Veterinary Service on Custer’s Last Campaign

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THE SPECTACLE of a thundering cavalry charge overwhelming a terrified foe makes thrilling Hollywood fare, but rarely materialized in real life. All too often, the ungallant preliminaries to such a stirring climax had reduced the trooper’s steed to staggering crowbait.

During the first two years of the Civil War the Union cavalry did not exceed 60,000 men; yet it consumed 284,000 horses, precious few in action. In just the winter of 1863-1864, and within only the Union army of Tennessee, 30,000 cavalry horses perished. The major reason? Inadequate animal care.¹

Although the first domestication of animals probably gave birth to the art of veterinary medicine, professional status did not arrive until the middle of the 19th century. Even then, the cavalry arm of the service lagged far behind the civilian population in recognizing the value of veterinary care.

At the opening of the Civil War, the regular army boasted five regiments of cavalry and innumerable horses and mules used for transportation in the field. The quartermaster department bore the responsibility for all these animals in procurement, distribution, and supplying feed and care. Yet not a single veterinarian served anywhere in the army. One enlisted man in each cavalry company was a farrier, but his obligation ceased when the animals were shod.

The humaneness of a President forced the initial step that presaged a new attitude. The appalling mistreatment of animals in the service deeply offended Abraham Lincoln. When asked to approve the authorization of a sixth cavalry regiment, the President imposed a condition of his own. For this reason War Department General Order No. 16, dated May 4, 1861, carried a

¹. This, and following, information on the development of the army veterinary service is based on Louis A. Merrilliat and Dalwin M. Campbell, Veterinary Military History of the United States, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1935).
presidential paragraph calling for one veterinary sergeant in all six cavalry regiments. These appointments soon commanded the princely salary of $17 a month!

The year 1863 marked two further steps that heralded the eventual development of an army veterinary service. The first guaranteed that President Lincoln would no longer have to fight the battle alone, for the civilian profession that year organized the American Veterinary Medical Association, with one of its major aims to strengthen the army service. The second was War Department Order No. 73, dated March 24, which authorized a veterinary surgeon for each cavalry regiment with the rank of sergeant-major and the pay of a first lieutenant—$75 a month. This regulation remained in effect for the duration of the war.

These early measures, however, proved powerless to correct one of the worst evils and the heaviest financial drain—the horse procurement system. Purchased in enormous numbers from near and far, the animals were densely crowded in corrals knee-deep in mud and excreta, inadequately fed, and watered from a common stagnant trough. With them came every contagion known to the equine world. In such unsanitary remount depots, disease decimated the herds. The only thing that could be said for the system was that survivors were indeed hardy and immune.

This army neglect appalled every farmer of the day, for such practices did not reflect the current state of knowledge. Prior to the war, glanders, a justly dreaded disease of horses communicable to man, was rare in this country. But as a result of the army procurement and resale system it became epidemic throughout the nation before the end of the war. The economic loss was astronomical and it took decades of effort to bring the disease under control again.

The cavalry mount in the Civil War faced disease, overwork, abuse and neglect, for there is more to the proper care of horses than ritual grooming. The veterinary sergeant, poorly trained, if at all, was unequal to the task. Lacking military rank, he could exert little influence against the ingrained tradition that cavalry horses were as expendable as paper plates are now.

Worse yet, the cavalry of that day was still dream-living in a romantic past. When well-mounted, it doted on gallant charges, though the saddle furnished a defeating platform for doing execution with firearms. And when bereft of mounts, it exposed less mobility and combat skill than the lowly infantry. Not until late in the war did Gen. Philip H. Sheridan revolutionize cavalry
tactics by exploiting a superior mobility to reach tactical positions from which troopers could fight effectively on foot.

After the war the next advance came in July, 1866, when congress, in authorizing four new cavalry regiments to be numbered Seventh through 10th, empowered the secretary of war to appoint, on recommendation of regimental officers, two veterinary surgeons to each of the new, but not the old, regiments. A senior veterinarian, paid $100 a month, usually served the regimental headquarters, while the junior, receiving $75 a month, some separated company or battalion. Although this arrangement was inequitable between the new and old units, it was to endure for the next 33 years. Further, the failure to specify the qualifications of veterinarians was not remedied until an order of 1879 restricted appointments to graduates of recognized veterinary colleges.

