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From the Collection

One Man, Two Wars, and a Sunday in June

Steven Wilson

Editor's Note: Steven Wilson is the Assistant Director and Curator at Abraham Lincoln Library & Museum/Carnegie Vincent Library.

Call it a society of warriors, a loose congregation of individuals who find a sense of purpose in soldiering and battle. The society is an ancient endeavor, the practice destructive but strangely fulfilling, and the proximity to death somehow sharpens the impact of life for those who survive such encounters.

Soldiers are protective of those events. They should be: Combat is a highly personal occurrence. After the fact, they will argue over what transpired, how they reacted, what their companions did, and what the results were. They will affix blame willingly, and in some cases shield themselves from responsibility. These soldiers will, unfailingly, claim that what they saw and did could not be modified by other soldiers. Primarily, those who viewed the battles historically, and especially those soldiers who shared the event were unlikely to admit to misconceptions.

Frederick William Benteen was born to Theodore Charles and Caroline Benteen on August 24, 1834, in Petersburg, Virginia. Benteen's father was a secessionist. The younger man was not, instead the young graduate of the Petersburg Classical Institute decided to join the Union army and was named first lieutenant of the 1st Missouri Cavalry Regiment. The event might have foreshadowed Benteen's most famous association of captain, United States 7th Cavalry Regiment, and his troubled



**Frederick William
Benteen**

relationship with its lieutenant colonel. But first there was a war to be won. He served in the cavalry until being promoted to the rank of colonel and ordered to command the 138th Infantry Regiment, USCT. The photograph in the museum collection was probably taken during that period (July 1865 to January 1866), because Benteen is shown wearing a garrison cap affixed with a French horn, signifying infantry.

After the war, the army found itself awash in officers who jealously guarded their brevet ranking or the more coveted position in the Regular Army. Many volunteers fell away or were discharged returning home, while others were fortunate enough to find commands in a newly reorganized and much smaller army. In 1867, Captain (the brevet rank of colonel now nothing more than a courtesy of address) Benteen was assigned to the newly created 7th Cavalry Regiment.

Forever associated with Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer, the 7th was actually commanded by Colonel Andrew J. Smith followed by Samuel D. Sturgis, who found it more convenient to be detached from the regiment for more civilized locales. His son, Second Lieutenant James G. Sturgis, followed his father into the regiment.

Immediately after the Civil War came the reduction in force and reassignment of officers. Generals who led divisions and colonels who had commanded regiments soon found themselves reduced to regimental or company grade assignments. War, as practiced from 1861 to 1865, now became an immensely less glamorous exercise with fame as elusive as the Plains Indians they were ordered to subdue. Service in the West became, as Nancy Hendrickson described it, no more than “glittering misery.” The outposts were widely scattered over the vast landscape and the extremes of temperatures could be brutal. Soldiers were more likely to die of disease, alcoholism, or accidental death than be killed in battle. When not on campaign, troops often found themselves used as laborers, a considerable number, found solace in the bottle.

Then, there was the enemy.

Lakota, Cheyenne, and Comanche to be certain, but for Benteen the enemy was the arrogant George Armstrong Custer. They got off to a bad start on January 30, 1867, when the newly arrived Captain Benteen presented his respects to Lieutenant-Colonel Custer and his wife Libby. The cool, considerate captain with prematurely graying hair found the Boy General to be pompous and opinionated, and Benteen soon grew to distrust

him and the officers who became unofficial members of the Custer family. This disgust for the flamboyant Custer became pure hatred after an incident at the Battle of the Washita on November 27, 1868.

The attack against Cheyenne Chief Black Kettle's camp foreshadowed that of the Little Bighorn in a number of ways. Firstly, based on General Philip Sheridan's instructions, it was an attack designed to catch the Cheyenne and their allies unaware, striking the village before the warriors had a chance to shield the escape of the women and children. Secondly, the cavalry was divided into four wings, striking from several directions. Thirdly, it was an all-Custer show with Sheridan's most dynamic and trusted subordinate charged with the attack. The fourth similarity was that the camp was much larger than anticipated; the lodges of the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, Comanche, and Kiowa-Apache bands (along with a few Lakota) were scattered along a ten- to fifteen-mile stretch of the river.

There were major differences, of course, between the two events. A foot of snow blanketed the ground, and the temperature was near or below zero. A plus for the cavalry because it was most likely that the Cheyenne were safely in the comforts of their teepees early in the morning making Custer's approach largely unnoticed. Ironically, Black Kettle was one of the few Cheyenne chiefs who desired peace and had approached Colonel Edward C. Wynkoop and Colonel William B. Hazen about securing an agreement that would safe-guard his people. Circumstances combined to prevent Black Kettle from achieving his goal. The often contentious relationship between the army and Indian agents clouded cooperation between the two, and a separate band of Cheyenne traveled through Black Kettle's camp after a raid on white settlers. Their trail was discovered by army scouts, making it appear that Black Kettle was responsible for the attacks.

