"OUR DOGS give us SUCH PLEASURE."

—Mrs. George Armstrong Custer

AT HOME WITH THE GENERAL, HIS WIFE, AND THEIR PACK OF WELL-LOVED HOUNDS.

BY BRIAN PATRICK DUGGAN

ST. PAUL, MINN., JULY 14, 1876

DEAR SPIRIT [OF THE TIMES]: — I AM TO-DAY IN RECEIPT OF A LETTER FROM MRS. CUSTER, WIDOW OF GENERAL CUSTER, ASKING ME IF I COULD PROVIDE HOMES FOR A PACK OF STAG HOUNDS AND A PACK OF FOX HOUNDS. ... ANY PERSON WHO TAKES THE DOGS CAN FEEL THAT HE IS DOING A GENUINE SERVICE TO THE WIDOW OF THE DEAD HERO.

Libbie Custer's sheltered upbringing could not have prepared her for the hardships of a soldier's wife in the field, yet she took to it like a duck to water—and gave it up just as suddenly after her husband was killed on June 25, 1876, at the Battle of Little Bighorn.

Elizabeth Clift Bacon married the dashing "Boy General" George Armstrong Custer in 1864 and whenever campaigning in the Civil War permitted, she chose to live with her husband in the field. He was instinctively a brilliant commander and his victories ultimately won him successive promotions when he was in his early twenties. After the Confederacy surrendered in 1865, Custer's Cavalry Division was sent to Hempstead, in southeast Texas, as part of the occupation forces. It was there that Custer was introduced to hunting deer with foxhounds and Greyhounds.

Libbie had no experience with pets until the cotton planters gave Custer six foxhounds and English Greyhounds. The Custer pack soon grew to 20 and included Byron, an aristocratic Greyhound who was hell on jackrabbits and a bold thief. Byron once snatched a large piece of meat out of a boiling kettle and streaked away through a barrage of sticks, rocks, and boots. Custer was secretly delighted at the Greyhound's cunning and audacity—desir-

CENTER: COURTESY THE LITTLE BIGHORN BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL MONUMENT; PAPER: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/©ALEX SCHÜS

PICTURE TAKEN OCTOBER 18, 1865, AT HEMPSTEAD, TEXAS, BY AN UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER. COURTESY WEST POINT MUSEUM ART COLLECTION, UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY, WEST POINT, NEW YORK

able qualities in both hunting dogs and soldiers. Libbie admired Byron's beautiful form, but thought him cold and aloof.

"Libbie's love for dogs is second only to her affection for horses, those ranking next to her nearest relatives."—George Armstrong Custer

While Libbie was periodically exasperated by the misbehavior of her husband's dogs she did have her heart dogs—particularly a Pointer named Ginnie. She would take Ginnie's newborn puppies to bed to warm them on a freezing winter night. Years later, Libbie's other favorite was Cardigan, a great cream-colored staghound who *"... never gave up trying to be my lap-dog. He was enormous, and yet seemingly unconscious of his size. He kept up a perpetual struggle and scramble on his hind-legs to get his whole body up on my lap."*

Custer's last favorite, the only staghound who could catch a full-grown antelope, did much the same to her master: "I find myself more warmly attached to Tuck than to any other I have owned. ... First she lays her head on my knee, as if to ask if I am too much engaged to notice her. ..." After that overture, Tuck would slowly creep into his lap and sleep for as long as Custer's legs could stand it.

In 1867, Custer was given command of the newly created 7th Cavalry Regiment and they would soldier in Kansas, Kentucky, and the Dakota Territory. It was on the vast plains of the unsettled West where Custer's infatuation with hunting hounds became a passion. When the dogs woke to see the Custers dressing in their riding clothes, they would leap over furniture, race around the room, and then dash outdoors, prancing and jostling while howling enthusiastically. For Custer, the more ruckus the better, and he worked them into a joyful riot by snapping his English whip, blowing the dog horn, and shouting, "Whoop 'em up!"