The theater of operations after the war shifted from the populous and fertile East with its network of roads, rivers, canals, and railways to the unpopulated, barren plains and mountains of the Indian frontier with its meager transportation facilities. Hence, just as the effort to provide improved animal care showed signs of progress, the means of furnishing it diminished.

The difficulty in chasing elusive Indians with infantry was widely recognized, but the mounted arm faced its own special problems. Hardworked cavalry mounts required grain, not just hay or grazing. Since full daily forage for one horse came to 14 pounds of hay, or 12 pounds of grain, this posed a supply problem of towering magnitude. Furnishing forage at isolated frontier posts was a never-ending headache and a heavy expense. Local contractors usually cut and delivered hay, but sometimes this chore fell to the troops, diverting them from military duties.

These garrison problems exploded as soon as the cavalry took the field. Every extended campaign demanded slow and extensive wagon trains, and steamboats when possible, to transport mountains of forage, rations, ammunition, and other things to stock supply depots in the area of operations. Depots then had to be guarded, preferably by infantry, since they consumed less stores themselves. Nor did this supply problem vanish when the cavalry launched seek-and-destroy operations from such depots.

The Indian was born to live off the country, but the cavalryman had to tote his own rations. The warrior boasted many ponies that thrived on scant grass and could subsist on cottonwood bark, while the trooper had to nurse a single, grain-dependent horse.
through an entire campaign. Supplies for a hot chase, even when launched from the best-stocked depot, had to be restricted to what the trooper could carry on his person; part rations and no forage abbreviated the sortie, but still so punished the mounts as to require a long after-period of rest and recuperation.

To be sure, the pack animal furnished a means of rapid transport, but it was not until after the Civil War that Gen. George Crook developed and perfected the military pack train, whose skilled civilian packers and trained mules could outmarch the cavalry it supported *without forage for itself.* Unfortunately, other officers proved slow to adopt this efficient, but costly, technique. They relied instead on amateur trains using untrained draft mules and novice packers drained from the fighting ranks. Such outfits not only woefully retarded the column, but failed to meet the supply requirements.

It was this slowness and restricted range that reduced the frontier cavalry to near impotence against the superbly mobile Plains Indian; and it was this inability to sustain forage requirements that punished the horses. When, as was often the case, the country was poor in grass, or so unsafe as to demand close picketing, or military necessity worked the animals too many hours to leave adequate grazing time, the horses deteriorated, inevitably and swiftly. The choice was often a brutal one: seek and destroy the foe, or, save the horses.

As the first of the four new postwar regiments, Gen. George A. Custer’s Seventh cavalry was activated before the close of 1866 and promptly saw hard service on the Plains from the Platte to the Washita—but with its veterinary positions left vacant. It was not until May 14, 1869, that Dr. John Honsinger, a native of Germany but then a resident of Adrian, Mich., accepted the first appointment as senior veterinary surgeon of the Seventh cavalry. Then three more years passed before Dr. John Tempany, a New Yorker, joined as the first junior veterinarian on March 19, 1872.

Orders of February, 1873, transferred the regiment from a tour of duty in the South to the Department of Dakota. Dr. Tempany accompanied Maj. Marcus A. Reno’s companies I and D to St. Paul, whence they escorted the International Northern Boundary Survey along the Canadian border that summer. In October he

3. Names, regimental assignments, and dates of service of army veterinarians are listed in Merrillat and Campbell, *Veterinary Military History.*
returned with the battalion to garrison the wintry post of Fort Totten on the shore of Devil’s lake in Dakota territory. 4

Meanwhile, Dr. Honsinger went with Custer’s 10 companies to Yankton, where they experienced a memorable Dakota blizzard before marching up the Missouri to join Gen. David S. Stanley’s Yellowstone expedition, which escorted the surveyors of the Northern Pacific railroad. On the north bank of the Yellowstone opposite present Miles City, Mont., Custer’s advance battalion, on August 4, engaged an army of angry Sioux protesting the invasion of their treaty lands by the hated railroad. Dr. Honsinger, and sutler Augustus Baliran, having forged ahead of the main column to water their thirsty horses, ran into an ambush set by Rain-in-the-Face and succumbed to a shower of arrows. 5

Expedition correspondent Samuel J. Barrows described Dr. Honsinger on that fatal morning as

a fine-looking, portly man, about 55 years of age, dressed in a blue coat and buckskin pantaloons, mounted on his fine blooded horse. . . . No man of the regiment took more care of his horse than he. It was an extra-professional care—a love of the horse for his own sake. . . . He had taken the horse at Yankton, in the Spring, from one of the cavalry troops—a gaunt-looking steed then, but under his fostering care he had grown fat and sleek.

