

2300 words

Winning at the Washita:

Custer's Return to Glory

by Duane Schultz

*One year after his court martial, he became a national hero again.*

Custer watched the warriors gather a mile away from the village he had wiped out only hours before. There were not many at first, but there were soon a lot more, and they were heavily armed and wearing full Cheyenne battle dress.

He knew that only a few warriors had escaped from the village and that they could not possibly have taken so much with them. The Indians had to be from a village not far away that Custer did not know about.

It was noon, November 27, 1868, on the northern bank of the Washita River in Oklahoma Territory. As Custer watched the warriors gather, his men reported seeing thousands of tepees just over the ridge stretching for ten miles, and Custer later wrote that, "from being the surrounding party, as we had been in the morning, we now found ourselves surrounded." They were trapped.

If Custer had made a reconnaissance of the area before attacking, he would have seen that he was leading the 900 troopers of his beloved 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry dangerously close to as many as 6000 Indians.

But Custer had not looked before he attacked—that was not his way—any more than he had in most of the battles he fought during the Civil War. He had often led his troops forward without knowing how many of the enemy he faced or their exact dispositions. But once in battle,

Custer had proved himself to be a master at quick-thinking, save-the-day tactical maneuvers. As a result, he and his troopers won most of those fights, or at least escaped.

And so, because it had always worked before, he had not scouted the terrain before attacking that morning, and now it appeared that he was surrounded. A few hours earlier Custer had achieved what everyone, including the Cheyenne, thought was impossible. He had located and attacked an Indian camp in the middle of winter with the snow piled high on the plains.

It was the first battle he had fought against Indians, less than a year after his court-martial and suspension from active duty for being absent from his command without authority, for ordering deserters shot without a hearing, and for leaving behind the bodies of his dead soldiers. He had led his men on a forced march away from the Indians he had been ordered to chase down so he could spend a night with his beloved wife Libbie, whom he had not seen in six weeks.

But 11 months into his 1-year suspension, his friend Phil Sheridan, needed him to lead a campaign he was planning to rid the West of all Indians. As Sheridan put it, the only good Indians he ever saw were dead, which the press immediately transposed to "The only good Indian is a dead Indian."

Sheridan devised a bold plan to launch a punitive expedition in wintertime. He knew that snow and cold would keep the Indians in camp and that their ponies would be weak from the lack of prairie grass, and that they would not be expecting an attack. It was unorthodox and daring, and Sheridan believed there was only one man who could carry it out. On November 12, 1868, Custer led the 7th Cavalry, followed by 400 wagons and five infantry companies, to what was called Camp Supply in Kansas Territory where the men built a stockade.

"We are going into the heart of the Indian country," Custer wrote to Libbie, "where white troops have never been before. The Indians have grown up with the belief that soldiers cannot

and dare not follow them there.” He was out to prove them wrong—his first opportunity since the end of the Civil War three years earlier to recapture his former glory and again see his name in newspaper headlines.

During the war the press had dubbed him the “Boy General.” At 23, only two years out of West Point, where he had ranked last in his class—especially in cavalry tactics—Custer had become the army’s youngest general. Idolized by the public, Custer was a national celebrity, a handsome and flamboyant figure famed for his sweeping cavalry charges.

Custer thrived on the adulation and acclaim. “In years long numbered with the past,” he wrote, “when I was merging upon manhood, my every thought was ambitious, not to be wealthy, not to be learned, but to be great.” And so he was.

Custer loved making war. “I must say,” he wrote to a friend, “that I shall regret to see the war end. I would be willing, yes, glad, to see a battle every day during my life.” But when the Civil War ended in 1865, Custer had no more battles to fight, no more glory to win. The public soon forgot him. His wife wrote that after the surrender at Appomattox, Custer appeared haggard and exhausted, as if he had lost all energy and zest for life.

General Sheridan arrived at Camp Supply on November 21st with orders for Custer to locate the camps of hostile Indians, kill all the warriors, destroy the tribes’ possessions, and take the women and children prisoner.

At 6 o’clock the next morning, despite a foot of fresh snow on the ground and more falling, Custer ordered the band to strike up “The Girl I Left behind Me,” as he led the 7th Cavalry out of camp. Sergeant John Ryan of M Troop wrote: “We had the capes of our overcoats drawn up tightly around our heads, and while marching in fours we could hardly see the next set ahead of us because the blinding snow was so bad we had to turn our faces from it.”

The snow and fierce, biting winds continued for three days. Men and horses struggled with every step, nearing the point of exhaustion. Finally, at midnight on November 26, Custer's Osage Indian scouts spotted a single village up ahead on the banks of the Washita River. Custer halted the troops and ordered them to prepare to attack at dawn.

One of his officers said, "General, suppose we find more Indians there than we can handle?" "Hah," Custer replied. "There are not Indians enough in all the country to whip the Seventh Cavalry."

The troopers endured the freezing night with no fires for warmth or to boil water for coffee, spending the long hours sitting like statues in their saddles. At first light, Custer silently led his men forward. He was about to signal the band to play their battle song, "Garry Owen," when a gunshot sounded from the Indian camp.

The chief of the Cheyenne, Black Kettle, had sensed their presence and fired his rifle in the air as a warning to his people. Custer waved to the band leader. The musicians raised their instruments and tried to play, but only a few muted, off-key bleats emerged. The extreme cold had clogged their horns.