Off they would ride after buffalo, elk, antelope, deer, and jackrabbit. Libbie was more decorous than her boyish husband but dearly loved riding with the hounds, and while she never cared for being in on the death of the quarry, she had no problem with the resulting steaks, chops, and roasts.

"I have in my kennel Scotch deerhounds, fox-hounds, and pointers, but I prefer to keep them pure."—George Armstrong Custer

Scottish Deerhounds were a scarce breed in both the British Isles and America at the time of the Civil War. Custer had first seen the aristocratic Highlanders in Michigan, and in about 1867 he purchased a pair of Deerhounds from Canada and was later given others by a sportsman from Detroit and an English lord. In his writings, Custer called them variously "Scotch Deer-

GENERAL CUSTER WITH HIS HORSE VIC, STAG HOUNDS AND DEER HOUNDS.

hounds/Staghounds" or just "Staghounds" and thought they were perfect for hunting game as well as wolves and coyote, and for campaigning with horse soldiers.

Dog breeds in those days were usually defined by what the dog was able to do rather than by pedigree, and Custer kept a mixed pack to take advantage of each type of hound's ability. While he was proud of his purebreds and their pedigrees, Custer also had crossbred hounds or the lurchers now called American staghounds. When the 7th was stationed in rural Kentucky, his pack numbered nearly 80 dogs but it dropped to a more manageable 40 out on the frontier.

"A dog is so human to me and dogs have been my husband's chosen friends so many years, I cannot look upon the commonest cur with indifference."
—Elizabeth Bacon Custer

Custer and Libbie were childless, so the Army and dogs became their family—and their hounds' misbehavior and constant thieving of food were bemusedly tolerated. The Custers' tents were thick with dogs on the rugs and furniture. With two or more favorite dogs to a bed, there were often struggles to get a useful amount of blanket. Napping on halts for lunch during a march was more restful, for Libbie would doze on a tarp spread on the grass with Tuck, Bleuch, and Lady sleeping contentedly beside her.

The Custers became experts at doctoring with the help of a dog book and the regiment's veterinary surgeon. Wounds were closed with sewing needle and silk thread. Poor Cardigan was once savaged in a kennel fight and his gaping wounds took months of nursing to heal. Libbie and Custer would patiently extract porcupine quills from the dogs' lips and mouths, and spent hours with tweezers removing prickly-pear thorns. Cactus injuries got to be enough of a problem that Libbie and Private John Burkman (Custer's orderly and dog tender) stitched mittens for the hounds out of old shoe leather.

"But they was army dogs and army life means bein' tired and footsore and thirsty and hungry and jist marchin' on."
—Private John Burkman

When food was scarce on winter expeditions in the Dakota Territory, the troopers, horses, and dogs went hungry. Horses might have only bark torn from cottonwood trees to eat, while man and dog shared raw bacon and war-surplus hardtack. When starvation threatened, a horse or pack mule would be killed and Custer once said (hopefully jokingly) that rather than eat mule, he would sooner cut off and eat the ears of his hounds.

The frontier was dangerous for man, horse, and hound, and sudden injury or death lurked everywhere. The plains were riddled with prairie-dog and gopher burrows that could break the leg of a galloping horse or dog. Riders could be maimed or killed when thrown from a horse. There were rattlesnakes, rabid wolves, grizzly bears, accidental shootings, and always the threat of hostile Indians. Blücher and Maida, Custer's original brace of Scottish Deerhounds, both died young and violently on the prairie.

Blücher was a battle casualty at Washita River in the Oklahoma territory where Custer's regiment attacked a

CUSTER DOG NAMES

One can discern a lot about Custer by the names he gave his Deerhounds and Staghounds.

BLÜCHER—Prussian Field Marshal Gebhard von Blücher, who saved the day for the British at Waterloo

BLEUCH—After Blücher's death in 1868, a second hound was named Blucher but usually called Bleuch.