In addition to this tribute to the doctor’s feeling for animals, Barrows observed that he had served throughout the Civil War and was “greatly esteemed by officers and men for his personal and professional qualities.” 6

To replace the late Dr. Honsinger, Dr. Tempany was promoted to the senior position. He arrived at Fort Abraham Lincoln, opposite Bismarck, on October 29, 1873. Only the day before, Dr. John Bretherton, an Englishman appointed from Minnesota, replaced him in the junior position at Fort Totten. He soon fell ill, however, and resigned the following August, leaving Dr. Tempany to carry on alone. The latter served on the Black Hills expedition of 1874 and remained at Fort Lincoln through most of the next year while half the regiment took station in the Department of the Gulf.

Dr. Charles A. Stein, the German father of a large family in New Orleans, accepted the appointment of junior veterinarian on

July 15, 1875, and hastened to report for duty with Company B at Shreveport, La. When Dr. Tempany resigned on October 1, Dr. Stein was promoted to the senior position with orders to proceed to Fort Lincoln. His transfer was delayed until spring, however, to spare his family the hardship of a winter move to the snow-bound post. In late March he started out with a herd of mules for delivery to his new station, which he reached on April 17, fated to join Custer’s Sioux campaign of 1876.7

“I have had a visit from the Veterinary Surgeon . . .,” wrote contract medical surgeon James M. DeWolf on May 8. “[He is] not so very nice but tolerable he imagines he knows something about medicine it seems so ridiculous to hear him talk mixed Latin German & English it would make you laugh.” 8 Dr. DeWolf, having been appointed hospital steward from the ranks, had concurrently attended Harvard Medical School, from which he had graduated only the summer before. When a doctor from Harvard finds a veterinarian with a German accent “tolerable,” it may be assumed that the latter was a pretty decent fellow and well qualified! Furthermore, at that time Germany was turning out the best men in the profession.

Dr. Stein’s first duty was to inspect the cavalry horses in preparation for the coming campaign, reconditioning those not up to standard and condemning those truly unserviceable. According to the regimental returns, the Seventh cavalry began the month of April with a total of 722 horses, of which 39 were unserviceable. By the end of the month Dr. Stein had reduced the total to 683, of which he pronounced 10 as unserviceable.9 He had apparently accomplished this without official aid, but on May 8 Regimental Special Order No. 36 detailed Pvt. Martin Kefoye of Company G to daily duty as his assistant.10

Dr. Stein probably worried about one serious problem that was beyond his power to remedy. Late in April 64 recruits assigned to Companies B, G, and K, were delivered unmounted, though it was too late to procure additional mounts. It is not possible to fix the precise shortage, for the returns account only for public horses. Officers, allowed more than one horse according to rank, could choose private animals, for which the quartermaster was obligated to furnish public forage. If the officers averaged one public horse each, there would have been only 644 mounts for the

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10. *7th Cavalry Order Book, 1876*, RG 393, National Archives.
718 enlisted troopers who served on the expedition, making a shortage of 74.

Custer might have moved heaven and earth to remedy this deficiency, but he had been subpoenaed to testify on administration scandals in Washington. Pres. Ulysses S. Grant, in a fit of pique, had held him there and then demoted him from command of the expedition to that of only his regiment. As a result, Gen. Alfred H. Terry, commanding the Department of Dakota, found himself suddenly and belatedly assigned to lead the column of cavalry and infantry.

