

# **The Fool on the Hill**

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[Note: Perry Baker died on April 14, 2006, prior to the publication of this article.]

As this is the premier publication for Little Bighorn battle buffs, I am appropriately awed and even a little amazed that I have been invited to discuss one of the many intriguing mysteries that transpired in this battle fought over two days, 130 years ago. I am humbled all the more so when I realize that what I am about to do is simply pose a question for you to ponder as you read and study and debate the battle on your own. In all fairness, I should let you in on a little secret: I do not have any new facts or findings to regale you with. In fact, there is little available research or reference to back up my central question. It is just a personal observation about a question that probably does not have an answer. In fact, I am pretty sure that if I had not had our editor paged by the front desk for a non-existent phone call, this article would not be here. But I did, and she fell for it, and this got printed while she was otherwise busy. Don't tell her.

My trip to the Little Bighorn had started off quite well, I thought. I had left my home in Phoenix about a week ago, telling my wife I was going to take out the trash, but that I would be right back to continue going over cruise ship itineraries with her. Who in their right mind would trade such promised pleasures for the chance to sit on a hot, dusty hill in Montana and scan the horizon for the ghosts of warriors long dead?

For anyone who has ever watched an old war movie, particularly those exciting, inspirational and patriotic films that Hollywood turned out by the dozens in the 1940's, we are all familiar with the cautionary tale of the Coward. It seemed like every movie has someone who was so frightened at the thought of facing the enemy that he quivers and cowers and cries and brings shame and, most often, death upon himself. On those occasions that his simpering behavior does not result in a fast, craven death, he may find it possible to redeem himself through some form of heroic deed before he meets his end, but in most cases, you just know that this guy is not coming home.

For those of us who as adolescents were enthralled by Errol Flynn as Custer, seen in grainy black and white on some tiny, often round TV screen, we were treated to the grand story of the character portrayed by Arthur Kennedy, who not only embodied the most vile of villains, but aptly served as the film's simpering coward, someone we would have all loved to punch in the face or better yet, picked up and placed on a skirmish line on Last Stand Hill. I for one, cheered when Flynn's Custer did just that. And being somewhere around the age of 10 or 11 when I first saw this film, I never seemed to care much that he showed some nascent presence of backbone in the final thirty seconds of his screen life. He was a coward and deserved his fate.

We are all quite aware that in real life a battlefield coward was probably not the most popular of bunkies. Down through the history of the United States Army such a person could, indeed, face an ignoble death in the form of withering enemy fire or, in some eras, summary execution without due process. George Armstrong Custer himself was said to have executed deserters during his service after the Civil War, and without much regard for the niceties of Constitutional rights that we insist upon today. Although he did receive a severe reprimand for doing so, I expect that this was of little comfort to those who had been shot.

During the Civil War, deserters, and by inference, cowards, could routinely expect severe punishment if they were apprehended. While a summary battlefield execution was not officially condoned by the Army, firing squads, hangings or lesser sentences were administered in very public settings, serving as a warning to all that such behavior was not looked upon favorably by those who command. By the time that World War II was actually being fought, it appears that either the movie cowards had indeed served their purpose or perhaps our fathers were just made of sterner stuff. There was only one case of an actual soldier being executed for desertion and cowardice, and before you start sending me nasty letters, I acknowledge the controversy surrounding that case continues to this day.

During the campaign of 1876, official Army policy frowned upon the idea of any officer simply up and shooting a trooper, no matter what the reason or rational may have been. While this may have been frustrating at times for many officers, I can certainly see where this enlightened policy would have made for a much better recruitment tool. Far better than, say, the admission one could be shot on sight for even the perception that one was thinking of taking a French Leave.

So, what does all of this have to do with the Battle of the Little Bighorn? Well, there I am, sitting in the sun on Reno Hill and staring at the locations of the rifle pits on the southern perimeter, imagining the noise and dust and smoke and general chaos that characterized that portion of the battle. I am trying to figure out if it is possible to identify the probable location of the unfortunate coward who refused to charge the warriors with Benteen. The poor, sobbing fool who seems to have expired under questionable circumstances while hiding in his hole. The ultimate coward from the ultimate battle. Quivering in his shallow hole, sobbing like a baby, he is instantly recognizable. He's the guy who shoots his own foot. The jellyfish who throws away his rifle and covers his head with his hands. The soldier who runs away screaming before the enemy charges. He's Arthur Kennedy in the flesh. He has no name. (Although there are tantalizing similarities in the descriptions of the death of private Golden that are left us by Lt. Edgerly. For the record, Golden is my pick.) For the most part, this coward was faceless and forgettable, and soon dead.

