DROPPED INTO HISTORY

A sophomore seminar gives students an intimate view of the people and places surrounding the Battle of Little Bighorn.

BY MIKE VANGEL

DAN ARMSTRONG

UNITED AIRLINES FLIGHT 1532

On a September night somewhere over the Midwest, Professor Scott Sagan was getting nervous. He was flying to Billings, Mont.—or at least, he was trying to—a pilgrimage of sorts that he's made for each of the last six years. The trip was part of a Sophomore College seminar Sagan teaches, one of 20 selective courses that rising sophomores can apply to take for the last three weeks before fall quarter. Titled The Face of Battle, his course whips students through a weeklong history of military theory, starting with Carl von Clausewitz and his "remarkable trinity," up to modern counterinsurgency combat like that in Afghanistan, or the ongoing ISIS conflict. But the terminology has a way of distancing people from war's gruesome reality. To get that, they visit battlefields.

As might be expected of a national security scholar who teaches military history, Sagan is a man who appreciates order. His colleague and co-teacher, Col. Joseph Felter, PhD '05, a retired Army Special Forces and foreign affairs officer now studying national security at Stanford's Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC), has a similar affinity for organization. This tendency is nowhere more evident than in the itinerary for the trip: five days in Washington, D.C. (where the class toured nearby Gettysburg, among other places), and two days in Billings, the closest major city to the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, each day subdivided into increments as small as five minutes.

Imagine Sagan's and Felter's concern, then, while shepherding 14 undergraduates across the country, when their flight from D.C. was delayed past the departure time of their connecting flight in Denver. Contextual note: The number of late-night, midweek flights from Denver to Billings can be counted on one hand; an even smaller number would have 16 open seats.

Various scenarios were debated. "We started thinking, are we going to have to get vans?" Felter remarked. It would be an eight-hour, all-night haul to make Billings by morning.

The plane touched down in Denver, the door opened, and the students and faculty took off at an awkward sprint across the terminal, arriving out of breath and hopeful.

The gate was still open.

Amy Zegart, co-director of CISAC, stood waiting for them. They were lucky: "The attendant was a Civil War reenactor," Zegart, MA '93, PhD '96, later explained. She had informed him about the group's travel mishap, and explained that she was observing a class going to the Little Bighorn, which so excited the gate attendant that he agreed to try to stall the plane. The attendant then began to describe the many characters he's portrayed in various battle reenactments; Zegart listened dutifully until reinforcements arrived. Half an hour later, the Stanford contingent was back on the runway.

MAGIC CITY

Billings is the largest city in Montana, although the main downtown can be driven through in about 10 minutes, if you time the lights right. Railroad lines hug the town and cut through its center, between the oil refineries at its outskirts and the Yellowstone River. Ford and Chevy pickups line the streets, more than a few with stickers proclaiming a different remarkable trinity: "God, Guts & Guns!"

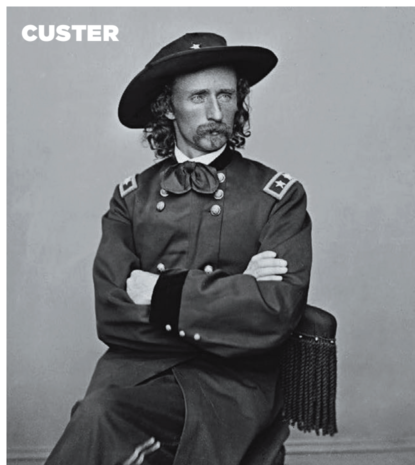
Billings is a modern city, with third-wave coffee shops and a bustling economy thanks to the oil and natural gas of the Bakken Formation. But it is also tethered to and proud of its frontier identity, and a long way from tech-centric Palo Alto.

Downtown, on the walls of the Montana Brewing Company, a portrait of Gen. George Armstrong Custer, America's original Golden Boy, hangs prominently among images of railroad workers. A few blocks away, in the lobby of the ClockTower Inn, Stanford lecturer Tom Freeland, who'd flown separately from San Jose, sat beneath a stuffed bison bust and an antler chandelier, waiting for the rest of the cohort to arrive.