On the misty morning of May 17, 1876, the Dakota column paraded out of Fort Abraham Lincoln to launch a summer-long Indian campaign that the fates had slated for frustration and disaster. As a prophetic note, the 64 disgruntled recruits slunk in the rear of the parade on foot, deaf to the spirited play of the band. One of them, Pvt. Jacob Horner, left an account describing the hardship experienced in tramping 318 miles to the mouth of Powder river in new cavalry boots, eating the dust of more privileged comrades.

Contemporaneous records contain relatively few references to Dr. Stein's activities on the campaign. But the diary of expedition correspondent Mark H. Kellogg mentions on May 21 that one mule, diseased with glanders, was shot. That evening he further recorded that “U.S.A. veterinary surgeon, Dr. C.A. Stein [misread Stern by the diary transcriber] duties begin when we get into camp.” This passage indicates that an animal inspection was held daily at this time. Kellogg's news dispatch of May 29 was curtailed for lack of space, but the editor apologized for having to omit “several personal references, including a handsome one on the efficient Veterinary Surgeon, C.A. Stein.”

When the column encamped just west of the Little Missouri on May 31, the horse count was again taken for the monthly return. Seven horses appear to have become unserviceable on the march of 177 miles. Only one of them, however, belonged to the four companies that Custer had taken on a fast scout 25 miles up the Little Missouri and back on the preceding day. General Terry had ordered the quartermaster to issue no more than half forage (six

11. This and subsequent details of this Indian campaign, not otherwise documented, are based on the extensive primary sources cited in John S. Gray, *Centennial Campaign: The Sioux War of 1876* (The Old Army Press, Fort Collins, 1976).


pounds of grain) to any animal after May 21, but the marches, having averaged less than 12 miles a day, should have left adequate grazing time. The implication is that accident or neglect, rather than overwork, had brought these animal casualties.

On June 10 Major Reno took the right wing of the Seventh cavalry on a reconnaissance up Powder river in search of stray Indians. Although his troopers were fully rations for 12 days, his amateur pack train carried only one-sixth forage for the horses (two pounds of grain per day). He found and followed for some distance up Rosebud creek the heavy trail of a hostile village in this march of 240 miles in 10 days. On his return he reported his animals to be "leg weary and in need of shoes." 

Meanwhile, the remainder of the regiment rested a few days at the mouth of Powder river, where the infantry was establishing a substantial supply depot. Here a total of two officers and over 150 enlisted men were detached from the Seventh cavalry in preparation for seek-and-destroy operations. Nearly all the recent unmounted recruits were left behind, revealing that the shortage of horses was a major reason for detaching so many men. The process succeeded in releasing enough horses to mount each of the 597 officers and men who would continue the campaign.

There is strong evidence that Dr. Stein was one of the two officers detached at this depot. Although the regimental returns list him vaguely as "on duty in the field," they do specify that his personal assistant, Private Kefoyle, was detached there. More conclusive is the fact that the entire depot was moved up to the mouth of the Rosebud on July 28, and two days later, when the survivors of Custer's defeat approached the new depot, Lt. Edward S. Godfrey recorded in his diary that Dr. Stein rode out to meet them. As confirmatory, though negative, evidence, there are no references to Stein’s presence with Custer's force, before, during, or after the battle. This is significant, for he would certainly have aided the overworked Dr. Henry R. Porter, the sole surviving medical officer, in caring for half a hundred wounded men.

At noon of June 22, Custer led his reunited regiment up the valley of the Rosebud to pursue and attack the hostile village of 400 lodges whose trail Reno had discovered. The pack train carried 15 days’ rations for the men, but again only one-sixth

15. Field Order, May 21, 1876, Dept. of Dakota, "Letters, Sioux Uprising," Box No. 19, RG 98, National Archives.
16. Reno to Terry, June 19, 1876, ibid.
forage for the horses. Long daily marches for 15 days would clearly endanger the horses, but Terry’s plan called for only 30 miles a day, expecting the strike-force to overtake the village on the upper Little Big Horn within a few days.

Custer’s walking pace up the Rosebud followed Terry’s plan to the letter, covering 12 miles the first afternoon, 33 the second day, and 28 on the third, which included several short rests and a three-hour halt in the afternoon. That evening the hostile trail, suddenly remarkably fresh, unexpectedly turned west over the divide toward the valley of the Little Big Horn.

