

Other facts that were in his favor were exaggerated. Still other individuals, who hated Custer, distorted truth and spread malicious rumors.

It was from the lips of Indians who fought on the other side, from aged warriors whom virtually none had interviewed for almost three-quarters of a century after the historic battle, that an unvarnished and unglamorized picture of what happened finally emerged. But the mold of history had been set and there were few who chose to question the legend of Custer's Last Stand.

George Armstrong Custer was, before Fortune turned her back on him beside the Greasy Grass, one of the luckiest soldiers who ever lived. He was a man of incredible energy. He was brave. Even those who hated his guts never denied that he had them. There is no room for disagreement on those three factors concerning Custer. But he gambled with his luck when it appeared that an opportunity was at hand for a spectacular military coup, to be led by him alone. He gambled and he--- along with 224 others---lost.

Custer's luck began early. After securing an appointment to the Military Academy, which none had thought that he could land, only luck allowed him to stagger through. His career as a cadet was marked by a record that was very likely the worst ever set by a man not actually thrown out of West Point. In a class of forty-three he stood forty-third. Under a system whereby one hundred demerits meant automatic expulsion, Custer several times ran his string to ninety-nine--the brink of disaster. He was saved each time by some spectacular accomplishment.

Typical of his career was that when his class graduated in 1861, and rode off to join their regiments in the battles of the Civil War that was just getting under way, Custer was detained under arrest for gross breach of discipline. But again he came out unscathed and went on to a spectacular war service which on his second day of active duty as a lieutenant, won him the personal commendation of General McClellan. His sensational exploits of daring, courage and skill on ensuing fields won him promotion to the rank of brigadier general when he had just turned twenty-three.

The end of the war brought a surge of relief to the whole nation. But to Custer it came as a stunning shock. Where could he go to find the fame and glory he had lived for and which wars so handily provide?

Although reduced in rank, as the once-huge army was dissolved, Custer badgered his old leaders, Sherman and Sheridan, to assign him to duty of the plains. At last his wish was granted and the second phase of his military life began.

In 1868, Custer again achieved notoriety through a well planned surprise attack at the Washita River on a large village of hostile Cheyennes under command of the infamous Chief Black Kettle. The camp was virtually wiped out. But by and large, the years after the incident on the Washita passed uneventfully for Custer. More and more frequently he took to wandering