

THE BLACK HILLS

By John F. Hall

One of the things that I enjoy about history is when I can write a story that links me to that history going back to June 25, 1876. For decades, Elizabeth Bacon has helped perpetuate a myth about her husband. She wanted the world to believe that he was a hero, a martyr and that he did all that he could to prevent his soldiers from being annihilated at



the Battle of the Little Bighorn. That battle was fought along the Little Bighorn River in the Crow Indian Reservation in the former southeastern Montana Territory. Under darken skies caused by gunfire, smoke and flying arrows, 210 men of the U.S. 7th Calvary, let by Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer, fought against 2,000 Lakota Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors.

It was the most ferocious battle of the Sioux Wars. Colonel George Custer and his men never stood a fighting chance. One fact from that battle is that Custer disobeyed a direct and lawful order. His insubordination caused his men to be slaughtered. One thing that I insisted on, during the nine years that I served as an Army Reserve Inspector General, is that all those that had first hand knowledge of the facts be interviewed. Custer's four Indian scouts knew the facts and he fired them one hour before the battle began.

History portrays Colonel Custer as being a brilliant military tactician, a distinguished officer and a gentleman. History plays down the fact that he was an Army deserter who abandoned his post to spend time with his wife. In his Court-Martial of 1867, he was found guilty on five charges and specifications. He was suspended from his rank and command for one year and had his pay forfeited for the same period.

So what else does history say about Colonel Custer? He was certified to teach grammar school in 1856. He taught at an elementary school in Cadiz, Ohio. In his four years at West Point he amassed a total of 726 demerits. It is one of the worst conduct records in the history of the Academy. The local minister remembered Custer as “the instigator of devilish plots both during the service and in Sunday school.” He graduated from the West Point Academy in 1861, dead last in his class. Had it not been for the Civil War, he would have been drummed out of the Army. He became a fearless fighter in many Civil War Battles. He had 11 horses shot out from under him. He had unusual luck. But that luck ran out on June 25, 1876, when he refused to obey the order from his superior officer, to wait for reinforcements. Custer received two bullet wounds, one to the head and one near his heart.

For many years, the Crow scouts that served with Colonel Custer, that he dismissed before the Battle of the Little Bighorn began, had their knowledge and observations of the leading up to the battle ignored. The Crow scouts' depiction of Custer as being vainglorious, headstrong, and reckless did not make it into the history books. The names of these scouts are: “White Man Runs Him, Curley, Hair Moccasin and Goes Ahead.”

These scouts advised Colonel Custer to wait for reinforcements. Custer refused to take their advice and prepared to attack.

The Crow scouts took off their military uniforms and put on their Crow war clothing. Custer asked them what they were doing? The scouts told him they wanted to die as warriors and not as soldiers. This angered Custer and he dismissed them as being cowards and sent them away about an hour before the battle. The Scouts' account was found in the personal papers of Edward S. Curtis. He photographed and interviewed three of Custer's Crow scouts.

In 1981, I was tasked to relieve the commander of the 614th Military Police Company, Kentucky Army National Guard in Murray, Kentucky. The commander, Captain Huffman, was denied tenure as a professor at Murray State University. I had been an officer for two years in the rank of First Lieutenant. I came in the unit as his executive officer. He wanted to arm the soldiers as they were requested to assist Murray State in traffic control at the Homecoming parade. I refused to comply because it was an unlawful order. The man was losing his mind. I assumed command in 1982. I was beginning to get burn out as I was working full time as a state Trooper and commanding a unit with 170 soldiers.