The march of June 25 began at midnight with an eight-mile ascent up the divide, followed by a six-hour rest, and then a late morning climb of five miles, interrupted by a halt of an hour and a half. This would have been all for the day, for the scouts had spotted the village on the Little Big Horn and Custer was planning to remain hidden before launching a surprise attack at dawn the next morning.

By this time, however, several parties of hostile spies had discovered the approaching column. Convinced that any alarm would prompt the village to break up and flee, Custer felt compelled to change this plan. Neither he nor any other officer knew that recent reinforcements had more than doubled the village to about a thousand lodges and some two thousand warriors. Nor did any of them sense the true temper of the Indians. An immediate threat to their women and children, coupled to a full awareness that their tribal ways had been marked for elimination, would unleash a desperate resistance.

Having reluctantly abandoned a delayed surprise for an afternoon approach and attack, at noon of that fatal day Custer ordered his men forward on a steady descent of 14 miles at a slightly more rapid pace. He took the lead with his own battalion of five companies and Reno’s of three. He sent Capt. Frederick W. Benteen’s three companies to a high ridge about two miles to the left to see whether the village was moving away; the captain was then to hurry and join the lead, but instead he moved slowly to fall far behind. The amateur pack train lagged even farther behind, draining off soldier-packers and an escort company equivalent to the other battalions.

On nearing the village, Reno took the advance to attack the village from upstream, while Custer turned right to deliver a supporting attack from farther downstream. Reno was quickly repulsed, while the delayed Custer was annihilated. Benteen and the pack train eventually joined Reno on a hill top, where they lay
besieged until Terry, with Gen. John Gibbon’s Montana column, rescued them on June 27. It was a centennial blow to the frontier army, and a fleeting triumph for the Sioux and Cheyennes.

The Battle of the Little Big Horn took a tragic toll of men and a greater one of horses, as the returns for June 30 reveal. Of officers and men, 253 rode to their death. Of public horses, 319 perished and 15 more were rendered unserviceable. In every company more horses than men fell (or were captured), leaving but 263 serviceable mounts for the surviving 344 officers and men. When these remnants marched from the field on the night of June 29 with the rescue column, 29 wounded men rode on travois and litters, but some troopers must have been reduced to shank’s mare or pack mule.

Dr. Elwood L. Nye, the only competent veterinarian to study the Custer campaign, has advanced the thesis that Custer, assumed to be far harder on horses than other officers of his day, had so abused them that their failing condition contributed significantly to his disaster.\textsuperscript{18} We thoroughly respect Dr. Nye’s veterinary expertise, but are compelled to correct some of his campaign facts, dispute his assumption regarding Custer, and reject his conclusion about the battle.

We agree that there can be no doubt that when the cavalry horses reached the scene of battle they were in much less than fresh condition. They had been reduced to one-sixth forage for the four and a half days of marching from the mouth of the Rosebud. It appears that on the climb to the divide the water was unsuitably alkaline, and that the regiment had failed to make full use of the halts to unsaddle and graze the animals. As a result, at least seven mounts in Custer’s battalion alone are known to have given out entirely in the final miles, forcing their riders to straggle back to safety.

Having been nearly six weeks in the field, with never more than half forage, the right wing companies had ridden as much as 700 miles and those of the left wing as much as 600. There were, of course, a few days of hard riding and many days of full rest, but the over-all average amounted to about 16 miles a day, even for the most-traveled mounts. This should impose no strain on horses given good modern care and supplied with adequate forage. But, instead, they received the army care of 1876, with forage limited by the transport facilities of the time.

Above, the horse Comanche at Fort Riley. A survivor of the Battle of the Little Big Horn, the horse was probably the most famous recipient of veterinary service on Custer's last campaign. Left, Capt. Myles W. Keogh, Comanche's rider, who died in the battle.
These were not the failings of Custer, but of the century, and hampered all its campaigns. Custer’s marches, as we have related, were certainly not excessive by the accepted standards of the day. The assumption that he especially abused his animals on this campaign is completely shattered by comparing his performance with those of his fellow officers. No march of Custer’s matched the long, grueling, and unnecessary ride of Terry’s column across waterless badlands on June 25. Terry, Gibbon, and Crook made a week’s march in August that broke down numerous animals. In two weeks of September, Crook literally worked his horses to death.