Dead. Shot through the head. A casualty of the second day of fighting on Reno Hill, around midmorning.

The story goes like this: Benteen becomes concerned that warriors are moving in too close on both the south and north sides of the defense perimeter. After some discussion with Reno, Benteen is either given the order to organize a foot charge or a couple of foot charges, or he takes the initiative to do so on his own. The first one being on the south end of the hill, the area covered by his own command. (It appears that Benteen may repeat this action on the northern perimeter a little later that day.)

As this first charge is being formed up, the hapless coward is informed that he will be a part of this action. He grovels and hides in his hole and begins to whimper and cry. Now, in almost all the accounts that mention this incident, there is not much more that is ever said about our Fool. The assumption is that he was indeed left behind and did not take part in the charge and amazingly, it seems as if those in command just let it drop. General Godfrey in his correspondence to Camp tells us straight up that the Fool remained in his hole during Benteen's successful charge. He also tells us that the man suffered a bullet through his head shortly after the chargers returned. Leaving us with an abrupt ending to the tale of the Fool, who had last been seen safely groveling in a hole that had shielded him well up to that point. Most accounts of the Fool end with such ambiguity that it is impossible to know what the authors really meant to tell us, if anything more at all. It is entirely possible that the Fool was killed by a well placed shot from a skillful warrior who had his range down pat. It is also possible that a trooper, or an officer-perhaps Godfrey himself-may have suffered an accidental discharge in the vicinity of the Fool's hole, abruptly ending his short and sad military career. The only three officers that I have seen mentioned in connection with the Fool's story are Benteen, Godfrey and Edgerly. I should say quite loudly here, no one is ever implicated in any wrong doing regarding the poor Fool. He just suffers a gunshot wound to his head and expires. And Lord knows, there were plenty of bullets in the air that day, and some may even have been smart enough to drill straight down into the head of a coward, hiding out in a hole in the ground, while his comrades were busy pushing warriors back to a safe distance, and suffering casualties while doing so. In any case, this short little anecdote is pretty much all there is to this tale: A coward who refuses to fight is soon found dead in the bottom of his hole.

My question is, of course, "Who killed the Fool?" Did he die from a well-placed Indian shot or was he killed by his own frustrated comrades? Could he have been executed for his shameful behavior by an officer, thereby serving as an example and warning to everyone else that failure to follow an order would not be tolerated, especially under the conditions that existed on Reno Hill? Could he have died by his own hand, so terrified of dying that only death could ease his fear?

As I sit here in the heat and the dust trying to figure out this smallest of LBH mysteries, it dawns on me that we know very little about the Benteen charge(s). It seems from what record there is that he first charged off to the southwest into the area of Water Carrier Ravine. But if so, how would Godfrey have known about our coward and his demise? Godfrey was defending the northern perimeter. With McDougal's B Company on one side and Weir's D Company on the other, a long way from Benteen and the southern perimeter. I begin to get a headache from the sun—and the strain of trying to keep the various troop movements straight. On the first day of the fight, French's M Company had been next to Godfrey. On the second day, French and McDougal switched places, with French joining Benteen in a combined force of M and H Company men making this charge. That could mean our Fool was actually a member of M Company and could have planted himself in a hole on the northwest perimeter, close to Godfrey's line on the first day. When M Company moved on the second day, he just stayed put. Of course, that leaves us wondering just how large a charge this was, but that is grist for another day in the sun. Today, realizing that I still need to come up with a good excuse to explain why it took a week to empty the kitchen trash, I throw in the towel and decide to do any further research over a hot pizza and a cold beverage, while practicing my own groveling for the trip home.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this tale, it covers an aspect of the battle that is one of those delicious mysteries that keep me coming back year after year and spending a little more than the entire annual budget of several European principalities on books that only whet my appetite for yet more knowledge about this one specific battle, on two days, 130 years ago. I did keep my promise to you: I really have no answers to my question. But I sure do have more questions, like what did Wooden Leg really see when he observed some soldiers shooting others on Last Stand Hill? Now, do you think my wife will be suspicious if I volunteer to take out the trash again, next June?