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Review

LIFE IN THE SADDLE

Two Michigan Brigade troopers recall fighting with Custer

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Husby, Karla Jean and Wittenberg, Eric J. *Under Custer's Command: The Civil War Journal of James Henry Avery*. Brassey's, Inc., 2000-11-01. ISBN 1574882767

Amongst the vast literature related to the Civil War, studies of George Armstrong Custer rank high as a recurring theme for exploration. Now another pair of books-**One of Custer's Wolverines** and **Under Custer's Command**-has been released that add to this extensive body of information.

Both titles deal with troopers who followed Custer in the famed Michigan Cavalry Brigade. But there are many other ties between the works.

First, Eric J. Wittenberg, an Ohio-based attorney and a founding member of the Civil War Cavalry Association, edited the pair of accounts. Wittenberg has produced other publications related to his favored topic. In fact, two of his earlier efforts, *Gettysburg's Forgotten Cavalry Actions* and *"We Have it Damn Hard Out Here": The Civil War Letters of Sergeant Thomas W. Smith, 6th Pennsylvania Cavalry* speak to his knowledge of mounted forces during the 1861-65 period. Consequently, Wittenberg would seem a logical candidate to undertake the editing of subsequent volumes about Union and Confederate cavalry operations.

Furthermore, in his latest efforts Wittenberg turned to Temple University's Gregory J.W. Urwin for forewords and also consulted with Brian C. Pohanka. These individuals enjoy highly respected positions in Civil War circles. Finally, Wittenberg twice drew upon Blake A. Magner's cartographic skills for simple, yet effective maps depicting various battles and campaigns discussed in the respective texts.

Despite these similarities there also are many differences between the new publications. For instance, **Under Custer's Command** reflects the perspective of an enlisted man, James Henry Avery, an Ohio farmer with presumably a limited education. Avery kept a diary of his service with the Fifth Michigan Cavalry, and later used it when producing the memoir under review here. Conversely, **One of Custer's Wolverines** deals with an officer, James H. Kidd, who rose from lieutenant to colonel during the war. Kidd was a student at the University of Michigan when he ended his academic pursuits to join the Sixth Michigan Cavalry. His level of education along with a subsequent career as a journalist ideally positioned him to produce a literate reminiscence of his wartime experiences. In 1909, Kidd's *Personal Recollections of a Cavalryman in Custer's Michigan Brigade in the Civil War* was released, and subsequently was reprinted four times. The volume, according to Urwin, "ranks as a classic, one of the richest and most reliable accounts of Union cavalry operations in the Eastern theater."

Dozens of letters Kidd sent home during the war likewise survived. This correspondence and other papers, now held by the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan, served as the impetus for **One of Custer's Wolverines**. Urwin's foreword to this title contends it "will take its place alongside Kidd's *Personal Recollections*. . . ."

Such praise from a scholar whose own *Custer Victorious: The Civil War Battles of General George Armstrong Custer* has become a standard in the field, should indicate the merit of **One of Custer's Wolverines**. Despite these supportive words and Urwin's further statement that "Wittenberg has woven his subject's observations into a fascinating narrative," the volume exhibits certain shortcomings.

Indeed, rather than offering a seamless narrative, Wittenberg's commentary on each letter is stitched together with Kidd's correspondence in a patchwork manner. This is not always so, as seen on pages 67-68 where Wittenberg's succinct introduction and postscript provide the proper context for Kidd's account of life in winter camp during 1864. Elsewhere, however, in cases where their content offers little information relevant to the flow of the story, some letters might have been better left out or paraphrased.

Another problematical aspect of the book has to do with the use of notes. These appear at the end of the text, thereby requiring the reader to jump to

another section of the book, and, even then, the notes sometimes lack citations and generally provide little more than the full name of an individual mentioned in the letters.

In other places, content notes about such conventions as prisoner exchanges or paroles would have been helpful to individuals not as familiar with the subject as Wittenberg is. Moreover the content of some notes might have better served the audience had it been placed in the body of the text. Also, in a few instances there are tantalizing references to Kidd's "Reminiscences of a Volunteer" from the *Ionia Sentinel*. These undated clippings from Kidd's hometown Michigan newspaper may well have been the basis for his 1909 book, yet Wittenberg does not attempt to establish this possible connection. Nor did he evidently make an effort to ascertain whether a run of the paper existed to provide accurate dates for the scraps his researcher copied from the Bentley Library collection.

In another note found on page 217, the editor states that the Powder River Expedition undertaken during the summer of 1865 was "remarkable" in its similarity to the failed 1876 Little Bighorn campaign. Actually, the two incidences were only superficially alike, the major distinction being the outcome of the clashes: the troops and their leader in 1865, Brigadier General Patrick Connor, emerged from fighting against the Sioux with few casualties whereas Custer and his Seventh Cavalry suffered a very different fate. Wittenberg not only acknowledges this fact in the text, but also repeats the same conclusion in the accompanying note—thereby contradicting his interpretation of these distinctly different engagements. If anything, the situation for Connor's force more closely paralleled Custer's strike at Washita than it did the Little Bighorn.

These issues aside, the last chapter of **One of Custer's Wolverines** is representative of the book's real merit: the many insightful elements found in Kidd's previously unpublished letters. Those written after Lee's surrender particularly are strong, demonstrating that not all troops went home immediately after fighting ceased. Much to their chagrin, men in some volunteer units, including the Sixth Michigan, were sent to the West as a force against American Indians in the region. Of course, others went south as an army of occupation with the opening of Reconstruction.

In the final analysis, **One of Custer's Wolverines** will appeal to enthusiasts who share Wittenberg's fervor for cavaliers in blue and gray, and be a resource for future authors writing about Custer and Civil War cavalrymen. For a general

readership, however, Edward G. Longacre's *Custer and His Wolverines: The Michigan Cavalry Brigade, 1861-1865* or Wittenberg's second new editorial undertaking, **Under Custer's Command**, should prove more satisfying.

The latter publication is a collaboration with Karla Jean Husby, the descendant of a veteran of the Fifth Michigan Cavalry. As Gregory Urwin's foreword indicates the volume is "more than a notable historical resource. It is even more than a good read." In fact it is a revealing account by Sergeant James Avery that in some respects is nearly as compelling as the timeless *Hardtack and Coffee, or the Unwritten Story of Army Life* by John D. Billings.

Assuming Avery's great-great granddaughter was faithful in the transcription of her ancestor's papers, this straightforward saga of life in the saddle is an extraordinary, candid glimpse of the dangers of combat and intimate details of routine life between campaigns. Avery's writings essentially stand on their own merit, although Wittenberg's editorial efforts, which in this volume are placed conveniently on the page where the corresponding reference appears, add to the published account. Wittenberg makes corrections to the old trooper's occasionally faulty memory, fills in basic facts, and provides contextual elements. The result is a worthy addition to any well-rounded Civil War library. **Under Custer's Command** promises to stand the test of time long after many other works have been forgotten.

John P. Langellier received his Ph.D. in military history from Kansas State University. One of his most recent books, Custer: The Man, The Myth, The Movies (2000), treats film and television representations of this flamboyant former Union cavalry commander.