

Massacre of Custer Retold as Indian Warrior Recalls Slaughter; Bloody Battle That Followed Described by 85-Year-Old Cavalryman

PINE RIDGE, S. D., Sept. 25—Eagle Bear, old Sioux Indian warrior who fought in the Custer massacre, extended his firm, wrinkled hand in friendly greeting as a woman Indian interpreter introduced him at his home on the Pine Ridge agency in South Dakota.

He was standing under a crudely built sun shelter in front of his one-room log cabin where he lives with his brother, Fool's Crow. Eagle Bear's long, gray hair, parted in the middle, hung in two braids down his back. He wore an old pair of corduroy trousers, a faded blue shirt and shabby moccasins. A blue bandana handkerchief was tied around his neck.

A few hours earlier, 125 miles away, one of Custer's old cavalrymen, Sergt Charles Windolph, described the bloody battle with Eagle Bear and his people that immediately followed Custer's massacre. It was to Capt F. W. Benteen's troops, with whom Windolph was serving, that Custer sent his tragic plea for help shortly before his death. Windolph's detachment found the bodies of Custer's men. The old cavalryman criticized Custer and blamed the general's "pride and personal ambition" for the massacre.

"Eagle Bear, how did the battle with Custer begin?" the woman interpreter, Josephine, put the question to the Indian. The word "battle" was used judiciously because old-time Indian dislike the word "massacre" in describing Custer's defeat.

The Indian looked stolidly at the ground, then grunted a few words.

"He says the fight happened so long ago he must think awhile," Josephine said.

For several minutes the Indian reflected as his mind went back to that hot day on June 25, 1876, when he and several thousand other Sioux warriors slew Custer and his entire command at the historic battle on the Little Big Horn river in Montana. Custer, commanding 6000 men, had been sent by his commanding officer, Gen Terry, to investigate the report of a large Indian force in that vicinity.

Custer Untouched

Custer decided to surround the village and capture it. He split his force into three divisions under himself, Maj Reno and Capt Benteen. Deploying the other divisions to points several miles away, Custer moved toward the village. No white man ever saw Custer or any of his 212 men alive again. Their bodies were found a day after the battle, all of them horribly mutilated except Custer's. Out of respect for "Long Hair," as the Indians called Custer, his body went untouched.

"Custer was to blame for the battle," Eagle Bear said, speaking slowly. "Our people wanted peace. We did not want to fight the white men anymore. If Custer had not fired on us, we would not have killed him and his soldiers.

"Custer first shot and killed an Indian boy who was camped with his father a few miles below our village. The boy was helping his father skin a buffalo when the soldiers fired into their camp. The soldiers rode on but he father jumped on his horse and

hurried to tell us what had happened.

"None of the Indians expected a fight. The children were swimming in the river and playing on the bank. The women were cooking and packing their stores as we planned to break camp.

"Far in the distance we saw a thick cloud of smoke. There was great fear and excitement among my people when we knew the soldiers were coming. We were not prepared to fight and even when we saw the soldiers coming we did not make ready for battle."

Before Custer arrived, another band of soldiers attacked the lower end of the village about three miles from Eagle Bear's tepee, he said. It was Reno's troops. The Indians there quickly drove them to refuge in a fringe of timber, where the soldiers stayed until Benteen's men came several hours later.

"When Custer's men drew near our camp they fired at us," Eagle Bear continued. "Many of our warriors rode into a ravine where Custer could not see them but through which he would have to pass to reach our village.

"Custer's men kept coming. My father sent me running to find my mother and sister who were digging wild turnips near the river. He told me to see that they fled to safety. They had already gone when I got there so I hurried back. The fight with Custer was just starting.

"Killed All," Says Eagle Bear

"Our men, catching Custer by surprise, had driven him out of the ravine to the top of a small hill. I hurried to join the fighters. We couldn't ride in a circle around Custer's soldiers because they were on one edge of the hill. There were great numbers of us, some on horseback, others on foot. Back and forth in front of Custer we passed, firing all of the time. We were yelling and screaming. The soldiers were falling fast. Then we suddenly rode right into Custer's men and killed all who were still alive."

The massacre did not last longer than 15 minutes, Eagle Bear said.

