

Who Was August Finckle?

By George Kush



Over the years some writers have questioned the true identity of Sergeant August Finckle, a member of Captain Thomas W. Custer's Company C, 7th Cavalry who is listed among the fallen at the Little Big Horn.

With no serious evidence beyond the fact that the surname Finckle is inscribed on the Cavalry Monument erected at Little Bighorn Battlefield in memory of those soldiers, scouts and civilians who died with Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer's command, these writers have proffered the bizarre claim that the German born Finckle was in reality a foot-loose Ohio farm boy named Frank Finkel, a self-proclaimed survivor of "Custer's Last Stand."

Setting aside all such controversial claims, the interested reader might ask: "Who was August Finckle?" It is a good question and deserves a good answer, one that will set the record straight.

To date, not much information about Finckle has come to light but Charles Windolph, a private in Company H in 1876, told his biographers that after the Battle of the Little Big Horn, he tried to locate the body of his "German friend, Trooper Finckle, the tallest man in the regiment," among the dead on Custer's battlefield but "could not identify him." He also told Indian wars researcher Walter Camp that Finckle "had been a captain in the German army" but beyond a few scattered references by other battle veterans almost little more is known—at least until now.

According to surviving U.S. military records, August Finckle was born in the German kingdom of Prussia (probably in the vicinity of Berlin) about the year 1844. Immigrating to the United States after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, he enlisted in the U.S. Army in Chicago on January 27, 1872. We might never know the reasons for serving his new country but we can surmise that given the harsh Illinois winters coupled with likely unemployment, a five year hitch in the Army seemed an appealing alternative to a cold room and an empty stomach.

Recruiting officer Captain Samuel Young described the 27 year old recruit as 6'½" tall, having gray eyes, dark hair and matching complexion. His civilian occupation was simply recorded as "clerk." Shortly after

signing his enlistment papers Finckle was assigned to the Company C, 7th Cavalry, stationed at Rutherford, North Carolina, commanded by Captain Verling K. Hart.

At a time when most recruits entering the U.S. armed forces were marginally literate, educated men, those who could read and write were a valuable commodity. For those who also demonstrated natural aptitude for military life, rapid promotion was often their reward.

Samuel Alcott from Port Allegheny, Pennsylvania was just such a man. The 20 year-old business school graduate, laboring long hours as a tile-cutter, enlisted in the army in Troy, New York, just days before Finckle "took the oath." Assigned to Company A, 7th Cavalry, he was soon assisting the company clerk with the daily paperwork. In January 1875 he had been promoted to the rank of sergeant.

Finckle's career followed a similar path. Thirteen months after donning his suit of army blue, he was promoted to corporal and to sergeant in June 1875. Like Alcott, Finckle must have impressed those in authority because from July through September 1875, he also served as acting battalion sergeant major at Fort Rice, Dakota Territory. Like Alcott, Finckle was detailed to special duty in the Quartermaster's Department. Despite their different backgrounds, the two sergeants became fast friends.

Samuel Alcott left the Army after his five-year enlistment expired, eventually immigrating to Canada where he settled into the more sedentary life as a clerk employed by a large lumber company. Alcott's un-published military memoir ("With the Forty Thieves in '76") fondly recalled many of his old comrades and (in Finckle's case) good natured amusement ("Forty Thieves" being the moniker that Alcott used to describe the members of "A Troop").

The memoir, for example, recalled:

We had in our outfit a German-born sergeant by the name of Finckle. Gus Finckle was a veteran of the Franco-Prussian War, and one of the very few of our number who then did not smell [gun] powder for the first time. He was highly educated and wrote in a beautiful hand; but his command of English was a fearful and wonderful production. One day, he received instructions from Lieutenant [Henry J.] Nowlan, the regimental quartermaster, to perform some special duty to which he made the reply, "But I have doodened it already, sir." To which the Lieutenant retorted, "Well, you didn't doodened it right and you will doodened it again."

On another occasion, when orderly sergeant, Finckle discovered a caricature of a company officer tacked to the base of the garrison flagpole, which he immediately removed and presented to the regimental adjutant with disgust. The next morning, a similar cartoon on a large sheet of white cotton was hoisted to the top of the flagpole. After removing it, he complained in the orderly room: "I finden it, the letter on the pole. I finden it, the flag on the pole, and they is bounden to thinken I was doodened it myself."

Alcott recalled that other German-speaking members of the regiment told him that Finckle's command of their mother tongue was as bad as his English.

This communication problem was apparent when he was assigned to instruct a drill squad nicknamed "The Foreign Legion," composed of green recruits, "mostly French, Galician (Polish) and some thick-headed Germans" who had difficulty understanding commands in English. That night, the squad went to

the regimental sergeant-major *en masse* to protest Finckle's appointment and to demand an English-speaking drill sergeant whose orders could be better understood.

Alcott remembered that he once watched Finckle drill troops in the "manual of arms," telling them to hold their weapons to the "perpen-dickalic." It was "a byword" that Finckle kept his company roster "alphabetalic."

Sergeants Alcott and Finckle both proved to be excellent soldiers and left Fort Abraham Lincoln May 17, 1876, on the campaign that would result in the Battle of the Little Big Horn. At that point their paths diverged. Finckle and his troop rode into battle as part of Custer's ill-fated immediate command and suffered their fate at the hands of the Lakota and the Northern Cheyenne.

Alcott, on the other hand, served as chief clerk for the expedition's quartermaster, Lieutenant Nowlan, and thus missed the disaster that befell his regiment. Although aboard the steamer *Far West* as the desperate fight occurred on the Greasy Grass, he did accompany Nowlan, a member of General Alfred H. Terry's staff, to the battlefield and witnessed the burial of the dead, among them his comrade Gus Finckle.

"My friend Gus Finckle, Killed at Custer Massacre," Alcott wrote on the sleeve of the tintype that illustrates this article. "I still possess a photo of Sergt. Finckle," he noted in his memoir, "*who I saw buried* on that barren plain." (Italics added.)

Simple words but irrefutable proof that Sergeant August Finckle did not desert his command, did not cheat death and that his bones rest with those of his comrades, in the mass grave on Last Stand Hill. Case closed.

*Please refer to the author's profile of Sergeant Samuel Alcott in the Winter 2013 **Battlefield Dispatch**, which will be provided as a PDF file upon request.*

*The 2013 edition of **Greasy Grass** features a related article, "The Germans in the Seventh Cavalry at the Battle of the Little Big Horn" by Albert Winkler.*

*The 2010 **Men With Custer** entry for August Finckle states that before his assignment to the 7th Cavalry, he had served in the 14th Infantry from 1869 to 1870. Alcott recalled that he had fought in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), presumably based on Finckle's statements. Both claims might be correct (however remotely or unlikely). A more plausible explanation is that the previous "Finckle" was, in fact, a different individual.*

*In the spirit of productive dialogue, we encourage and welcome constructive reader comments on this and other controversial subjects. For a contrary interpretation, please refer to John Koster's letter to the editor in the Spring 2013 **Dispatch**. We would appreciate additional biographical and other information concerning Sergeant August Finckle.*

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