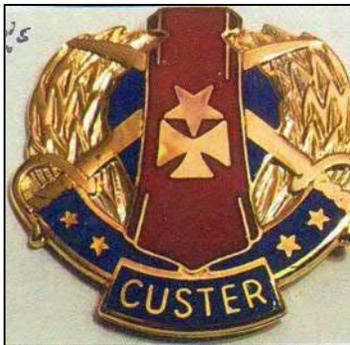
In 1983, my dad died unexpectedly. I had to travel to Florida to arrange a church service and to deal with estate matters. Burn out and grief made me want to resign my Direct Commission. I was advised by a good friend that if I quit, I would not be able to find another position. I was 38 and always believed that once you passed the age of 35, that you were not marketable. So I called Lindsey Freeman, a business man in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. He was also a full Colonel in the Army Reserve. I told him that my command time in the MP company was up and did he know of any available positions that I could apply for. He told me to call John Evans who lives in Lexington, Kentucky. This man was also the MP Team Leader in the 100th Division Maneuver Command (MTC) in Louisville, Kentucky. I called him and he asked me if I had command time. I told him that I had two years. He said the next drill at the MTC was in two weeks and I was to report for duty at that time. Lindsey Freeman retired from the Army Reserve as a Major General.

The MTC Military Police Team evaluates National Guard and Army Reserve Military Police units. In the late 1980s, the Kentucky Army National Guard held a training exercise in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Our MP Team loaded up our documents and military gear and boarded a flight from Louisville to Rapid City, South Dakota. After a five-hour or so flight, we landed and obtained rental cars and drove to the Camp Rapid National Guard Headquarters. We drove out to the Black Hills to begin our evaluation of the Military Police training. For me, it was like a homecoming. I had served as a National Guard officer in two Kentucky MP companies and as a staff officer in the 198th MP Battalion. I was now evaluating these units as an Army Reserve evaluator. Many of these were my former soldiers. They were happy to see me. One soldier came up to me and said, "Captain Hall, you were the best company commander that we ever had. And we

miss you.” I felt the same way about them. For two weeks I evaluated their training. The purpose of the training was to prepare them for deployment to Iraq.

Like Colonel Custer, I spent some time in the Black Hills. Once our evaluation mission was completed, we turned in our rental cars and boarded a flight back to Louisville. I was requested to become an Assistant Inspector General (IG) in the 100th Division Headquarters. The MTC was deactivated and the IG position was a three-year tour. They would give you a fourth year if you were good in that position. So I went to IG School and became an IG in 1993. Due to The IG leaving the position and his replacement having to medically board out of the service, I served six years as an IG in the 100th Division. In 1998, I turned 53 and was informed that I had to retire. As my retirement orders were being drafted, Congress changed the regulation and allowed Field Grade officers to remain in the service until they turned 60.

I served another year as a Project Officer and was told to find another assignment. The 85th Division had an opening for a assistant S2/S3 staff officer in Indianapolis, Ohio. I applied and was accepted, but the position would go away in a year. The Headquarters of the 85th Division is in Arlington Heights, north of Chicago. They had a 106 case backlog and only one person in their IG section. I wasn't sure if I would even be allowed to serve another tour as an IG. I went ahead and applied for the position. They wanted an officer that could hit the road running and clean up that mess. I was hired and I was able to hire an Active Duty Army Major and two Army Reserve Captains. The incoming Division Commander was strange, but he appreciated me and what I was able to accomplish.



From 2000 to 2003, I was The Inspector General (IG) of the 85th Division. I became a part of that Division's history. The nickname for the 85th Division is the “Custer Division.” Its unit crest contains the name Custer. The two stars on the crest are for Custer's rank during the Civil War. The Division's shoulder patch is round with two letters: “CD,” for Custer Division. I was a Lieutenant Colonel, the same rank as Custer when he was killed.



(Pictured: Front R: Lieutenant Colonel John F. Hall 85th Div IG. Top R: Captain Meeks Assistant IG).

