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The Other Custer

Capt. Thomas Custer was twice honored for battlefield bravery

BY SARAH ACHENBACH

Capt. Thomas Ward Custer's heroics during the Civil War are the stuff of legends. As an 18-year-old second lieutenant in the U.S. Army Cavalry—his first attempt to join the Army at age 16 failed, but several months later, with his father's permission, he enlisted—Custer earned two Medals of Honor during the Appomattox Campaign. On April 3, 1865, his unit, Company B of the 6th Michigan Cavalry, ran into Confederate soldiers near Namozine Church, Va. Charging forward on horseback, Custer leapt across the barricade, captured the Confederate colors, three officers and 11 enlisted men, and earned his first Medal of Honor.

Three days later, he earned his second at Sailor's Creek,

Va., when he and his men encountered the 2nd Virginia Reserve Battalion. Again, Custer and his horse took flight over the soldiers, but this time, there was a second line. Charging for the Confederate flag, Custer was shot point-blank in his cheek. Rocked by the impact, he remained in the saddle, killed the Confederate flag bearer who had fired the shot, and captured the battle flag. He then rode triumphantly into the Union troops, clutching his prize, and shouting to his commanding officer (and older brother) Gen. George Armstrong Custer, "Armstrong, the damned Rebels have shot me, but I've got my flag."

He is the only soldier during the Civil War to receive dual Medals of Honor for two separate actions—only two other Civil War sailors would join him in this honor—and one of only 19 in history to be awarded two separate Medals of Honor.

Yet, history remembers (if it remembers him at all) simply as "the other Custer." His bravery, life of military service, and even death at age 31 were overshadowed by his older brother by six years and commanding officer from 1864 to 1876.

A bachelor throughout his life—rumors persist that he fathered several children in his home state of Ohio—Custer greatly enjoyed his time spent with George and his wife, Libbie. Following the Civil War, Custer joined the 7th Cavalry under Lt. Col. George Custer's command. In 1873, three years after the 7th Cavalry's first Indian War experience (and George's court-martial for shooting deserters during the ill-fated 1867 campaign against the Cheyenne), the 7th Cavalry moved west to the Dakotas. There, in the privacy of George's quarters, the two brothers and Libbie Custer often could be found engaged in child's play. Libbie Custer wrote, "The day rarely passed that Col. Tom, my husband and I did not have a game of romps. The grave orderly who sat by the hall door used to be shocked to see the commanding officer in pursuit of us by the steps."

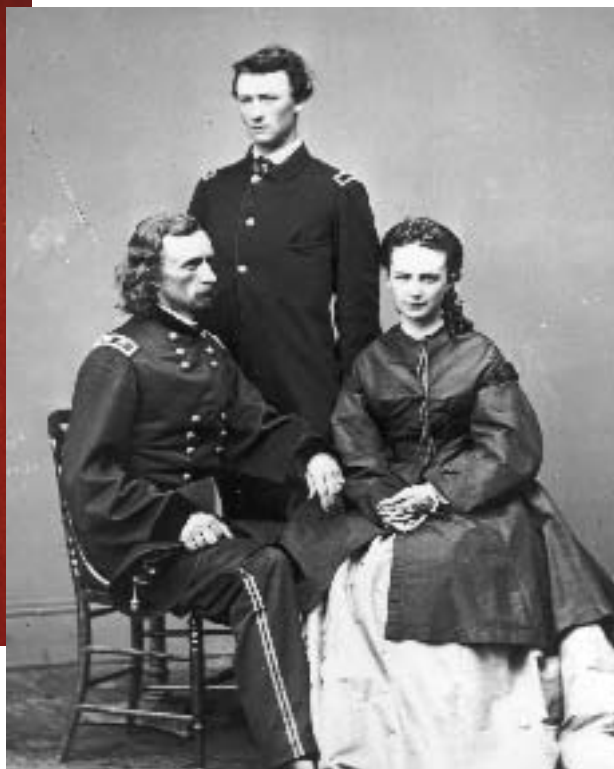
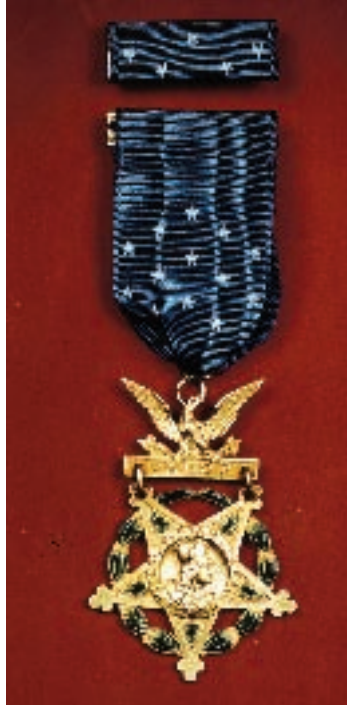
Their love for pranks continued when brother-in-law James Calhoun, younger brother Boston and nephew Autie Reed joined them by 1876 at Fort Abraham Lincoln for the Great Sioux War. On May 17, the 7th Cavalry began marching west to Montana. During the first few weeks of the march, the older Custers played pranks on their younger relatives, once pretending to be Indians about to ambush Boston, a civilian.

On June 22, Brig. Gen. Alfred Terry ordered George to march the 7th Cavalry south along the Little Bighorn River to scout for a large Sioux village. On the morning of June 25, Gen. Custer decided to attack the village with Tom Custer in command of Company C, Calhoun leading Company L, nephew Autie riding with Uncle George and Boston with the 150-wagon pack train. With Custer's men greatly outnumbered, in a little over an hour, what is considered the

worst military disaster in U.S. history was over.

Indeed, Custer's Last Stand was the Custers' last stand, as each of the Custer men—and all of the men under George Custer's command—perished. Scalped and mutilated beyond recognition, Capt. Tom Custer was recognized only by the initials on his tattoo. His brother's body, clad in buckskin and not Army blues, was stripped of its weapons but left intact. Fittingly, Capt. Custer's remains were found beside his older brother's. For a year, they remained beside each other on the battlefield, the hard Montana dirt mounded upon their fallen bodies in makeshift graves, until Gen. Custer's remains were interred at West Point. Capt. Custer's remains are buried at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., the white tombstone noting his Medals of Honor.

Though much of history and the Gen. Custer lore remain silent on Capt. Thomas Custer's heroic life, brother George was not. He once remarked proudly that "Tom should have been the general, and I the lieutenant." ■



Capt. Thomas Ward Custer enjoyed a close relationship with his more famous brother, Gen. George Armstrong Custer, both on and off the battlefield. He is shown here, standing in back, with his brother George and George's wife Elizabeth "Libbie" Cliff Bacon Custer.

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