**Grim Facts Of Custer's Last Stand Revelations From The Remains Of Battle**

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Human bones, bits of leather, shreds of uniforms and spent gun cartridges by the thousands.

These were the clues of a mystery dating back 110 years ago this week, to a grassy Montana hillside where more than 200 sweaty and dust-covered troopers under Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer were wiped out - to a man - by about 4,000 Indians.

It was Custer's last stand, a bloody battle that has created endless controversy over the generations and baffled and fascinated historians and history buffs alike.

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What happened that warm Sunday afternoon on June 25, 1876? What was Custer's strategy? And what did the army find on that gently sloping hillside in the battle's grim aftermath?

Now, those questions are being answered scientifically, for the first time, after recent extensive archaeological excavations that uncovered 4,000 battle- related artifacts, including the skeletal remains of more than 30 troopers of the U.S. Seventh Cavalry.

From such remains and their location on the battlefield, archaeologists and forensic experts are giving historians a clearer understanding of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, according to Douglas D. Scott, an archaeologist for the National Park Service who helped direct the research.

The findings, expected to be published this fall, reveal that:

\* The Seventh Cavalry was not only vastly outnumbered - it was heavily outgunned by Indians who were far better armed than previously believed. The warriors had at least 350 firearms and probably many more, including 100 repeating Winchester rifles that could fire 16 times without reloading. Custer's troopers carried single-shot carbines that required reloading after each shot.

\* Custer's soldiers were far from the spit-and-polish troopers portrayed in Hollywood films. They were an unkempt-looking bunch, wearing a wide array of clothing that was clearly not Army issue. Some of them were underage for military service, and some rode into battle with physical ailments that hampered their fighting ability.

\* Custer used standard cavalry tactics during his last fight, deploying his troopers in a general V-shaped pattern, but the strategy was ineffective against the overwhelming force of thousands of Indians who took cover in the high grass around the soldiers and cut them down in a hail of gunfire.

\* The historical accounts of Indians mutilating the bodies of some troopers are true. And archaeologists now have physical evidence showing that the victors slashed or cut off legs and arms and decapitated the bodies of some of Custer's men.

The human remains of about 36 of Custer's troopers, including a skull and hundreds of bones, will be placed in three small flag-draped plastic containers on Wednesday and reburied in a neat, tree-shaded cemetery near ''Last Stand Hill," where the troopers spent their last desperate hour.

It was all over quickly. "An Indian who was in the fighting was quoted as saying after it was over, 'The battle took as long as it takes a man to eat his dinner,' " said Jim Court, superintendent of the Custer Battlefield National Monument. "We estimate that most or all of the men were knocked down within a half-hour to an hour after the battle started. It didn't take long."

Portions of skeletons from at least 33 men were found during archaeological digs in 1984 and 1985, the first of their kind at the battlefield. The excavations followed a flash fire in August 1983 that cleared away a dense growth of 2-foot-tall prairie grass.

"It is like processing a crime scene," said Scott, 38, who helped prepare the report on the battlefield dig. "You talk to the victims and suspects and get one side of the story, and then you get forensics people to get the physical evidence. Human behavior, no matter how frantic, is patterned.

"We are now looking at a new set of data. This is the first time these techniques and analyses have been applied to the battlefield, and we have come up with archaeological detail that has fleshed out historical detail."

The new information provides a view of the Seventh Cavalry far different

from the one presented in the old Errol Flynn movie, They Died With Their Boots On, which showed soldiers - sabers drawn - riding off to glorious defeat to the tune of "Garry Owen," an Irish quick-step that was the Seventh's marching song.

In reality, Custer's men were not very dashing. In fact, they were not much to look at just before the fight, based on a study of the bits and pieces of clothing left behind at the battlefield. Scott said the scruffy troopers wore pants, blouses, boots, buttons and other articles of clothing that were not part of regulation Army uniforms.

And historians have known for some time that the men did not take swords - or musicians - along to the battle.

Scott said a bone analysis, not yet completed, should shed light on the soldiers' nutrition. Records indicate that the daily rations of hardtack, bacon and beans did not provide enough calories to sustain men for the hard life in the field, said Scott.

"We found ration containers at the battlefield. We believe the soldiers may have supplemented their rations with meats, and the new study should give us information on that."

Whatever the cavalrymen's physical condition, their fair-haired and buckskin-clad commander, George Armstrong Custer, then 36 years old, had full confidence in their courage as he led them in advance of a column of slower- moving infantry under General Alfred H. Terry.

