Glory Was Their Destiny; Rancor Was Their Legacy

THE JANUARY GALES WORKED their way down the length of Lake Michigan, whipping the sluggish waters into whitecaps that slammed into the city of Chicago on its southern shore. Driven by the biting winds, snow swirled in front of the gray and monolithic Palmer House Hotel in the heart of downtown at Monroe and State streets.[1]

The Palmer House aspired to the greatness offered by the best of European hospitality, with over-sized rooms and high-vaulted public spaces decorated in "the tortured grandeur of the Victorian Age." That ever-so-proper Englishman, Rudyard Kipling, once had the misfortune of testing the Palmer House's hospitality and came away appalled by the spectacle he had witnessed. "They told me to go to the Palmer House," he lamented:

> [It] is a gilded and mirrored rabbit-warren, and there I found a huge hall of tessellated marble, crammed with people talking about money and spitting about everywhere. Other barbarians charged in and out of this inferno with letters and telegrams in their hands, and yet others shouted at each other. A man who had drunk quite as much as was good for him told me that this was "the finest hotel in the finest city on God Almighty's earth."[2]

1 "Palmer House, Chicago," 1873, lithograph, American Oliograph Company, The Great Chicago Fire and the Web of Memory, www.greatchicagofire.org/queen-of-west-once- more/bricks-and-mortar.

2 John Upton Terrell and George Walton, *Faint the Trumpet Sounds*: *The Story of Major Marcus A. Reno* (New York, 1966), 234-235; Rudyard Kipling, "American Notes, Chapter Five: Chicago" (Boston, MA, 1899), 92.

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The Palmer House was the site of the much-awaited Reno Court of Inquiry of 1878, which delved into the aftermath of the battle of the Little Bighorn. *American Oliograph Company 1873*

Elizabeth Bacon Custer, bundled to the neck in furs to ward off the harsh chill, swept into the chaos like a shot of hot pepper sauce into a boiling gumbo. Now in her late thirties, she remained a striking woman, presenting a vivacious, articulate, and determined façade. It served to mask the deep sadness that would permeate the rest of her long life, for she would outlive her beloved husband by more than 50 years. As befitted her status as a grand dame, she was accompanied by her entourage and a stack of luggage that tested the bell staff to the utmost. Libbie, as she was known to all, settled into one of the Palmer House's palatial suites along with her aunt, Loraine Richmond; her close friend, cousin, and confidant, Rebecca Richmond; and her sister-in-law, Maggie Calhoun.[3]

3 Shirley A. Leckie, *Elizabeth Bacon Custer and the Making of a Myth* (Norman, OK, 1993), 199. Libbie never remarried. In her later years, she would write three highly acclaimed books about life on the frontier and the happy years she spent alongside her husband. In the process, she stole the hearts of the American reading public and shaped their perspective of the battle of the Little Bighorn. Despite her determination to secure his legacy in the pantheon of American heroes, Libbie's depiction of George Custer has been greatly tarnished over the years. None of

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This photo of Elizabeth Bacon Custer, taken in 1882, shows very little change in her appearance since the Reno Court of Inquiry in 1878. She would remain clothed in the black vestments of bereavement until her dying day. *Monroe County Library*

Despite the Palmer House's proximity to shopping, theaters, and the city's renowned restaurants, Libbie had more serious business on her mind. The United States Army, finally succumbing to a multitude of pressures, had officially ordered a board of inquiry into the events surrounding her husband's death and the crushing defeat of the 7th U.S. Cavalry Regiment at the battle of the Little Bighorn.

On June 25, 1876, Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer led his vaunted cavalry regiment on what many have condemned as an ill-advised and reckless attack on a village populated by the largest gathering of Northern Plains tribes ever witnessed on the North American continent. Thousands of Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors moved against Custer, cut him off, surrounded him, and in one dust-choked hour—an hour that must have seemed like an eternity to those encircled unfortunates—overran and slaughtered Custer and the five companies of troopers that accompanied him. Not a single man survived, and only one wounded horse was found wandering aimlessly over the bloody battlefield. The blaring headlines that appeared atop the July 6 issue of the *New York Times* stunned the entire nation: "Gen. Custer and Seventeen Commissioned Officers Butchered in a

her accomplishments, however, managed to ease her sense of loss. To her close friend, Marguerite Merington, she would write, "When I heard the news [of his death] I wanted to die." Unburdening herself further, she acknowledged that she "had to live—a hero's widow—to the end of my appointed time, worthily."