In 2015, John Holland wrote about the five mistakes that Custer made at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. “First, Custer refused to listen to others, figuring his judgment was superior. He was ordered to hold off any attack until Brigadier General Alfred Terry arrived with reinforcements. He also ignored warnings from his Indian

scouts. Second, Custer was arrogant. He was guilty of over confidence in his own talents. His soldiers were mainly armed with single-shot rifles. The Indians had a number of repeating rifles and superior forces. Third, Custer was not entirely focused on the job at hand. He was not focused on fighting and defeating the Indians. His misguided concern was to trap them and not let them escape. That's why he split his forces into three parts and diluted his overall strength. Four, Custer was out managed. Sitting Bull lured him into a fight on his timetable. Crazy Horse executed the battle plan perfectly. Fifth, Custer had terrible bad luck (that day). He had the terrible misfortune of deciding to fight What is considered to be the largest force of Indian warriors ever assembled in North America, and he did it with an undersized and outgunned cavalry unit that he split in three parts.” '

My fondest memories of being in the Black Hills was being with the soldiers from my former Military Police Company in Murray, Kentucky. In 1983, my unit had only 69 soldiers available for training. We were tasked a mission against 8,000 Soldiers and Airmen.

In 1983, my Military Police Company was tasked to play the role of the enemy against the entire Kentucky National Guard that consisted of 8,000 Soldiers and Airmen. The training would be held on Camp Shelby, Mississippi. For the mission, I was given four M-60 tanks and their crews. I was a First Lieutenant under the supervision of a Colonel. Other than a pre-combat check of my force, the Colonel spent most of the exercise in his air conditioned office. He knew how the training scenario was supposed to end, but he never briefed me. He let me run the aggressor force, thinking that I was a dumb lieutenant. I had trained my soldiers to operate with their M-60 machine guns mounted on quarter tons (Jeeps), as four-man combat teams. I trained them to get away from the jeeps, with the machine guns, in four seconds upon contact with the enemy.

I felt that the M-60 tanks were nothing but a burden because their tracks would give away our positions in the soft Mississippi sandy roads. I instructed them to operate on their own. Before the training exercise began, I called all the soldiers together to pray. I asked for Christ's blessing to keep everyone safe. I remember part of the words in Romans, Chapter 8, Verse 31, “...If God is for us, who can be against us?”

I knew that the Air Guard would be using their helicopters to try to locate us. So I had my soldiers go to the one place they would not be looking for us. I had my soldiers camouflage their jeeps in the woods by the airfield. We moved my night and stayed hidden in the day light. The Army Reserve MTC was evaluating the training exercise and they attached SSG Al Fugate to my force. He was dressed like a Russian soldier and he became a very valuable member of my force. You could say that he was like one of the Indian scouts assigned to Colonel Custer. He knew Russian tactics. One day, during the early hours of the morning, my soldiers spotted a Brigade Headquarters that was not properly guarded. I was standing on the road with SGT Fugate when an Army Reserve Umpire pulled up in a jeep with a Two-Star General from Texas. The General was there to observe the training exercise. He asked me what I planned to do. I turned to SGT Fugate and asked what the Russians would do. He said, “They would attack Sir!” The General asked me what I planned to do? I told my soldiers to capture the headquarters.

The exercise was suppose to end with my force being captured. But no one told me that. We were surrounded and about to be captured. I turned to SGT Fugate and asked him what the Russians would do in this situation. He said, "Sir, they would fire a small tactical nuclear artillery shell to wipe out that surrounding force." I jokingly asked if he had a simulator in his bag of tricks. He said, "Yes Sir! I have one" I told SGT Fugate to set it off. I told him to follow me to the top of the hill. I called out, "Who is the commanding officer in charge of this unit?" A lieutenant came forward. I then put on an act that would have made even William Shakespeare proud. I said that I was sick and tired of soldiers not knowing how to do their jobs. Your men just received a tactical nuclear shell and you are standing on contaminated ground. Did you make an NBC report? Go tell your superiors! I then walked away yelling at SG Fugate. It worked. They pulled back. They thought I was some crazy Colonel. I was just crazy as a fox. And I save my soldiers from being captured.

John F. Hall

*Read other stories by John F. Hall and others at:

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1st Lieutenant John F. Hall holding a prayer service in Camp Shelby, Mississippi.