But the troopers heard the sounds and charged the Indian camp, shooting down the villagers, including Black Kettle, as they tried to flee. Custer rode ahead of his troops next to young Captain Louis Hamilton, grandson of Alexander Hamilton. Almost immediately, Hamilton was shot off his horse and killed. A moment later a warrior leaped in front of Custer's horse and raised his rifle. Custer yanked the reins, brought his horse to a stop, and shot the man in the head. Another Indian ran toward them. Custer dug in his spurs and rode the second man down.

Major Joel Elliott led 19 men across the Washita River away from the village, shouting to a friend, "Here goes for a brevet or a coffin"—a ride to glory or to death. Elliott's outfit was

quickly surrounded and massacred, their bodies mutilated. It would be the greatest loss of the day for the cavalry.

Indian women and children ran screaming from their shelters but no direction was safe. Two dozen of them plunged into the icy river, only a few made it to the other side. The situation turned worse for the Cheyenne when Custer's Osage Indian scouts arrived. The Osage were out for revenge against their lifelong enemies. They scalped both the living and dead, severing arms, legs, and breasts, and further mutilating the remains.

Ben Clark, Custer's lead white scout, stopped some soldiers from shooting into a group of fleeing women and children. Clark let them escape and then rode up to Custer to ask if all the women and children should be killed. Custer ordered him to stop the troops and the Osage scouts from harming anymore and take them captive instead. Custer had no intention of letting his glorious victory be tainted by tales of brutal, senseless killing.

The battle was over by 10 o'clock, but within a few hours, as more Cheyenne warriors massed around the camp, he had reason to worry that his success might turn into a humiliating rout at best, or a last stand to the death at worst. His men were low on ammunition and the supply wagons were several miles away, guarded by only two dozen men. If the supplies were captured, Custer's outfit would run out of bullets by nightfall and be completely at the mercy of the Indians.

Also, the troopers had stashed their overcoats and haversacks nearby before going into battle. The men assigned to guard them had fled when Indians attacked, leaving the soldiers with no warm clothing or food beyond what they carried in their pockets. Fortunately, the ammunition and supply wagons cut their way through the ring of warriors surrounding Custer, moving so fast that the tar-soaked wheels caught fire, but not a man or wagon was lost.

Custer's position was now more secure but his mission was not yet finished. Sheridan's orders had been to totally destroy the Indian encampment. The tepees were torched and everything of value, the tribe's entire wealth, was tossed into the flames. There would be nothing left of the stores the tribe needed to survive the winter; food, clothing, weapons, tobacco, saddles, bridles and reins all destroyed. Custer reported to Sheridan: "We have cleaned Black Kettle and his band out so thoroughly that they can neither fight, dress, sleep, eat or ride without sponging upon their friends." He was not exaggerating. The sight of the fires infuriated the warriors. They charged the soldiers, probing for weak spots in the line, but each time they were driven back.

Custer then had to decide the fate of the 875 horses and mules his men had captured. He could not take them along—they would slow down the march—nor could he leave them behind. Horses were valuable for the Indians. Without them, they could not hunt or make war. There was only one solution: The soldiers would have to kill them. A few of the better mounts were selected by the scouts and officers for their personal use, and the women prisoners were told to choose rides for when they left the camp.

Soldiers corralled the horses and began the grisly task of slitting throats. The animals went berserk, kicking and bucking frantically so the men could not get near them. The men then started shooting into the herd, and the animals ran until they dropped bleeding in the snow.

A young Cheyenne girl, Moving Behind, hid among the tall grasses and witnessed the massacre. "The wounded ponies passed near our hiding place, and would moan loudly, just like human beings." A woman prisoner recalled how "The snow on the whole bend of the river was made red with blood." It took an hour and a half to kill them all.

Custer now had to get to get his men out of the trap in which they found themselves. He decided to try to fool the Indians into thinking that the 7th Cavalry was preparing to attack the

other Indian villages. He hoped that this would draw the warriors back to their own camps to defend them. If his plan worked, then Custer would turn the regiment around during the night, and race back toward Camp Supply.

If it did not work, and the Indians attacked while they were strung out in a long column, they could all be lost. It was a bold and daring gamble, but Custer later wrote that he “had recourse to that maxim in war which teaches a commander to do that which his enemy neither expects nor desires him to do.”

The plan worked. At dusk, while there was still enough light for the Indians to see them, the troopers noisily formed a column with 53 women and children prisoners in the center. The band struck up the rousing Civil War tune, “Ain’t I Glad to Get Out of the Wilderness.” As the cavalry headed southward, the Indian warriors raced ahead of them to defend their villages, leaving only a few behind to shadow the troops.

After dark the column reversed course, and four days later reached Camp Supply safe and sound without losing another man. Custer had won his victory at the Washita, and with it came a return to the glory he had known during the Civil War. He was hailed as the greatest Indian fighter of all time, and proudly saw his name again in banner headlines.

His luck had held again and he had no reason not to believe that it always would. And so he saw no reason to change his tactics and conduct a reconnaissance eight years later before launching an attack at the Little Bighorn. He was certain that nothing could happen to the 7th Cavalry while he was leading it.

#### **About the author:**

Duane Schultz has written numerous articles and books on military history, including *Custer: Lessons in Leadership (Great Generals Series)* (2010) NY: Palgrave Macmillan, and *Coming through Fire: George Armstrong Custer and Black Kettle* (2012) Yardley, PA: Westholme. For more information see [www.duaneschultz.com](http://www.duaneschultz.com).

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