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Custer's Last Fight

Editor the Star:

The Star and Citizen quoted verbatim from Stanley Vestal's article in American Heritage (The man who killed Custer).

The man who led the 7th Cavalry to disaster on the Little Big Horn was a man with whom history must perforce deal harshly. For military offenses, Custer had been court-martialed by General Sherman and given a punitive sentence; he had been placed under temporary arrest by Major General Hancock; he had recently been publicly reprimanded by President Grant and removed from command at Fort Lincoln, to be superseded by General Terry; he had just disobeyed General Terry's orders which sent him out on reconnaissance only; he had precipitated the battle after dividing his small force before a superior enemy. These statements are of military record.

During 10 years of savage Indian warfare, Custer had become a widely acclaimed national hero for his unsurpassed personal courage and resourcefulness in battle. Yet we are asked to believe that this valorous fighter, facing death as he had faced it many times on the battlefield, stood idly with empty hands, with a loaded pistol in his holster, let White Bull approach him frontally, let him grab that pistol and shoot him with it. Preposterous! This is a complete reversal of a certainty. Under the alleged circumstances, what Custer would have done, either from conscious intent or automatic reaction, would have been to pump those two bullets into White Bull at point-blank range.

So far as the quoted excerpts are concerned, White Bull's unproved and unprovable claim will be accepted only by the uninformed and the credulous.

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FRIDAY, MARCH 15, 1957



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MEMBER AUDIT BUREAU OF CIRCULATION

PAGE TWELVE—SECTION B

SATURDAY, MARCH 30, 1957

This column is for the opinion of readers. Letters should be free of libelous matter, carry signature and address; be under 300 words.

Who Killed Custer?

Editor the Star:

I wish to add these comments on Stanley Vestal's discrepant article, "The Man Who Killed Custer." White Bull's bit of Sioux hyperbole that Custer "tried to bite my nose off" renders suspect his entire statement.

Remington's painting of Custer's Last Stand was based on the known fact that Custer's body was found in a small heap of bodies. So long as an officer or enlisted man remained alive, Custer would not be alone. White Bull claims he saw alone "a tall soldier with yellow hair" and that he charged and killed him. Here White Bull had to hedge. He could not claim to have scalped Custer because of a rumor that he alone had not been scalped. White Bull took evasive action by saying that "nobody scalped Long Hair because his hair was cut short." If through "the dust and smoke" White Bull could see Custer's yellow hair, then that hair was long enough to lift. It strains credulity to believe that any Sioux warrior on that day left unscalped an enemy he had killed in hand-to-hand fighting. Had he done so, he would have been tribally disgraced.

White Bull saw no mutilated bodies. General Gibbon's force found 225 mutilated bodies.

From colonial times the men who command our armed forces in war have received from posterity the respect and honor due them. This is their American heritage. Gen. George A. Custer's claim to honor and respect rests chiefly on his valor and indomitable courage. He died fighting against odds of 10 to one. Who killed Custer is not important. But it is regrettably important that his heroic stature should now be diminished by an article of doubtful veracity in American Heritage Magazine.

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get the body entire article