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Battle on the Little Horn . . . Three Hundred and Fifteen Men Killed and Thirty-one Wounded . . . The Battle-field Like a Slaughter Pen."[4]

Frederick Whittaker's *A Complete Life of General George A. Custer*, published in 1876 in a rush-to-print job, blasted Custer subordinates Major Marcus Reno and Capt. Frederick Benteen, whose detached companies had survived the battle. Whittaker accused Reno of cowardice and Benteen of deliberately sacrificing Custer's command. In May 1878, Whittaker wrote to his friend, W. W. Corlett, the delegate to the United States Congress from the Territory of Wyoming. "I desire to call to your attention . . . the necessity of ordering an official investigation into the conduct of the United States troops engaged in the battle of the Big Horn."[5]

In 1872, Whittaker had published a treatise on cavalry tactics based on his short-lived stint as a brevet captain in the 6th New York Volunteer Cavalry, grandiloquently entitled *Volunteer Cavalry: The Lessons of the Decade by a Volunteer Cavalryman*. An abridged version had appeared in the *Army and Navy Journal*. Regardless of its size, the mere fact of its publication established, at least in Whittaker's mind, his tactical bona fides.

Whittaker detailed his charges in a six-point letter to Corlett, and had it published to keep it from being swept into the dustbin of other legislative rubbish. He alleged that, "[o]wing to such cowardice, the orders of Lieut. Col. Custer, commanding officer, to said Reno, to execute a certain attack, were not made," and the result was fatal:

> . . . the failure of this movement, owing to his cowardice and disobedience, caused the defeat of the United States forces on the day in question; and that had Custer's orders been obeyed, the troops would probably have defeated the Indians.[6]

On November 25, 1878, the war department, responding to congressional pressure, issued the necessary orders to convene a board of inquiry, to be held at the Palmer House in January 1879. Whittaker wrote to Libbie in his bombastic style. "[The board of inquiry will] clear the General of the charge of rashness and leave him with his laurels unstained by the shadow of a slur. That is my object, and

4 "Massacre of Our Troops," *The New York Times*, July 6, 1876.

5 Terrell and Walton, *Faint the Trumpet Sounds*, 229.

6 Ibid., 230.

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will be accomplished in God's good time. I am glad, all things considered, that you knew nothing of all this till the papers informed you."[7]

The board of inquiry would be composed of three senior officers, with Col. John H. King of the 9th Infantry serving as its president. Two cavalry officers made up the rest of the board: Lt. Col. William B. Royall of the 3rd U.S. Cavalry Regiment, and Col. Wesley Merritt of the 5th U.S. Cavalry Regiment.[8]

After graduating from West Point in 1860, Merritt reported to the 2nd Dragoons—soon to be re-designated the 2nd U.S. Cavalry—in the Utah Territory. With the outbreak of the Civil War, the regiment traveled back east, where Merritt's meteoric rise through the ranks began.

Just days before the start of the battle of Gettysburg, Maj. Gen. Alfred Pleasonton promoted Merritt to brigadier general and gave him command of the Reserve Cavalry Brigade. Merritt's leadership and gallantry during the Overland campaign of 1864 so impressed Maj. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan that Sheridan named him head of the 1st Cavalry Division at the start of the Shenandoah Valley campaign later that year. When Sheridan set off down the valley in February 1865, he promoted Merritt to the command of the Cavalry Corps of the Army of the Shenandoah. Merritt was tireless in the pursuit of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia to Appomattox Court House in the early days of April 1865.

Merritt mustered out of the volunteers in February 1866 and reverted to his Regular rank of lieutenant colonel. While others jockeyed for the few officer positions available in the postwar army, Merritt inexplicably set off on a European excursion. When he returned, he took an assignment with the 9th U.S. Cavalry, a regiment composed of African American troopers that would become legendary as the "Buffalo Soldiers." Given the state of army politics at the time, this was not considered a plum assignment. Merritt stayed with the 9th Cavalry until 1876, when he took command of the 5th U.S. Cavalry.

A palpable tension existed between Merritt and Royall, dating back to their service together in the aftermath of the Custer disaster. Fifty-six days after his defeat by the Indians at the battle of Rosebud Creek, Maj. Gen. George Crook was ready to go back into the field in order to avenge Custer; the resulting actions became known as the Big Horn and Yellowstone campaign. The core of Crook's 2,000-man force consisted of Merritt's 5th Cavalry, ten companies strong, and the

7 Leckie, *Elizabeth Bacon Custer*, 221.

8 William A. Graham, *The Reno Court of Inquiry* (Harrisburg, PA, 1953), 3.

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entire 3rd Cavalry under Royall. Their task was to comb the Big Horn Mountains and the Yellowstone River for the elusive Sioux and their Cheyenne allies.