"When the soldiers were dead, the young boys between 11 and 15 years old ran from one body to another, shooting arrows and firing rifles into them, scalping them and stripping their clothes. The boys were more cruel than the warriors.

"Only Custer's body went untouched. He was the chief and our people had great respect for the white man's chief."

Eagle Bear could not recall how many warriors were in the battle but he believed there were several thousand. Best accounts, based upon reports of Indians who fought in the massacre, estimate the number at between five and six thousand men, a much greater force than Custer thought was there. He was deceived by the fact that the village was built along a bend in the river which obscured the largest part of it.

"Would you like to be a warrior again, live in big camps with your people, fish and hunt?" It seemed a natural question to ask of the old Indian. Eagle Bear answered without hesitation.

"When I was young, I liked to

fight. But now I'm old and it doesn't interest me any more, I am contented to live quietly here with my horses."

The tragedy at Little Big Horn would never have occurred if Custer had not been a headstrong, ambitious officer who disregarded the orders of Gen Terry, according to Sergt Windolph.

The former cavalryman, 85, corpulent, bright-eyed, was sitting on the back porch of his home in Lead, S. D., where he lives quietly. Sergt Windolph was awarded the Congressional medal of honor for bravery in the battle of Little Big Horn. Just to prove he "isn't a fake," as he bluntly expressed it, he walked inside, leaning heavily on his cane, and

brought out the medal, his discharge papers that time has stained with yellow and a letter of recommendation from Capt Benteen.

"Sergt Charles Windolph has been a gallant soldier and has been faithful to me. I recommend him to anyone needing his services," Benteen's letter read. It was dated October 1, 1882.

Headstrong Custer

"One thousand dollars wouldn't buy that letter," Sergt Windolph declared proudly. Windolph holds Benteen in higher esteem than he does Custer.

"Custer was a proud, headstrong man who wanted to be promoted," Sergt Windolph said. "In his command were two brothers, Tom and

Boston, and three other relatives. Custer thought that if he could whip the Indians without help from the other troops he would make a bigger name for himself and assure him and his relatives promotions.

"When Gen Terry sent Custer and us soldiers after the Indians, he told Custer not to take the offensive against the Indians until June 27, when Terry would come in from the West to join us. Custer disregarded those instructions. Had he obeyed, the massacre would have been avoided.

"Custer sent Reno to attack the village first and said he would back him up. Well, Reno charged and was driven back, but Custer was nowhere around. He had gone to attack the village from another point."

Custer also disregarded the suggestion by Capt Benteen that the command of 600 men be held intact, and paid scant attention to the report of his Ree Indian scouts that the village had many more warriors than were apparent when the camp was discovered, Windolph said.

"I was standing near Capt Benteen when he and Custer held their final meeting," Windolph recalled.

"General, don't you think it better not to split up the command?" Capt Benteen said to Custer. "Why not hold all the men together?"

Scouts Ran Away

"Custer did not answer. He swung up on his horse and rode away. I never saw him alive again.

"The Indian scouts for Custer knew it was folly to attack the village. When they saw that Custer was moving into battle, they wheeled their horses around and ran away. That's why none of them were killed."

Capt Benteen's troops were several miles away when they received from one of Custer's officers this pleading message:—

"Benteen, come on. Big village. Be quick. Bring packs. P. S.: Bring packs."

At the time the message was dispatched, Custer evidently had learned that he was facing a much more formidable foe than he had expected. He knew he would need Benteen's force and the ammunition-loaded mules in Benteen's command.

"We hurried as fast as we could," Windolph said. "But it was impossible to cover ground rapidly with the packs. When we came up we were behind Reno, who had taken a defensive position on a hill. He was in great danger from warriors who had almost surrounded him and were firing into the ranks of the soldiers."

Military men have concluded that Custer probably had been annihilated by the time Benteen arrived.

"We joined Reno," Windolph continued. "All that day and night and the following day until late afternoon, the Indians kept up an almost constant fire at us. We dug trenches and held them at bay. On the second day we were without water. The wounded were suffering horribly and screaming deliriously for drink. Several soldiers had tried to sneak to the river for water but they were either killed or driven back by the enemy's fire.

Heroic Act by Windolph

"At last Capt Benteen called for

volunteers to crawl out in front of the lines to attract the Indians' fire so that others could reach the river in safety. Two of us volunteered. I was shot in the ribs but both of us managed to pull through. Other soldiers got water."