We cannot accept the conclusion that the condition of the horses significantly affected the outcome of the Custer battle. Reno’s attack with 129 troopers, and Custer’s with 193, were widely separated in space and time, because of terrain features. Alone, each struck a hornet’s nest of fired-up warriors, who dealt them a classic defeat in detail. The rest of the regiment with Benteen and the pack train arrived too late to join any attack. How the horses, even if in superb condition, could have neutralized such odds, especially when practically all the fighting was done on foot, is not apparent.

Years after the battle, the romantic saga of Comanche, the wounded horse of Capt. Myles W. Keogh, billed as “the sole living thing found on the Custer field,” began to grow and capture the imagination of the public. Only one notice of Comanche has been found prior to April 10, 1878, when Col. Samuel D. Sturgis issued the regimental order that proscribed further riding and installed him as the ceremonial horse to commemorate the men lost in the famous battle.¹⁹

The romance in purest form appears in a biography of Capt. Grant Marsh, the able skipper of the supply boat, Far West. We quote the lyrical passages beginning with the arrival of the rescue column at the steamboat in the early hours of June 30:

The captain turned away to look after the accommodation of another passenger brought down with the wounded, whose housing, in the now crowded condition of the boat, was no easy problem. The passenger in question was a horse, but with such tender interest and affection was he already regarded by every man on board that they would almost rather have been left behind themselves than to have had him deserted.

Lieutenant Nowlan of Captain M.W. Keogh’s troop, I . . . discovered the horse standing in a ravine, covered with bullet and arrow wounds and half dead from loss of blood. He was instantly recognized as Comanche, the “claybank

¹⁹. Anthony A. Amaral, Comanche, the Horse That Survived the Custer Massacre (Los Angeles, 1961).
sorrel” charger of Captain Keogh. . . . Lieutenant Nolan caused the animal’s wounds to be dressed as well as possible and brought him to the boat. Captain Marsh at length found a place for Comanche at the extreme stern of the Far West, between the rudders. Here a stall softly bedded with grass was made for him and his care and welfare became the special duty of the whole boat’s company.

With the main column . . . came a civilian contract veterinary surgeon, whom Captain Marsh describes as “the worst scared man I ever saw.” The terror of the Indians had entered his soul, but the captain induced him by forcible persuasions to control his fears sufficiently to extract the bullets and arrow-heads from Comanche’s body and to dress his wounds thoroughly. The horse began to mend rapidly, and reached Fort Lincoln in safety.20

Our confidence in this picture of the heroic captain forcing the hysterical dutchman to work his healing magic on the exanguinated Comanche is somewhat undermined by the facts that Dr. Stein had not left the Powder river depot, and that Comanche had just made a night march of 15 miles over rough terrain.

Could Comanche have been “half dead from loss of blood” and still walked to the steamboat? Since he certainly accomplished this feat, was it necessary to nurse him aboard a boat overjammed with wounded men? And if everyone was already in transports of sentiment over him, why is it that not another account from the many aboard happens to mention him?

We are certain that the “charger” did not sail on the Far West to Fort Lincoln with the wounded men, and seriously doubt that he ever set hoof on her deck. He undoubtedly walked again with the rescue column on its two-day march down to the mouth of the Big Horn, where he spent nearly a month recuperating from his nonincapacitating wounds. The convalescent mount probably marched again for four days at the end of July, when the Seventh cavalry moved down to the new supply depot at the mouth of the Rosebud.

It was here that he first came under the care of Dr. Stein. It was only for two days, however, for the doctor left on August 2 aboard the Carroll with 20 sick troopers. She tied up at Bismarck on the 6th, and three days later the Bismarck Tribune noted: “Dr. C. A. Stein, Veterinary Surgeon, 7th Cavalry, has tendered his resignation because of inadequate salary, Congress having refused to raise the pay and rank of veterinary surgeons, and has returned to his family at Fort Lincoln.” There he remained until his discharge came through, effective September 1, 1876.