On August 4, 1876, Crook appointed Merritt as his chief of cavalry. The mounted columns were to move fast, and Crook ordered his men to get rid of all unnecessary equipment. Each trooper carried rations for four days, one overcoat, one blanket, and 100 rounds of carbine ammunition. All other supplies and accoutrements were carried by the mules of the pack train. Merritt's primary duty during the campaign was to conserve the command's horses and supervise the march discipline of the cavalry columns. He proved admirably suited for this task.

The columns moved out early on August 5, but the hot, dry weather turned nasty soon after their departure, with a cold rain slashing at the scantily equipped troopers. The men suffered horribly from the inclemency, and their fruitless pursuit of the enemy came to be known as the "Mud March." As a result, Crook earned the disgust of the veteran soldiers, officers and enlisted men alike.

During this campaign, Merritt quickly became disenchanted with Royall, blaming him for the slack camp discipline of the 3rd Cavalry. Merritt could be a bit of a martinet, and he believed in the strict enforcement of cavalry procedures. The notorious disciplinarian berated Royall, and a heated argument between the two men was easily overheard by the regiment's officers, who had gathered within earshot of the commanding officer's tent. Two and a half years later, the rancorous feelings between the two men still simmered as they gathered for the board of inquiry.

The "Reno Board of Inquiry," as it came to be known, convened on January 13, 1879. For the next 25 days, survivors of the 7th Cavalry squirmed in the witness chair and addressed, to the best of their recollection, the tumultuous events of that disastrous day. Like buzzards, the investigator and defense teams picked away at the desiccated shell of what had once been the proud "Garryowen Regiment." Elizabeth Custer heard every word. Day after day, she sat attentively in the audience, holding out for the vindication of her husband. In truth, however, she would settle for the condemnation of Reno and those officers of the 7th Cavalry she thought were complicit with him. In her naiveté, Libbie looked to Merritt, as a past comrade-in-arms, to lead that effort. She was to be sadly disappointed.

First Lieutenant Jesse M. Lee of the 9th Infantry was appointed as the court's recorder. Lee, serving for all intents and purposes as the prosecutor, was not an attorney by training, and he openly admitted that he did not aspire to a career in law. He was ill-equipped to handle the duties of the government's chief court official, especially given the fact that at Col. King's direction, the court would "expect to go

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over the whole ground. The recorder will proceed in his own way to prove whatever matters he chooses to allege against Major Reno."[9]

Reno was represented by 33-year-old Lyman D. Gilbert, Pennsylvania's assistant attorney general. With his reputation as a shrewd and competent lawyer already established in his home state, Gilbert sought a big case to catapult him into national notoriety. Seeing the Reno inquiry as that case, he offered to represent the beleaguered major for a nominal fee. His forceful and knowledgeable cross examinations of witnesses were fueled by his belief that he had an airtight case. Gilbert was so confident, in fact, that he cancelled his plans to call defense witnesses and simply put Reno on the stand to tell his side of the story. To that point, his defense had been very impressive.[10]

After summations by the opposing counsels, the members of the court retired to a private room to begin their deliberations. They emerged on February 1 and handed down their decision, which was a shocker. "The conduct of the officers throughout was excellent," read Lee in conclusion, "and while subordinates in some instances did more for the safety of the command by brilliant displays of courage than did Major Reno, there was nothing in his conduct which requires animadversion from this Court. It is the conclusion of this Court that no further proceedings are necessary in this case."[11]

Libbie was stunned. From her privileged seat, she must surely have been staring directly at the court and focused on Wesley Merritt. In all probability, her eyes reflected the betrayal she felt. Merritt, ever the professional soldier, would not have flinched under her withering gaze.

The members had deliberated over every aspect of the battle. Merritt stood completely behind the court's decision, but he must have been a little uncomfortable. Airing the fractious political relationships of his beloved United States Army to the public went very much against his grain. Merritt privately believed that the witnesses had not told the entire truth, and he felt the court had not been harsh enough when it had "damned Reno with praise."[12]

Whittaker, who had stormed out of the proceedings, launched a strident attack on the court's decision in the *New York Sun*, calling it a "Mockery of Justice," and "a

9 Terrell, *Faint the Trumpet Sounds*, 235.

10 Ibid., 235-236.

11 Don E. Alberts, *General Wesley Merritt: From Brandy Station to Manila* (Columbus, OH, 2001), 268; Leckie, *Elizabeth Bacon Custer*, 223.