Benteen commanded H Company under Major Joel Elliott's battalion of G, H, and M Companies. Custer ordered Elliott to circle to the left and cut off any Cheyenne attempting to flee the attack. Two other battalions consisting of two companies each were to move to the right and strike from slightly different directions. Custer and the remaining companies, along with scouts, would drive into the village.

The attack took place at dawn catching the camp by surprise. Reports by Custer estimated that 103 warriors were killed, a number he later amended to 140 dead. Cheyenne estimates put the number at a tenth

of that, so the actual body count of warriors was probably between the two numbers. About fifty women and children were captured with no mention of the number of dead non-combatants killed in the assault. The number was probably significant. Benteen recalled exchanging fire with a boy of about fourteen who was trying to do his best to kill the captain. Benteen shot and killed the boy.

It was on the banks of the Washita River that the seed was planted that most certainly contributed to the later disaster on the Little Big Horn. Benteen's superior, Major Elliott, broke off from the main attack leading a force of nineteen soldiers, shouting "Here's for a brevet or a coffin!" to pursue a group of escaping Cheyenne. He did so without orders and in the melee, probably unnoticed.

When the soldiers regrouped after the fight, burdened by captives and a herd of over 800 captured ponies, Custer was told that Elliott was missing. Custer began to organize an attack on the other villages but decided against it. Why is still open to interpretation, either the other Native Americans had fled or the combined force was too big for the 7th to handle. He turned his command back to rendezvous with his supply train, effectively ending the battle, and the search for Major Joel Elliott and his men.

Benteen was furious; and the regiment, already divided between pro and anti-Custer factions, suffered for it. A deep dislike of Custer grew into a festering distrust that would undermine the command's effectiveness and contribute to the death of 265 soldiers.

The legends and myths that grew out of the Battle of the Little Big Horn on Sunday, June 25, 1876, compounded the story. There is no doubt that a variety of circumstances contributed to Custer's defeat. Major Marcus Reno's failed attack against the Lakota camp and his subsequent disorganized retreat to the heights overlooking the river denied Custer and his five companies of the support he needed. The size of the camp, the overwhelming number of Cheyenne and Lakota warriors facing him, the fact that they did not react as expected, fighting not to shield the fleeing woman and children but launching an attack of their own, contributed to Custer's defeat.

Then there is the famous message sent to Benteen, who with his three companies had been ordered to sweep left in hopes of cutting off the fleeing enemy. Trumpeter John Martin handed the order to Benteen,

who commanded a battalion of D, H, and K Companies. The order written hurriedly by First Lieutenant William W. Cooke read "Benteen. Come on. Big village. Be quick, Bring packs. P.S. Bring pacs."

Be quick.

Captain Frederick W. Benteen, Company H, commanding, Brevet Colonel, ordered his command to turn back. Linking up with Captain Thomas McDougal and B Company watering the supply train, Benteen advised them to follow him and rode off without waiting. Benteen and his men found the remnants of Reno's three companies besieged on a hilltop. The captain dismounted his men and joined Reno in his defense. Soon after, the supply train arrived and the siege continued.

There was gunfire to the north; officers and men on the hilltop heard the sound clearly enough. Some remembered hearing volley fire, a distress signal to some. What Benteen and Reno knew was their position was precarious and they had more than enough fight on their hands. They remained in place, except for Captain Thomas Weir's failed attempt to strike out for Custer's presumed position.

Would it have made a difference if Captain Benteen had raced to Custer's side? The men were tired, the horse's played out, and Reno was in need of support. Had Benteen supported Custer, would there have been the bodies of eight companies scattered over the hillside instead of five? And Reno's beleaguered force would have undoubtedly been overwhelmed.

After the incident on the Washita, Benteen wrote to a friend detailing what he saw as Custer's cowardly act, which led to Elliot's death. The friend published the letter in the *St. Louis Dispatch*. Custer was furious and knowing that the account had to have come from one of the regiment's officers called them together and angrily told them he would horsewhip the offender when he found out who had sent the letter.

There was nothing wrong with Benteen's courage. He had proved himself during the Civil War, and accounts by officers and men on that sun-parched hilltop remarked about his indifference to danger and coolness under fire.

Benteen, some reports said, with his hand on his pistol or holding the weapon in his hand, told Custer that he had sent the letter.

Custer deciding that discretion was the better part of valor, said "Mr. Benteen, I will see you later."

No, he would not.