



A Surgeon with Custer at the Little Big Horn: James DeWolf's Diary and Letters, 1876 ed. Todd E. Harburn.

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Few engagements in American military history have generated as much discussion and controversy as that fought between the US 7th Cavalry Regiment and combined western Indian nations on the banks of the Little Big Horn River (25 June 1876). Yet new subjects are still being found for investigation.

Although several physicians accompanied Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer's 7th Cavalry on its march from Fort Abraham Lincoln on 17 May 1876, only three remained with the unit on 25 June. George Lord, the solitary regular US Army Surgeon, personally accompanied Custer and his two-battalion, five-company contingent. Two acting assistant surgeons, James DeWolf and Henry Porter, contracted by the Army for the campaign, accompanied Maj. Marcus Reno's battalion of three cavalry companies and Indian scouts in the attack across the Little Big Horn against the southern perimeter of the Indian village.

Little has been published on George Lord, who died with Custer at the battle.¹ Henry Porter, the only one of three physicians who survived the battle, has been the subject of two able biographies. One, by L.G. Walker,² focuses on Porter's contributions as a founding father and early civic leader in Bismarck, North Dakota; it also details its subject's personal and family life, and his worldwide travels between 1893 and his death in 1903. Little Big Horn gets only six pages of coverage, the Sioux War of 1876 just fifteen, and Porter's court-martial appearance only eight. The second biography, by Joan Nabseth Stevenson,³ concentrates on Porter's role at the Little Big Horn.

Luckily, Porter recovered his friend DeWolf's diary shortly after his death during Reno's retreat. Though it was first published in 1958,⁴ Todd Harburn, himself a physician, has now produced a welcome, authoritative, readily available edition with additional background information. The editor's medical training and professional experience give him insights unavailable to the typical specialist in military history.

The volume's invaluable twenty-eight-page introduction provides a cohesive sketch of DeWolf's life and Civil War service, including his severe wounding at Second Bull Run. DeWolf later served as a hospital assistant before his promotion to hospital steward with the regular Army (1865-75). At the age of thirty, he entered Harvard Medical School, graduating in 1875. Although he failed the notoriously challenging Army Surgeon's examination, he was soon awarded a con-

1. There is no proper biography, only a very brief, but well written article by amateur historian J.W. Vaughn: "Dr. George E. Lord, Regimental Surgeon," *The Westerners: New York Posse Brand Book* 9.2 (1962) 25-26, 30-31, 34-36.

2. *Dr. Henry R. Porter: The Surgeon Who Survived Little Bighorn* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008).

3. *Deliverance from the Little Big Horn: Doctor Henry Porter and Custer's Seventh Cavalry* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2012). See my (favorable) review at *Michigan War Studies Review* 2013-015.

4. In Edward S. Luce, ed., "The Diary and Letters of Dr. James M. DeWolf, Acting Assistant Surgeon, U.S. Army: His Record of the Sioux Expedition of 1876 As Kept until His Death," *North Dakota History* 25.2-3 (1958) 33-81.

tract as an Army acting assistant surgeon. He headed west to join the frontier Army's medical corps on the eve of the Great Sioux War.

Chapter 1 concerns DeWolf's brief service at Fort Seward in the Dakota Territory (Mar.–Apr. 1876). Three of his diary entries during this period intimate that he was a poor horseman. On 10 March, he writes, “my horse fell crushing my right foot” (40). In a letter to his wife on 14 March, he reports that, during his column's march through heavy snow, “I could not hold him [my horse] & keep behind on the trail as I would have liked [and] ... my foot is swollen yet has ceased to be lame but you know how lame horseback riding makes me” (42–43).

Chapter 2 recounts DeWolf's arrival at Fort Abraham Lincoln and his preparations for the upcoming campaign. On 8 May, the Army Quartermaster issued horses to three surgeons, including DeWolf, then with the 7th Cavalry, for the campaign. DeWolf comments in a letter to his wife:

I am assigned to the Cav so I must be a Cavalier, now darling I will tell you about my horse. Well we had to come down here in the Ambulance & two days after there was three—what the Q.M. [Quarter Master] called horses—came down for the [Medical Officers]... [Doctor] Ashton's horse can barely get up a gallop[,] mine is tolerable[,] but poor [Doctor] Clark's is a stumbler. (85)

Tellingly, neither in his long, frequent letters to his wife, nor in his diary entries, does DeWolf mention going hunting or horseback riding, shooting, or performing any training that might have prepared him for a demanding and dangerous military campaign.

Chapter 3 covers the march from Fort Abraham Lincoln through DeWolf's last diary entry (24 June), during which time he was the surgeon of Maj. Marcus Reno's Battalion. As such, he was considered a member of the headquarters staff (100, 104–5)—he notes that his tent was pitched “next to” Reno's (89). He wrote his wife on 17 May that “Reno who commands my wing I cannot like but suppose acquaintance will improve perhaps when we understand each other” (96). Unfortunately, he is silent on any such improved relations with Reno during his six weeks on campaign. His account of crossing the treacherous Little Missouri River suggests that his issued horse was affording him tolerable service: “had a great time lots of fun seeing the horses mire & throw their riders[.] The Genls nephew [Harry Armstrong ‘Autie’ Reed] got thrown over his horses head into a mud hole[.] My old steed made them all” (110).

Fans of Custer will be disappointed by DeWolf's report that “I don't see much of Terry & Custer they go in advance & of course I go with my wing commander” (100, 105). On the evening of 24 June, DeWolf scribbled his final lines in his cherished diary, “found lots of new [Indian] signs ... old camps in profusion...” (124).

Chapter 4 discusses the Battle of Little Big Horn itself, DeWolf's death, and Porter's recovery of his effects. During Reno's retreat across the Little Big Horn and up the river bluffs to a more defensible position, DeWolf rode to the left (north) of the main column of troopers, apparently following an easier route. The retreat was a bitter lesson in the loss of discipline under contact with the enemy. Reno's troops fled in bewilderment, confusion, and terror under heavy Indian fire. DeWolf was killed ascending the bluffs in an ambush by several Indian warriors. He was armed with at least two revolvers and, by one account, may have fought for his life. According to Sgt. Daniel Kanipe, who witnessed the fatal encounter, “If he had gotten a few feet further he would have been saved” (133). We may speculate that, had DeWolf been a better horseman, like his friend Porter, or better mounted, he might well have survived the engagement.

We learn in a brief epilogue that DeWolf's widow remarried. Her son by this second marriage, Veren Adams Dodd, was a highly accomplished physician in his own right. A World War I veteran, he was professor and Chief of Staff at the Ohio State University Hospital from 1921 to 1948.

Recognizing the historical significance of DeWolf's diary and journal, Dodd donated them to the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, where Park Superintendent Maj. Edward S. Luce transcribed and later published them.

Two short appendixes provide previously unpublished, relatively insignificant entries from DeWolf's diary. A third reprints Superintendent Luce's introduction to his 1958 publication. The depth and quality of Harburn's scholarship are evident in some seventy pages of endnotes (not, sadly, footnotes). DeWolf's stilted writing style, and erratic capitalizations, syntax, and punctuation are studiously preserved.

We must be grateful to Todd Harburn for the valuable service he has performed for all students and historians of the Battle of the Little Big Horn and the medical services of the Frontier Army during the Indian Wars.