12 Alberts, *General Wesley Merritt*, 269.

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complete and scientific whitewash." He charged that Reno had "sneer[ed] at Custer for his Civil War record, an appeal to the old rivalry between Custer and Merritt, now one of the court." Mincing no words, Whittaker placed the blame squarely on Merritt's shoulders. He accused Merritt of closeting himself privately with Lieutenant Lee, and in the space of a few hours, doing "most of the work of the decision, the Recorder having no voice save to present the case on trial." Whittaker claimed that Maj. Gen. Sheridan, the commander of the military district, had tried to influence the testimony of several witnesses in Reno's favor by supplying them with "ladies of pleasure."[13]

By the time the members of the court filed out of the hushed assemblage, Libbie Custer realized that there was a strong foundation to the rumors she had heard about tension between her husband and Wesley Merritt; there should be no doubt that as she departed the mahogany-paneled meeting room, she had become Merritt's enemy. When defending her husband's reputation, Libbie was an implacable foe, as Merritt would soon learn. They were to clash openly—bitterly—in the near future. The basis of their confrontation could be traced to the events surrounding the placement of a statue of General Custer at the United States Military Academy.

Not long after the Reno inquiry, Libbie learned that a committee had been formed for the purpose of erecting a monument to her husband at West Point. Despite renewed interest due to the national coverage of Custer's interment at the Academy, the committee had only managed to raise just under $10,000, making an equestrian statue out of the question. The relatively low commission only drew two artists' designs, of which the one by J. Wilson McDonald was chosen. Libbie made her objections known at once; she did not think much of McDonald's reputation as a "self-taught sculptor." Bluntly, she asked the committee how the artist and design had been chosen, and implicit in her letter was the question of why she had not been consulted at the outset of the project. She was astounded to learn that the work had progressed to the point where McDonald had already drawn the first part of his commission.[14]

In early August 1879, Libbie was informed that the statue had been unveiled in a private ceremony and had been "much admired by all who had seen it." Brusquely she was told that the "statue is completed, the stone for the pedestal on the ground, and everything in readiness to place" it. The matter of a monument to George

13 Leckie, *Elizabeth Bacon Custer*, 223; Alberts, *General Wesley Merritt*, 268.

14 Leckie, *Elizabeth Bacon Custer*, 224.

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Armstrong Custer at West Point apparently was a done deal. The date of the official unveiling ceremony was set for August 30, 1879. Unfortunately, the committee chose the wrong person to ignore, and Libbie chose to ignore the committee. Her absence, and that of anyone closely associated with her, was noted by all. "The bronze is a figure eight feet in height, and is an accurate likeness of the dead soldier," wrote a reporter for the *New York Herald*:

> The dress is a colonel's uniform. The attitude is a spirited one, the left foot being advanced, and the motion of a charge on foot being forcibly expressed by the position. The sword is gripped firmly in the right hand and held well down, while the pistol is in the left hand which is held across the breast and forward. . . . The features are set in the sternness of battle, and one looking at the statue can well imagine the moment of the gallant hero's struggle.[15]

Libbie was aghast, for no rendition of Custer could have been further from the mental image she cherished of her husband in his greatest moments of glory. Hers was of a hardened warrior, at a full gallop astride one of his warhorses, saber pointed directly at the enemy, with his trademark red necktie streaming in the wind. She was further outraged when she read in the pages of the *Detroit Free Press* the comments of some of Custer's contemporaries. "Several of them sneered at the statue and said it was a ridiculous one," reported the newspaper. "That no soldier ever held sword and pistol in that way and that Custer was a hero made by the newspapers and said that military men did not look on him as did the general public." Writing to Lawrence Barrett, the famous actor and Custer's intimate friend, she bemoaned, "The whole costume is incongruous and incorrect. . . . [He was] armed like a desperado in both hands—while some of General Custer's most brilliant charges, were made without a firearm about him." To her friend, the sculptress Vinnie Ream, she was equally vehement, declaring, "I was never consulted and did not even know about it until it was done. The bitter disappointment I feel is such a cross for me to bear it seems to me I cannot endure it. I shall not."[16]

15 Leckie, *Elizabeth Bacon Custer*, 224-225; Minnie Dubbs Millbrook, "A Monument to Custer," in Paul L. Hedren, ed., *The Great Sioux War, 1876-77: The Best from Montana: The Magazine of Western History* (Helena, MT, 1991), 273, 274.

