

The oldest survivor of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, also known as the Siege of the Greasy Grass, was a soldier who had come to America to avoid another war.¹ Charles Windolph was born in Bergen, Germany on December 9th, 1851.² His father, Joseph Windolph, was a master shoemaker, and taught Charles the trade while he resided in Germany.³ As a 19-year-old, he was looking closely at the political events happening around him, and he was weary of the start of the Franco-Prussian War. As tensions rose, Windolph was scheduled to be drafted in the Dragoons,⁴ a type of mounted infantry or conventional cavalry unit.⁵ This, however, never came to fruition. A few days before his enlistment in June, he left Germany for Sweden and Denmark, before traveling to America ten days later.⁶

Windolph's quick immigration to the U.S. in 1871 left him arriving in New York with only "a dozen words of English" and "exactly \$2.50 in money."⁷ With the help of another German immigrant that he befriended after arriving, Windolph got a job in an Avenue A shoe shop for a brief few weeks, then another job as a bootmaker in Hoboken. The shoemaking skills he was taught in Germany, though, differed from the American style. Not fitting in to the trade in America, and still struggling to learn the language, Windolph was convinced by a friend to join the U.S. Army.⁸ Windolph hoped that through this decision, he "could amount to something."⁹ He ultimately found it humorous that many Germans, who had left their country to avoid fighting in the Franco-Prussian War, ended up enlisting in the U.S. Army because this was one of the only jobs available to them after immigrating.¹⁰

With his first enlistment in the U.S. Army, he was assigned to Company A, 2nd Infantry, but this did not last long.¹¹ Windolph soon deserted from this company in July 18, 1872 and quickly reenlisted into Company H, 7th U.S. Cavalry, on July 23, 1872.¹² Due to his first desertion, he reenlisted with the 7th Cavalry first under the name Charles Wrangel.¹³ His time as

Wrangel was short; in 1873, he surrendered as a deserter after President Ulysses S. Grant issued a proclamation of general amnesty. After disclosing his desertion and his true identity, Windolph was restored to duty in Company H without punishment.¹⁴ Though he never acknowledged his desertion in later narratives of his time in the service, Windolph must have found Company H in the 7th Cavalry to his liking to stay with them.¹⁵ Thanks to his previous trade, he did cobbler work for his comrades in his companies while they traveled west for various expeditions,¹⁶ including the 1873 Yellowstone Expedition and the 1874 Black Hills Expedition.¹⁷

Lead by Colonel David Stanley, the 1873 Yellowstone Expedition took Windolph through the Dakota and Montana Territories to help protect the engineers as they surveyed a route for the Northern Pacific Railroad along the Yellowstone River. The largest portion of troops in this expedition came from the 7th Cavalry, with General George Custer being the second in command under Stanley.¹⁸ Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Gall and their bands of Lakota warriors resisted the advancement of the railroad through their hunting grounds, and several skirmishes followed during this survey.¹⁹ The following year, Windolph continued on to the 1874 Black Hills Expedition with General Custer to explore the region and evaluate it for possible sites for a fort in or near the Black Hills.²⁰ The search for confirmation of gold in the area, too, was the undertone of the expedition. Windolph even noted that, though it was a sacred and forbidden area, “if you want to keep people out of any place, don’t spread the report that there’s gold there. That’s what was happening.”²¹ With the cavalry band playing in the morning and concerts in the evenings, this military expedition proved to be an unusual and fun one for the 7th Cavalry, including for Windolph.²² A month into the expedition, gold was finally discovered by the company, and Custer quickly sent word to Fort Laramie, then onto other newspapers in the U.S., which began the gold rush in the Black Hills.²³ Looking back on this expedition years

later, Windolph equated Custer's discovery of gold in the Hills to the curse of those who would find Egyptian King's tombs, and that while Custer gained a lot of notoriety, "he never had any luck after that."²⁴

The impact of the 1874 expedition quickly changed the dynamic of the relations in the area and forebode battles to come. The influx of white settlers into the Black Hills for gold continued to create tensions between the Lakota, who had been given the Black Hills Territory as part of the 1868 Laramie Treaty, and the U.S. government, who was trying to keep out the encroaching settlers but also keep them happy.²⁵ Windolph even returned to the Hills with Captain Benteen in 1875 to remove prospectors from the area.²⁶ The news of gold and the surge of prospectors and military into the area violated the 1868 treaty, so a commission was appointed to meet with tribes to negotiate for the newly-found valuable Black Hills.²⁷ *Paha Sapa*, the Black Hills, is "the heart of everything that is," a sacred and worshiped place for the Lakota, so these negotiations were futile.²⁸ By March 1876, with thousands of prospectors gathered in the area, tribes were ready to go to war to protect their land.²⁹

Once June 1876 came, about 1,000 Sioux and Cheyenne warriors alongside Crazy Horse engaged General Crook's forces of 1,200 men at the Battle of the Rosebud.³⁰ This defeat sent Crook back to camp at Goose Creek, by present-day Sheridan, Wyoming, and opened the way for Benteen's and Custer's forces to meet up with Major Reno and move towards the Little Bighorn in Montana for another confrontation.³¹ While other soldiers wrote to loved ones back home before heading on route, Windolph did not have anyone to write home to, yet.³²