CARDIGAN—the English earl who led the famous Charge of the Light Brigade

FLIRT—self-explanatory

JUNO—the Roman goddess of war

KAISER—after Wilhelm I, crowned German emperor in 1871

LUFRA—the "fleetest hound in all the North," from Sir Walter Scott's *Lady of the Lake*

MAIDA—Sir Walter Scott's Deerhound cross, named for the Battle of Maida in 1806

TUCK—possibly named after a type of English broadsword

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sleeping village of probably peaceful Cheyenne in November 1868. Despite the snow, the soldiers had shed their overcoats and haversacks for the fight and Custer's hounds were left with the pile of gear and its guard. Blücher chased after a party of menacing warriors and was killed by an arrow. A year later, Custer's other Deerhound, Maida, was accidentally shot when an overexcited trooper fired at a buffalo brought to bay by the pack of hounds. She had been Custer's favorite at the time, and his sincere ode to Maida plagiarized both the verse of Lord Byron and William Spencer.

"Bleuch and Tuck started to follow but I called 'em back and held 'em by the collar."
—Private John Burkman at Little Bighorn

In the summer of 1876, when Custer took the 7th Cavalry to the valley of the Little Bighorn River, Tuck, Bleuch (a different dog than Blücher), Lady, Swift, and Kaiser went along with their master at least as far as the expedition's field depot at the Yellowstone and Powder rivers. The evidence is contradictory, but Bleuch and Tuck may have continued on with the regiment to Little Bighorn—but were kept out of the fight when Custer split his regiment into three battalions and ordered dog-tender Burkman to stay with the supply pack train.

There were more Indians at Little Bighorn than Custer had bargained for. Well-armed Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors led by Crazy Horse, Gall, and Sitting Bull attacked and Custer was cut off from the other two battalions and ammunition supply. There was nowhere to run. His men were picked off as they retreated across hills and ravines, finally stopping on the steep Greasy Grass Ridge that would come to be known as Last Stand Hill. There, the formerly invincible Custer and his command were all killed.

To the end of his long life, John Burkman regretted surviving the hilltop siege of the Reno and Benteen battalions and not being able to die with his general. Fifty years after the battle, Burkman, bitter and suspicious, told rambling stories of being Custer's orderly and dog tender to his only friend, who surreptitiously wrote them down. While Burkman insisted that Tuck and Bleuch were in the Valley of the Little Bighorn and alive after the battle, it is curious that he says no more about them. In 1896, Lieutenant Edward Godfrey, a reliable officer who was also in the Reno–Benteen fight, said pointedly that Custer's hounds had been left behind at the Powder River Depot. Like anything to do with General Custer, myth and rumor are plentiful and as with Last Stand Hill, we may never know the truth about the hounds said to be at Little Bighorn.

COURTESY THE LITTLE BIGHORN BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL MONUMENT

"And to my heart in anguish press'd, the girl I left behind me."
— Traditional U.S. Cavalry song

As Custer's widow, Libbie had no status in the Army beyond a meager pension and had to vacate the officer's quarters at Fort Abraham Lincoln fairly quickly. She could not take the hounds back to Monroe, so friends helped her disperse the pack to other officers and the Custer hounds disappear into history—almost. Two of the staghounds were entered in the first Westminster Show in New York the following year and shown beside a pair of Scottish Deerhounds owned by Queen Victoria. Twelve years after the battle, a "big gray wolfhound" was exhibited at Madison Square Garden as the sole survivor of Little Bighorn and though he was only 4 or 5 years old, no one noticed the impossibility of the claim.

Libbie never visited the place where her Custer died. She devoted the rest of her life to her husband's memory and through her books and lectures helped to create the iconic image of Custer as a martyred hero of the West. In 1933, she died in New York at the age of 91.

But there was one hidden Custer legacy that no one could have anticipated. Libbie saw to it that her beloved Cardigan was given to a friend in Minneapolis—the Reverend Cassius Terry. The last five years of the staghound's life were happy and he occasionally sired offspring in the neighborhood. When Cardigan died, Terry had his body mounted and put on display at the University of Minnesota as a tribute to both a brave dog and master. Sadly, the stuffed dog disappeared in the 1920s but one would like to think that Cardigan's descendants still go for walks in the neighborhoods of Minneapolis.

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