

Elijah T. Strode

On a spring day in March of 1851, a baby boy was born somewhere in Monroe County, Kentucky.¹ He was christened Elijah T. Strode and would go on to have a life as a farmer and soldier until tragedy struck a month before his 30th birthday.² Strode lived a humble life as a farmer in Kentucky until October 15, 1872, when he visited Elizabethtown at the age of 21 and enlisted in the United States Army with the help of Lieutenant Algernon Smith.³ He became a private in Company A of the 7th Cavalry, and on June 25th, 1876, took part in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, also known as the Battle of the Greasy Grass.⁴

Private Strode played an interesting role in the battle. Serving as Lieutenant Charles Varnum's orderly, he physically ran orders or messages back and forth between officers.⁵ Lieutenant Varnum was the chief of scouts whose job was to survey the area, and wherever he was, his orderly was too.⁶ There is one specific account where Lieutenant Varnum, Private Strode, two soldiers, and several Native Americans went to investigate a "lone tepee", but the scouts who were with Varnum started slowing down due to worn-out ponies, so he switched entourages with Lieutenant Hare. While this was happening, Varnum and Strode went on ahead toward the river, leaving the scouts to catch up later.⁷ We can only speculate the specific moments that Strode was with Varnum, because as much as he was in Varnum's presence, he was also running back and forth to Lieutenant Colonel Custer, delivering Varnum's messages. We do know, however, that Private Strode participated in both the valley and hilltop fights during this battle and was wounded in the right ankle sometime during the fight in the valley.⁸ He was then transported to Fort Abraham Lincoln in the Dakota Territory via the supply steamer "Far West," which was the first steamer to arrive after the 7th Cavalry retreated from the battle.⁹

A year later, on June 24th, 1877, Private Strode was discharged as a private of good character at camp on the Tongue River, Montana Territory, per Special Order Number 70.¹⁰ This didn't last long though, as he reenlisted almost immediately and was promoted to Sergeant in Company D.¹¹ A few months later, the 7th Cavalry was shipped off to the Montana Territory, and on September 30th, 1877, engaged in a fight with Chief Joseph's band of Nez Perce near the Bear Paw Mountains.¹² During the Snake Creek Fight, Sergeant Strode was wounded.¹³ He lived,

¹ Little Bighorn Articles. Accessed November 11, 2018.

<http://www.littlebighorn.info/Cavalry/NameS.htm#ElijahStrode>.

² *Old Post Cemetery: Fort Meade, South Dakota*. Fort Meade, SD: Old Fort Meade Museum and Historic Research Association, 1989.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Find A Grave. Accessed November 11, 2018. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/12450746/elijah-t.-strode>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ John S. Gray. *Custer's Last Campaign: Mitch Boyer and the Little Bighorn Reconstructed*. NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1993.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Old Post Cemetery: Fort Meade, South Dakota*. Fort Meade, SD: Old Fort Meade Museum and Historic Research Association, 1989.

⁹ Lorna Thackeray. "Steamer Had Key Role in Historic Battle." *The Billings Gazette*. June 19, 2011. Accessed November 11, 2018. https://billingsgazette.com/news/state-and-regional/montana/steamer-had-key-role-in-historic-battle/article_6f278a60-abe0-5fae-a8c4-ce147ffea08a.html.

¹⁰ *Old Post Cemetery: Fort Meade, South Dakota*. Fort Meade, SD: Old Fort Meade Museum and Historic Research Association, 1989.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

however, and in the years following was demoted back to Private for unknown reasons, and was eventually transferred to Company H.¹⁴

The end of his story occurs while stationed at Fort Meade, Dakota Territory, but there are several incongruencies when it comes to telling the tale of Private Strode's death. The story goes that Elijah Strode was out on the town with several other privates in his company. It was around one or two o'clock in the morning when Deputy Sheriff Justice Schnell stepped into Tom Miller's saloon. Strode invited Schnell over to have a drink with him and another soldier with the last name of Brophy. Schnell agreed and sat down to have a drink. After a while, Strode pulled Schnell aside to talk to him privately. While this was happening, Brophy went behind the bar, pulled out his pistol, and yelled at Strode to give up his or he would shoot. Deputy Sheriff Schnell told Brophy to drop his pistol, but he refused and retorted, "If you don't make him give up that pistol, I will shoot you." Schnell decided to search Strode but found nothing. Strode then took a few steps back towards the wall and said, "Damn you, if you want to shoot ---", but before he could finish his sentence he was shot in the middle of the chest. Strode stumbled out the back door right into Tom Miller and softly spoke, "I am shot," before collapsing to the ground, lifeless. But the shot hadn't come from Brophy but from Thomas J. Whalen, who was also standing behind the bar. Schnell drew his revolver and ordered Whalen to come around the bar and drop his revolver on the inside shelf of the bar. Whalen told Schnell that he didn't mean to do it, but Schnell grabbed Whalen and motioned for Tom Miller, who had entered the room, to "take hold of this man."¹⁵

Thomas J. Whalen was arrested for the murder of Elijah T. Strode on February 14th, 1881. His motive is unknown, but this was not his first run-in with the law. An anonymous businessman in Sturgis claimed that Whalen was hung by a vigilance committee for horse stealing a few years back and Whalen had a nasty scar around his neck as evidence.¹⁶ On Tuesday, March 22nd, 1881, Thomas J. Whalen pled not guilty of murder in district court with the honorable G.C. Moody presiding. During the trial, both Tom Miller and Whalen testified that Strode had been holding a nickel-plated gun in his left hand. Whalen stated that he fired his weapon in self-defense and not with the intent to kill.¹⁷ The jury took roughly two days, and when they came back, no decision had been made, although eight believed some other person had killed Strode and that Whalen was innocent. The trial was disregarded and a new one was convened on November 1, 1881. This time, someone brought to light that Strode had attempted to take his own life upon a former occasion. Whether or not this is true, the jury once again came back two days later only to present their disagreement on the verdict. With ten agreeing Whalen was acting in self-defense and two believing he should be convicted, the trial came to an end.¹⁸

It is unclear what really happened that night, and why the life of a 29 year old man with brown eyes, brown hair, a fair complexion, and a height of 5'9" was taken from this world.¹⁹ His murderer was probably never convicted, and for the last 137 years, Elijah T. Strode has been

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "Newspaper Accounts of the Murder of Elijah Strode." Accessed November 11, 2018. <http://pie.midco.net/treasuredude/StrodeNewspaperAccounts.pdf>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *Old Post Cemetery: Fort Meade, South Dakota*. Fort Meade, SD: Old Fort Meade Museum and Historic Research Association, 1989.

resting at the Fort Meade Cemetery outside of Sturgis, South Dakota. Here he will stay, his death a mystery, and his life remembered now by those reading this.