In late June, with Custer and his 7th Cavalry in the area of the upcoming battle, the established plan was to await the arrival of General Gibbon,³³ General Terry, and Crook's remaining forces before attacking at daybreak on the 26th.³⁴ As Custer waited Gibbon's 5th

Infantry, Custer's 7th Cavalry scouts went ahead and observed the Sioux camped at the Little Bighorn River. Custer was afraid of the Sioux retreating due to evidence from his scouts, so he went ahead and planned their assault a day sooner than Gibbon's arrival. On June 25th, as Windolph sought out Captain Benteen to discuss trading his horse with another trooper, he overheard the final discussion of battle plans between Benteen, a scout for the cavalry, Charlie Reynolds, and Custer. Soon after, without trading his horse, Windolph rode along with Company H, under the sights of Benteen temporarily, at the head of the column of soldiers moving ahead with their attack.³⁵

Whether it was his pride and need for glory, or believing their surprise attack to be ineffective, Custer began his fatal mistake of hastily charging into his attack without support. Custer split his forces into three companies under himself, Benteen, and Major Reno to attack the opposing camp composed mainly of warriors from the Lakota Sioux, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho tribes.³⁶ While Reno's company were being bombarded by Hunkpapa Chief Gall and his warriors on one side, Crazy Horse led warriors up the length of the Native American camp and cornered Custer. Benteen's Company H were scouting farther south when the initial attacks happened, and once they returned they found Reno on a hill under attack, causing them to then dig-in and prepare a skirmish line in defense.³⁷ While Windolph's company was set-upon quickly with attacks, given that their position was by the river close to the opposing camp, the firing gradually died down once the day ended, and Windolph noted that, "There was no moon, and no one ever welcomed darkness more than we did."³⁸ Cries from the wounded and those needing water mixed with the cries of the Native Americans across the river from them mourning their losses, as well, but also celebrating their victories.³⁹

Once the sun rose, they came under fire again. Windolph's friend was shot and died right next to him, and then Windolph received a minor gunshot wound to his chest, and the butt of his rifle was split by another bullet. However, this was not enough to stop him from volunteering to help further.⁴⁰ Benteen called for volunteers to fire into the bushes where their enemies were to cover a party setting out to get and distribute water.⁴¹ Windolph was one of the better marksmen chosen to take up a position on the exposed brow of the hill. Being successful and unwounded from this coverage, Windolph, and the other three German marksmen chosen to cover from the brow received Congressional Medals of Honor for their heroism.⁴² After getting the water, Benteen told Windolph that he was promoting him to a Sergeant right there on the battlefield, and Windolph "was always proud of that."⁴³

The main question everyone had on their minds during these turbulent two days was, "Where was Custer?"⁴⁴ Custer became trapped between Crazy Horse and Chief Gall's warriors (once Reno retreated to safety, Gall charged after Custer, too) without reinforcements or ammunition supplies.⁴⁵ On the dawn of the 27th, under the already hot Montana sun, the fate of Custer and his troops was discovered just three miles north of where Reno and Benteen had laid during their skirmishes. Windolph was one of the few troops to go with Benteen examining the site, and while they found Custer, who looked almost as if he was peacefully sleeping, the site was gruesome.⁴⁶

Windolph stayed with the Company H for another seven years after the Battle of the Little Bighorn, or the Siege of the Greasy Grass. In 1880, Colonel Benteen appointed Windolph First Sergeant of Company H, which was another honor he felt indebted to Benteen for. Soon, however, Windolph's life outside of the military developed more. In 1882, he married Mary Jones, but tragically, she died within the year.⁴⁷ However, in 1883, he reconnected with an old

sweetheart from his home in Germany, who immigrated to the U.S. with Windolph's parents, and he asked her to marry him. The same year, when his wife made him choose between starting a family with her or staying in the military, Windolph retired, and he "never regretted [his] choice."⁴⁸

After being discharged from Fort Meade, he and his wife, Mathilda, moved to Lead, South Dakota.⁴⁹ Charles and Mathilda Windolph built a happy and full life in Lead; he worked as a harness maker for the Homestake Mining Company for 49 years, and they had 3 children together. On his 95th birthday, representatives of the Fifth Army of the South Dakota Military District visited Windolph and awarded him a Purple Heart for the injury he sustained at the famous battle. Even then, with the Purple Heart pinned next to his Medal of Honor on his lapel, he expressed, "I am the proudest man in America. I want you to know that I appreciate this award very much."⁵⁰

On March 12th, 1950, at the age of 98, Charles Windolph passed away after being in failing health for several months. He was the last living white survivor of the Battle of the Little Bighorn and the nation's oldest Congressional Medal of Honor recipient.⁵¹ While this German immigrant did not enter the U.S. expecting to be a part of that fateful battle on the Montana prairie, Charles Windolph became a part of history through his contributions on the field of battle, and he continued to be humbled by the recognition he received and the people he met while in the military.

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Notes

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