16 Millbrook, "A Monument to Custer," 274.

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Libbie Custer was not consulted in the erection of this monument to her husband at West Point overlooking the Hudson River. She hated it with a passion. *The Monroe Doctrine, April 29, 1910* and the *United States: Military Academy Library*

For three fruitless years, Libbie waged a war to have the hated statue removed. Then, in 1882, Wesley Merritt was appointed superintendent of the Military Academy, and Libbie—like a pit bull gnawing on a bone—intensified her efforts; unwittingly, Merritt had stepped into another of those Custer controversies that seemed to dog his career. Merritt arrived at West Point with big plans. High on his list was a desire to tighten up the discipline of what he perceived to be a very slack Corps of Cadets, including an end to the practice of hazing. But most of all, he was determined to leave his mark on the curriculum that would be used to train the next generation of American military officers. Merritt wanted to drag the army out of the "dark ages" and into the modern world of war as practiced by the European powers. In the grand scheme of things, the

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controversy over the Custer statue was an unwanted distraction left over from the previous administration.

To Libbie, toppling the ludicrous rendition of her husband was an essential first step in her crusade to perpetuate Custer's memory, and, perhaps, to end the process of bereavement and get on with her life. She wasted no time, going straight to the top of the U.S. Army: its commanding general, William Tecumseh Sherman. A wily survivor of the army's political wars, Sherman ushered Libbie out of his office and sent her to Secretary of War Robert Lincoln. Like a hot potato, she was passed on to Gen. Oliver O. Howard, the incumbent superintendent at West Point, whose departure was imminent. Howard gladly handed the matter off to Merritt when he arrived to assume his new posting. Exasperated by the continuous shunting around, Libbie again addressed Sherman. "It frightens me dear General Sherman, because this vital matter to me rests so much in other hands," she wrote, using her feminine wiles shamelessly to tug on the heartstrings of the old warrior. "I tell you frankly," she continued,

> I do not believe that General Merritt will interest himself to aid the Secretary of War in hiding that statue unless you ask him to do it, dear General Sherman. A wife's love sharpens her eyes and quickens her instinct, and years ago I knew (not from my husband) that General Merritt was his enemy. On the plains we entertained him and he seemed to have conquered his enmity and jealousy that was so bitter in the Army of the Potomac. But when he was placed at the head of the Court of Inquiry that sat to investigate Col. Reno's conduct at Chicago—I saw all through the trial how General Merritt still felt toward his dead comrade.[17]

The statue was still in its place of honor—or perhaps "dishonor," if viewed from Libbie's position—when Sherman retired in November 1883.

Finally, in November 1884, Robert Lincoln directed Superintendent Merritt "to cause the statue to be removed from its pedestal and to be securely boxed and stored at the Post." Libbie would later claim that she had "literally cried it off the pedestal." Historian Minnie Millbrook wryly noted that they were tears that "had to be applied in the right places—and judiciously."[18]

Later that year, the pedestal that had supported the ill-fated statue of Custer that Libbie so detested replaced the original headstone. The marble pedestal was

17 Millbrook, "A Monument to Custer," 278-279.

18 Marguerite Merington, *The Custer Story: The Life and Intimate Letters of General Custer and His Wife Elizabeth* (New York, 1950), 327; Millbrook, "A Monument to Custer," 280.

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The pedestal of the monument utilized the base of the West Point statue Libbie Custer so detested, and was enhanced, in 1905, by the addition of an obelisk. *James Nesterwitz*

six feet tall with bronze panels on each side. The front featured a representation of Custer on horseback, and buffalo heads adorned the two side panels. The rear panel was inscribed with Custer's name, rank, and the details of his death. In 1905, an obelisk would be added to the base.

Somewhere in time, the crated statue disappeared, gobbled up in the vastness of a musty army warehouse filled with relics from the nation's wars. Maybe someday, many years from now, it will be found by a warehouse clerk with time on his hands and spurred on by a curious nature; or by some nameless historian, who, in the course of his research, stumbled onto a clue as to its whereabouts.

Ironically, with the removal of the statue, Wesley Merritt's Custer problems disappeared for the rest of his career.

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