

**CHARLIE WINDOLPH'S PURPLE HEART**  
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In December of 1946 ninety-five year old Charles Windolph was awarded the Purple Heart for a wound suffered in the Battle of the Little Big Horn. If Windolph had learned anything from surviving the battle it was that no Indian bullet could stop him. "I'll always say it was a renegade cowpuncher who shot me," the feisty Windolph said, "It was just a flesh wound." His final years were spent with his daughter in Lead, South Dakota, greeting occasional visitors who dropped back to meet the man who had fought with Custer at the Little Big Horn. In the summer of 1947 one of those visitors was a tall, young seasonal ranger at the Custer Battlefield named **Robert Utley**. R.G. Cartwright, a high school coach in Lead had invited young Utley to stop by on his way home and meet one of the last survivors of the battle of the Little Bighorn. Last Stand. Mr. Utley shared the memories of that day with me. "The weather was sunny and warm. He was obviously a very old man physically, but his mind was clear, and he spoke vividly of his experiences on Reno Hill and especially his veneration of Captain Benteen" Utley recalled. It was well known that Charlie Windolph made no secret of his admiration for Frederick Benteen. And the feelings appear to have been mutual. The day of his discharge Benteen entered Windolph's room and instructed young Charlie to give him a piece of paper. "I do not often recommend a man, but I am going to write a recommendation for you," Benteen told Charlie. "He took the paper," Charlie recalled, "and wrote 'To Whom It May Concern: Sergeant Charles Windolph has been a member of my troop for two enlistments. He has been a gallant soldier. I take pleasure in recommending him to anyone who needs the service of a man. He has been faithful to me. F.W. Benteen, Col., U.S.A.' This document in the clear, vertical handwriting of that great soldier is my proudest possession. Money would not buy it."

As they sat on Windolph's porch in the dry warm summer air the old soldier spoke of his adventure at the Little Big Horn. "I think this was a story he had told so many times that it came out the same every time," Utley recalled. "Nonetheless, it was an inspiration for a kid of seventeen to sit listening to this survivor of the Little Bighorn," he said, "I gained no new insights into the battle, just the awe of actually hearing the oft-repeated story from this veteran. We sat for probably half an hour or 45 minutes as he spun the narrative in articulate, easy-to-understand fashion."

Windolph recalled that after the events of June 25 the night proved especially silent and trying. "No one was supposed to sleep, but now and then a man would topple off in spite of everything, but before daylight the attack commenced, and nobody slept after that." The Indians began firing on the troops in early morning. "All day long we lay

there in the hot sun," he said, "In our troop the only ones hit were picked off by sharpshooters. The Sioux had rifles that outranged ours." The heat brought on uncontrollable thirst. "In the afternoon of the 26th the wounded got to crying so pitifully for water that volunteers were called for to go down the draw on our side of the hill, and get it from the river. Several volunteered and made the trip under fire from the Sioux hidden in the brush on the opposite side of the river. Benteen sent four of us, Geiger, Mechling, Voit and myself to a point on the west side of the hill with orders to cover their trip." Windolph was later awarded the Medal of Honor along with a number of his fellow troopers. "There were many men that day deserving medals who never got them," he said. "There was Sergeant Paul who got shot leading a charge on the north side of the hill: and a braver man never lived. And "Crazy Jim" Seivers, Dan Newell, Slaper and many more."

The 1946 Purple Heart presentation was made at the home of Windolph's daughter Mrs. C.G. Fehlman in Lead. Time had not softened the fact that the old soldier was a Benteen man through and through. On his 98th birthday Charlie was quoted by a newspaper as saying that Custer had been a "fool" but added the general had been "extremely brave." As Charlie Windolph's Purple Heart was pinned on by Col. Paul Mapes, the old soldier sat emotionless. Someone asked for a word regarding the medal. Old Charlie moved slightly in his chair and gruffly replied, "I deserved it." Windolph lived four more years passing away in 1950. Robert Utley, "That summer of 1950 I again rode the bus down to Lead. Carrie entrusted me with a treasure trove of artifacts to carry back to Custer Battlefield: Windolph's discharge papers, signed by Captain Benteen; Windolph's Medal of Honor, awarded for bravery at the Battle of the Little Bighorn; and the Purple Heart that recognized his wound on Reno Hill." The last soldier participant of the battle to die, Windolph was laid to rest in the Black Hills National Cemetery.

Special thanks to **Robert Utley** and to Sharon Small, Little Big Horn Battlefield National Monument.

*The Logansport Pharas Tribune*, 12-10-1946 "Custer Was A Fool, Snaps Last Stand Survivor Of Little Big Horn."

*The Huronite and the Daily Plainsman*, 12-13-1946, "S.D. Veteran, 95, Gets Purple Heart."

*Battle of the Little Big Horn as related By Charles Windolph, Company H, Seventh Cavalry, U.S.A.* Courtesy Little Big Horn Battlefield National Monument Archives, #6248X.

I Fought with Custer: The Story of Sergeant Windolph, Last Survivor of the Battle of the Little Big Horn As told to Frazier and Robert Hunt.