

## **Lt. Bradley's Letter to the Helena Herald**

**To the editor of the Herald:**

**In the presence of so great a disaster as that which overtook the regular troops on the Little Horn, and the consequent excited state of the public mind and its eagerness to get hold of every detail, however minute, of that unfortunate affair, it is to be expected that many stories of a sensational character having no foundation in truth would obtain currency in the newspapers and credence with the public. Of such a character is that now going the rounds of the press, to the effect that the Sioux had removed Custer's heart from his body and danced around it, a story related upon the authority of one Rain-in-the-Face, a Sioux chief who participated in the fight and afterward returned to his Agency. Of the same character, also, is the sweeping statement as to the general shocking mutilation of the bodies of the soldiers who fell on that occasion.**

**The bare truth is painful enough to the relatives and friends of these unfortunate men without the cruel and gratuitous exaggeration of their grief that must come from the belief that they had been horribly mutilated after death.**

**It therefore seems to me worthwhile that these stories should receive emphatic contradiction, and being in a position to make such a denial I address to you this letter with that object.**

**In my capacity as Commander of the Scouts, accompanying General Gibbon's column, I was usually in the advance of all his movements, and chanced to be upon the morning of the 27<sup>th</sup> of June, when the column was moving upon the supposed Indian village in the Little Horn valley. I was scouting the hills some two or three miles to the left of the column upon the opposite bank of the river from that traversed by the column itself, when the body of a horse attracted our attention to the field of Custer's fight, and hastening in that direction the appalling sight was revealed to us of the entire command in the embrace of death.**

**This was the first discovery of the field, and the first hasty count made of the slain, resulting in the finding of the 197 bodies reported by General Terry.**

Later in the day I was sent to guide colonel Benteen of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, to the field, and was a witness to his recognition of the remains of Custer. Two other officers of the regiment were also present, and joined in their identification; and as all had known him well in life, they could not be mistaken; and *the body so identified was wholly unmutilated.* (Italics mine ) Even the wounds that caused his death were scarcely discoverable (though the body was entirely naked) so much so that when I afterwards asked the gentlemen whom I accompanied whether they had observed his wounds they were forced to say that they had not.

Probably never did a hero who had fallen upon the field of battle appear so much to have died a natural death. His expression was rather that of a man who had fallen asleep and enjoyed peaceful dreams than that of one who had met his death amid such fearful scenes as that field had witnessed, the features being wholly without ghastliness or any impress of fear, horror, or despair. He had died as he had lived- a hero- and excited the remark of those who had known him and saw him there, "You could almost imagine him standing before you!" Such was Custer at the time of his burial on the 28<sup>th</sup> of June, three days after the fight in which he had fallen, and I hope this assurance will dispose of the horrible tale of the mutilation and desecration of his remains.

Of the 206 bodies buried on the field, there were very few that I did not see, and beyond scalping, in possibly a majority of cases, there was little mutilation. Many of the bodies were not even scalped, and in the comparatively few cases of disfiguration, it appeared to me the result rather of a blow with a knife, hatchet, or war club to finish a wounded man, than a deliberate mutilation. Many of Custer's men must have been disabled with wounds during the fight, and when the savages gained possession of the field such would probably have been killed in the manner indicated. The bodies were nearly all stripped, but it is an error to say Kellogg, the correspondent, was the only one that escaped this treatment.

I saw several entirely clothed, half a dozen at least, who, with Kellogg, appeared to owe this immunity to the fact that they had fallen some distance from the field of battle, so that the Indians had

not cared to go to them, or had overlooked them when the plundering took place. The real mutilation occurred in the case of Reno's men, who had fallen near the village. These had been visited by the squaws and children, and in some instances the bodies were frightfully butchered. Fortunately not many were exposed to such a fate. Custer's field was some distance from the village, and appears not to have been visited by these hags, which probably explains the exemption from mutilation of those who had fallen there.

Yours truly,

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First Lieut., 7<sup>th</sup> Inft.  
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