

1977

The Court-Martial of George Armstrong Custer

Robert C. Berkley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Berkley, Robert C. (1977) "The Court-Martial of George Armstrong Custer," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 30 : No. 3 , Article 22.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol30/iss3/22>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

probably all that the current state of the art will permit.

RICHARD NED LEBOW
Naval War College

Jones, Douglas C. *The Court-Martial of George Armstrong Custer*. New York: Scribner's, 1976. 291pp.

Chances are most schoolchildren learn about and remember Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer as the "hero" of the battle of the Little Big Horn (Montana Territory), where he, on the morning of 25 June 1876, along with his entire unit of 266 officers and men (including 5 civilians and 3 Indian scouts), rode into the midst of thousands of hostile Indians and, to a man, were slaughtered. Custer, a graduate at the bottom of his West Point Class of 1861, was never known for his faint-heartedness or lack of ambition. At the age of only 25 he became a temporary brigadier general of a Michigan volunteer cavalry brigade that distinguished itself in the battle of Gettysburg, and Custer earned for himself national renown and a reputation for daring and brilliance. As many a combat commander has discovered, however, the difference between daring and brilliance and recklessness and defeat can be a very thin one indeed.

In that summer of 1876, Custer and his 7th U.S. Cavalry regiment were ordered against the Sioux, led by Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse. Custer's spearheading unit was one of three converging columns ordered to return the Sioux (and their friends the Cheyenne) to reservations they had left in protest of the U.S. Government's inability to control gold-seeking white prospectors from entering Indian lands. Custer was ordered by his immediate superior, Brig. Gen. A.H. Terry, to rendezvous with Terry's force on 26 June for a coordinated attack. Instead, Custer attacked the vastly superior Indian force one day early, with fateful results.

What if Custer had survived the battle that day and had been brought to account for his actions which contravened the orders of General Terry? Was Custer's attack the result of his desire to gain immediate tactical advantage following loss of the element of surprise? Or, was his attack the result, as the prosecution in *The Court-Martial of George Armstrong Custer* charges, of Custer's "overriding ambition (to) precipitate a headlong engagement with a vastly superior enemy in order to defeat said enemy before other friendly forces could arrive to assist him?"

In his superbly written, historically based account, novelist Douglas C. Jones poses some interesting questions: To what extent are a commander's wrong battlefield decisions criminally neglectful? How does one sustain the burden of proving that disastrous actions stem from political ambitions or from a desire for personal glory? What is the measure of an "unwarranted loss of animals and men?" While perplexing, these questions can at least be resolved in a court of law. But should they, or should they more appropriately be resolved in another forum? The author has succeeded in illustrating the difficulty in obtaining convictions for even the most disastrous decisions made in the heat of battle, even those with seemingly blatant ulterior motives. By implication, Mr. Jones also refers to two areas of potential abuse in the military judicial system: "command influence" and military prosecutors who may not be truly independent of, and immune from, those with an interest in the case. Neither plays an important role in this novel, but the reader can judge the implications.

As an interesting reading experience, *The Court-Martial of George Armstrong Custer* is commended for students of battles as well as for students of the courtroom. Jones' novel also provides a valuable psychological insight as to what may have motivated Custer's

148 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

decision that unfortunate day on the Little Big Horn.

ROBERT C. BERKLEY
Commander (JAGC), U.S. Navy
Naval War College

Rhodes, Anthony. *Propaganda, The Art of Persuasion: World War II*. Edited by Victor Margolin. New York and London: Chelsea House. 319pp.

Psychological warfare, we are reminded by Daniel Lerner in his academic "Afterword" to this outsize volume, "is as old as Joshua's trumpets at the walls of Jericho." The present work attempts, for the period 1933-1945, a comprehensive overview of the craft in all its dimensions. The output of only the principal Allied and Axis adversaries is considered (Germany, Italy, Japan, Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union), but the elements comprising that output are lavishly displayed: poster, leaflet, radio, film, and postage stamp.

In addition to Lerner's 8-page monograph on propaganda and psychological war which really should have been boosted up to "Foreword"—there is a 6-page discussion by William Murphy of the propaganda film, buttressed by an elaborate "filmography" of Axis and Allied documentary productions. The principal author, Anthony Rhodes—an English journalist, novelist, and travel writer supplies the main text, which in each chapter is paralleled by black-and-white illustrations and rounded out with a color section. One chapter is devoted to Resistance propaganda on the continent of Europe.

For so various a project the number of spelling and typographical errors is not obtrusive, but one howler must be shared here: The Marshall Islands of the western Pacific emerge (p. 259) as "the Martials!" A few of the caption or title translations suffer rites of passage. For example, the Nazi anti-Semitic theme of *der Fwige Jude* (p. 49), which should be

translated as "The Wandering Jew," comes out literally as "the Eternal Jew." While the text several times assures us that Josef Goebbels, the German propaganda minister, was a genius at his work, the thesis is never analyzed. Indeed, the text as a whole, panoramic though it be and jampacked with names, will have little that is new to offer past students of the subject. The volume's index is grossly inadequate.

But such carpings pale in face of the overwhelming testimony of the illustrations themselves. Printed on first-class stock, every drawing is cleanly reproduced, and the color items are at times staggering. Considering the cost of artwork today, the book's price is not exorbitant. In sum, here is an opulent introduction to a very intriguing topic.

CURTIS CARROLL DAVIS

Rider, Hope S. *Valour Fore and Aft: Being the Adventures of the Continental Sloop Providence 1775-1779, Formerly Flagship Katy of Rhode Island's Navy*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1977. 259pp.

Mrs. Rider here traces the engrossing story of one small 12-gun sloop which enjoyed perhaps the most colorful career in the war at sea for American independence. Equally fascinating is the cast of characters who served as commanding officers of this inconspicuous trader turned man-of-war.

Owned by John Brown, merchant prince of Providence, *Katy* was chartered by the Rhode Island Government to protect the trade in Narragansett Bay shortly after open fighting erupted at Lexington and Concord. During the fall of 1775, the Colony purchased *Katy* "with her boats, stores and appurtenances" for \$1,250.

Abraham Whipple, local and active revolutionary, commanded *Katy* in the Rhode Island Navy. It was Whipple who, in 1772, led the band of defiant