Terry had ordered Custer to time his march so that both commands would reach the Valley of the Little Bighorn River on or about June 26, and he had given Custer discretion to act once he got there, Scott said.

Always ready for the fight, Custer moved quickly toward the suspected Indian encampment on June 25 before the infantry arrived and prepared to attack, unaware that up to 15,000 Indians, including 3,000 to 5,000 Cheyenne, Sioux and Arapaho warriors, awaited.

Making matters worse, Custer divided the Seventh into three separate commands. One under Maj. Marcus A. Reno rode toward the south end of the village and was repelled while Custer's force attempted to strike from the north and was wiped out about 4 p.m. in a bloody battle that lasted about 90 minutes. The other command under Capt. Frederick W. Benteen brought up the rear and later joined Reno, who held out until the infantry column arrived.

"I think (Custer) might have been a bit of a Hollywood-type figure," said Scott. "He had his strengths and weaknesses. I could never answer whether he was extremely brave. The archaeological data allow us to reconstruct the results of his decision. We can see the physical evidence."

Scott said the location of the bones and the distinctive spent shells of the soldiers gave researchers the exact location of Custer's V-shaped line of defense, with skirmish lines extending from a command center at the apex.

More than 200 white marble markers were placed on the battlefield in 1891 to show where the men fell. (The soldiers' remains were reburied at a mass grave at the site.) The new archaeological data, however, show that the location of many markers is inaccurate.

"We know where each side was fighting," said Scott. "The soldiers were carrying .45-caliber Springfield carbines and .45-caliber Colt revolvers. They could have sustained themselves if it had not been for the superior firepower and number of Indians."

Scott said the spent shells of the Indians, based on ballistics studies, show that they were armed with 25 different kinds of weapons, including three types of Winchester rifles, four types of Sharps carbines and various muzzle- loading weapons. Other warriors were armed with tomahawks, lances, spears, knives, and bows and arrows.

"We were able to assess the number of firearms within a degree of error," Scott said. "In all probability the Indians had a minimum of over 350 firearms, of which approximately 100 were repeating firearms.

"I was personally surprised at the variety and quantity of firearms. If you took just (the 100 repeating Winchesters), each holding 16 (cartridges), that means 1,600 rounds of ammunition could be fired without reloading. That's eight bullets for every man.

"That's a lot of firepower and a lot of lead flying. There could have been a good deal more. We are still working on firearms identification."

Based on the location of the spent shells, Scott said archaeologists identified six positions where the Indians took cover in the high grass and rolling ground to pick off Custer's men.

"The popular conception is that of a group of Indians on horseback shooting arrows as they swirled around a small knot of soldiers," he said. ''Historians have known that was not true from Indian participants who spoke of their part in the battle. Now, we know where some of the Indians were during the battle.

"I would assume they fired at the soldiers until they were thinned out and then attacked to finish them off."

After the battle, the Army found about half to two-thirds of the soldiers mutilated or scalped by the triumphant Indians and dozens of dead horses on the hillside, according to a military board of inquiry after the battle. And archaeologists now have physical proof in support of that record.

"We did find a fair amount of evidence of mutilation," Scott said. "We found that there had been cases where legs and arms were slashed. In a couple of other cases, there was evidence of dismemberment of the legs. And in one case, there was decapitation. There was no question there was a good deal of mutilation.

"The mutilation for the Sioux and Cheyenne was a normal cultural expression when they vanquished a foe. It was vengeance, but more importantly they were marking that person when they went to the spirit world or happy hunting grounds.

"How you entered the spirit world, that's how you were destined to enjoy it. If your eyes were poked out, you could not see in the spirit world."

The news of Custer's annihilation was greeted with shock across the country. In Philadelphia, people gathering to celebrate the nation's Centennial mourned the loss of a great hero.

Among them was Buffalo Bill Cody, who closed his show at the city's Centennial exposition, telling his audience his services were immediately needed in the Indian wars. Cody journeyed to the West and became an Army scout.

The public's shock was followed by numerous questions that persist to this day. Scott said the recent study of the Little Bighorn artifacts "won't solve all the mystery surrounding the battle. I think it is enduring and will keep people occupied in debate for some time to come.

<http://articles.philly.com/1986-06-22/news/26043641_1_troopers-douglas-d-scott-human-bones>