavalry in June 1876.

With the exception of the Indian scouts, each sketch is arranged in alphabetical order under the surname recorded in the U.S. Army's official *Register of Enlistments* and contains the rank, normal assignment in the regiment and that at the time of the battle, the place and date of birth (if known), date of enlistment/s and known date and place of death plus an extraordinary amount of other information covering both pre- and post-military service.

Many of the biographies have been expanded and updated to reflect the considerable amount of new material obtained by the editorial team and supplemented by others since the publication of the 2000 edition.

The excellent appendices contain a mine of useful facts and figures that include rosters of all those engaged in the battle; a summary of casualties; aliases of 7th Cavalry soldiers; Medal of Honor recipients at Little Big Horn and later engagements; those awarded the Indian Wars Campaign Medal and the Civil War Campaign Badge; and men of the regiment buried in Arlington, Custer, the Washington Soldiers Home and other National Cemeteries. A new feature is the list of "Casualties in Valley & Hilltop Fights," conveniently broken down between the two geographical locations and each day of the battle.

However, there is an important caveat that applies to ***Men With Custer***, ***Military Register***, similar publications, research articles and, indeed, "muster rolls" available on the Internet. It concerns dependence on U.S. Army records, such as the *Register of Enlistments*, oaths of allegiance, etc. as a major source of information, which by default or design are notoriously inconsistent and unreliable.

We know that a large number of recruits were recent immigrants from non-English speaking areas of Ireland and countries in continental Europe. Moreover, some were illiterate or poorly educated, which further increased the chances of misinterpretation. Of course, for a whole host of other reasons, many simply chose to conceal their true identity by deliberately providing spurious details about their name, age and/or place of birth.

Thus, John S. Stuart Forbes enlisted as a private under the name "John S. Hiley"; Pvt. James Pym said that he was "age 22" on December 11, 1874, when in fact he was born on November 7, 1847; and Sgt. Maj. William H. Sharrow would have us believe that he was "born at sea" despite the indisputable evidence that it was in Sheriff Hutton, near York, England.

Consequently, one must ask: Is the biographical information about other troopers (or even some officers) always as faithful as it purports to be? Almost inevitably, I suspect not.

A second dilemma confronting the reader is when information in *Men With Custer* differs from that in *Military Register*. For instance, page 107 states that the birthplace of Trumpeter Henry Dose was "Holstein, Denmark" (Williams says "Holstein, Germany"). From 1815 to 1864 Holstein was a member of the German Federation though still in union with Denmark (the King of Denmark being also the Duke of Holstein), hence the understandable geographic confusion. Other examples could also be cited.

One further observation is the lack of recognition ("Selected Sources and Notes") to *The Crow's Nest*, which is published twice a year by the Custer Association of Great Britain. There is little doubt that this edition of *Men With Custer* used a significant amount of new material taken directly from the pages of that journal. During the last ten years more than a dozen biographical accounts of officers and enlisted men have been featured in *The Crow's Nest* and, for the sake of parity, the inclusion of this reference in the individual sketches would have been not only helpful to the reader but also appropriate acknowledgement of that informative source.

In the preface of *Biographies of the 7th Cavalry* (1972) Kenneth Hammer correctly wrote: "It is needless to say that this is not a final study." Although its sequel and successor, *Men With Custer*, continues to add knowledge of those who served in (and with) the 7th Cavalry in June 1876, it too must remain a "work in progress," albeit an extremely good and comprehensive one.

In spite of the words of caution that draw attention to the inherent shortcomings of U.S. Army records in general, I have no hesitation recommending this new expanded version of *Men With Custer* to all who share an interest in the men who served under the legendary General. I can think of few ways of better spending thirty or even fifty dollars!

Reviewed by Peter Russell