It was for this deed of gallantry that Windolph was awarded the Congressional medal.

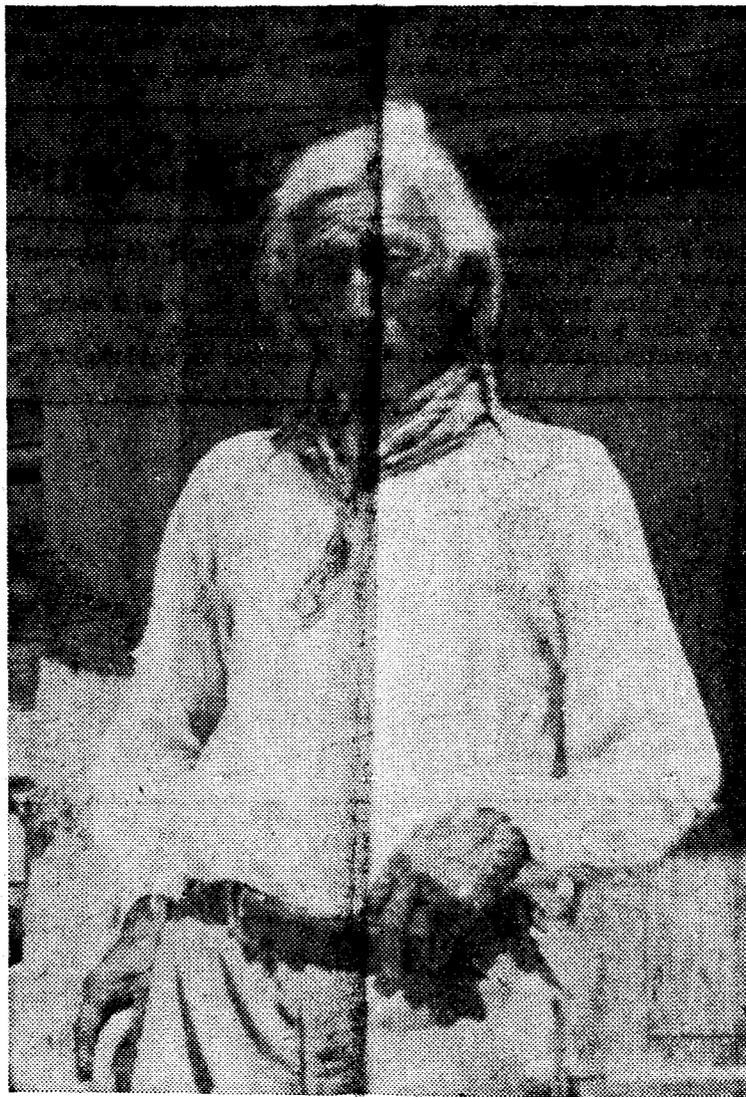
"About the middle of the afternoon of the second day, the Indians withdrew and disappeared," Windolph said. "We were in no condition to pursue them. Tired, hungry and thirsty, we wearily got ready to move on in the direction where we thought Custer would be. We had been fighting two days and a night and had been in the saddle 24 hours before the battle started. So many officers on our command had been killed that I rose from a corporal to a first sergeant on the battle field.

"We had moved only a short distance when we saw on a hilltop what looked like stones gleaming in the sun. Riding farther, we saw to our dismay that they were naked bodies. We knew then what had happened to Custer.

"The bodies were shamefully mutilated. The clothes had been stripped from the bodies and boots, guns, and everything else attractive or of value were missing. Indian arrows were sticking in some of the bodies almost as thick as porcupine quills. The men had been scalped."

The Indians at Little Big Horn were much better armed than the soldiers, Windolph said. For some time warriors had been buying the most modern repeating rifles on the market at trading posts. The soldiers were armed with old Civil war rifles. This was a contributing factor to the quick defeat of Custer, Windolph believes.

EAGLE BEAR OF THE SIOUX



Quiet life of contemplation is now preferred by Eagle Bear of Pine Ridge, S. D., who was among the Indians who massacred Custer's command to the last man.

This is exactly a historical account of the battle of Little Big Horn. I am glad to see it.