And what of Comanche? He came down on the very next boat, the E. H. Durfee, which left the Rosebud depot on August 5 and reached Bismarck on the 10th, with no local notice to mark his

arrival. His voyage was recorded, however, by an anonymous reporter writing from the mouth of the Rosebud on the 11th:

Hardly a day passes but brings some eloquent reminder of the terrible disaster to General Custer’s command. The steamer Durfee, which passed down the river several days since, had on board a horse, which was suffering from some severe bullet wounds received in that last charge. It was owned by Captain Keogh, 7th Cavalry, who was killed at the Battle of the Little Big Horn, and is named Comanche. It is presumed that after the death of Keogh, it broke through the enemy lines, as it afterwards joined Reno’s command. When discovered it carried seven bullets, which were extracted, and it was determined to attempt to save its life. It was accordingly shipped down the river and is now comfortably quartered at Fort A. Lincoln. Today it is the only living thing to remind one of the awful carnage. Comanche is an old soldier, having carried the dead Keogh through a number of battles during the Rebellion, and his honorable wounds should require that he be placed on the retired list with full pay.21

Two years later Colonel Sturgis’ ceremonial order exceeded the suggestion of our reporter. The publication of the order elicited the following comment in the St. Paul (Minn.) Pioneer Press for April 23, 1878:

There is little addition to be made to the interesting story regarding Captain Keogh’s horse, “Comanche,” in regard to which Dr. Stein of St. Paul figures. Dr. Stein was among the first that reached the fatal battleground where Custer and his comrades were slaughtered. It was discovered soon after reaching the field that Captain Keogh’s horse was alive, notwithstanding he had twenty bullets in him. Dr. Stein immediately went to work to extract the bullets, and succeeded in cutting out thirteen of them. Dr. Stein speaks favorably of the assistance he received, in extracting the bullets, from Lt. [James M.] Burns, acting assistant quartermaster at Fort Lincoln.

The puzzling implication that Dr. Stein had sped to the battlefield to operate on Comanche at Fort Lincoln, was corrected in the next day’s paper:

A slight inaccuracy occurred in the item published yesterday about Dr. Stein’s extracting those bullets from Captain Keogh’s horse. This inaccuracy is not of great consequence in itself, but inasmuch as the incident will constitute history in the future, it may as well be stated correctly. The thirteen bullets were not extracted by Dr. Stein on the battlefield, but at Fort Lincoln, to which place the noble animal had been transferred. At the time, Dr. Stein was awaiting action on his resignation, which he felt it necessary to forward to the War Department, and had obtained a leave of absence from General Terry. The army officers recollect very well the incident of Dr. Stein’s extracting the bullets.

The ceremonial order evoked another contribution to the Comanche saga which saw print before the legend could get out of hand. A reporter for the Bismarck Tribune went to Fort Abraham Lincoln to interview Comanche. He “asked the usual questions,” which his subject “acknowledged with a toss of his head, a stamp of his foot and a flourish of his beautiful tail.” His official keeper,

21. Chicago Times, August 20, 1876.
named as Farrier "John Rivers of Company I, Keogh's old troop, saved Comanche's reputation" by answering more fully. Here is the gist of what the reporter learned:

Comanche was a veteran, 21 years old, and had been with the 7th Cavalry since its organization in '66. . . .

He was found by Sergeant [Milton J.] DeLacey [Co. I] in a ravine where he had crawled, there to die and feed the Crows. He was raised up and tenderly cared for. His wounds were serious, but not necessarily fatal if properly looked after. . . .

He carries seven scars from as many bullet wounds. There are four back of the foreshoulder, one through a hoof, and one on either hind leg. On the Custer battlefield [actually Fort A. Lincoln, as we have seen] three of the balls were extracted from his body and the last one was not taken out until April '77. . . .

Comanche is not a great horse, physically talking; he is of medium size, neatly put up, but quite noble looking. He is very gentle. His color is "claybank." He would make a handsome carriage horse. . . .

Shortly after his resignation in September of 1875, Dr. Stein moved with his family to St. Paul, where he continued to practice his profession. Every year from 1878 through 1891 his name, and often his professional shingle, appeared in the St. Paul directories. Whether its abrupt disappearance therefrom signaled a move elsewhere, or his death, we do not know.

It is regrettable that no one seems to have gathered his personal account of the vexing veterinary problems of Indian campaigning, or even a reliable story of that equine symbol of survival, Comanche.