A theater scholar and lecturer in Stanford's oral communication program, Freeland, PhD '99, serves as the course's third

instructor. Although Sagan is technically head of command, he, Felter and Freeland act as a sort of unified trio, each with a specific role to play as the Professor, the Colonel and the Thespian, respectively. The reason a military theory course requires a theater expert is the immersive teaching technique at its heart, called a Staff Ride. As Sagan says, "Much of what we learn about [battle] is from the perspective of leaders who choose to go to war. But there's often a huge discrepancy between the way leaders are thinking and what's really happening on the ground, and the people who are pulling the triggers or suffering the consequences." To make the experience more visceral, Sagan assigns each student four historical personae—two for Gettysburg, two for Little Bighorn. Some of them are well known, like Custer and President Ulysses S. Grant, while others are nameless noncombatants. The students then research them in minute detail, scraping Green Library for whatever resources they can find. "You're checking out these obscure biographies," explains Kiran Sridhar, one of the 12 students selected for the seminar, "which it's obvious are only read by people in this class. If you look at when they're stamped, they're always stamped out in early September of each year."

Freeland coaches the students as they shape their notes into first-person speeches they'll perform on the battlefield, at predetermined points where a character may have made a crucial decision, or fought, or died. The technique is one that America's military colleges have used to teach battle strategy since 1906. It helps students "understand the strategic context, but then also how that translates to the battlefield," says Sagan. By physically embodying the people, they're "trying to understand the motivations of the individuals."



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The hotel shuttle soon arrived with Sagan, Felter and the class members, who looked weary from their whirlwind week in D.C. Some students still had monologues to finish; others, like Carson Smith, had written their lines but hadn't yet rehearsed. She would portray Mo-nah-se-tah, daughter of Cheyenne chief Little Rock, whom Custer stole for his personal uses following a battle eight years before his doomed encounter at Little Bighorn. Smith wasn't sure how to practice without frightening her roommate or the people next door—her performance would be emotional; it would have to be, to be convincing—so she just ran lines in her head in the shower. As she explained later: "I didn't want to be screaming in my hotel room."

BATTLE DAY

The students rose early, heading across the parking lot for rations at Stella's Kitchen & Bakery, the diner where the group eats every year. It's the sort of place where patrons linger half the morning over their coffees and make a big to-do about not accepting money to cover the tip.

Gathered around a large table in the back corner of the diner, the students discussed dating, people from school, the Paleo diet. Leslie Bridges, one of Sagan's two assistants for the course, was just glad to see fruit again. She'd eaten "a lot of pork and bread" all summer, her second in a row spent at boot camp, where she'd earned her commission as a U.S. Marine. Although back in civilian life, she wore her tan combat boots to breakfast, and with consistent grace and politeness referred to the waitress as "ma'am" and other patrons as "sir."

As a senior, she was now the oldest student at the table. She first participated in The Face of Battle as a sophomore. "My whole Stanford experience has been shaped by this course," including her major and her career outlook, Bridges says. She'd always wanted to join the military—she was scheduled to attend boot camp after high school, until she got into Stanford—which attracted her to the course in the first place. But as a Choctaw and Cherokee woman, the chance to visit Little Bighorn had also meant an opportunity to connect with her heritage. "I was the only Native American student in the group" that year, she says. "It was really hard to be a spokesperson for the entire Native community."

This year, Bridges's role was to help the sophomores research lesser-known characters, while drawing on her theater background to coach them on their performances. She worked closely with Smith; Bridges had played Mo-nah-se-tah two years earlier.

Bridges's other main responsibility was to coordinate logistics for the trip. Part of the course's vision is to develop student leaders, so Sagan and Felter take a fairly hands-off approach once the traveling starts. As Felter said over breakfast, "You just have to let them go, and sometimes you have to let them fail."

Spirits were high as the caravan was readied right at 0800 hours. A few minutes later, everyone else filed out of the diner, piling into two vans Sagan and Felter had retrieved at dawn, and departed for the battlefield.

A little way outside of Billings, Interstate 90 opened up into prairie; mountains loomed deep blue in the distance. Someone's phone rang.

They'd forgotten Grant and Custer.

Griffin Bovee and Brendan Edelson stood on the sidewalk outside Stella's, their breath misting in the crisp Montana morning, wondering where the group had gone. Edelson had been waiting for Bovee, who had run to use the bathroom a moment before the vans left. Now Bovee was on his phone trying to summon them back. It would be a while—the vans were way out in the country now, and highway exits were rare between Billings and Hardin, the nearest town to the battlefield, 50 miles away.

Bovee and Edelson laughed nervously, watching up the street for the first signs of their classmates. "Sagan's not gonna like this," Edelson said, shaking his head.

DAN ARMSTRONG

STAGING HISTORY: Freeland coached students on how to portray their characters during battlefield soliloquies.

THE APPROACH

The Stanford cohort entered the Little Bighorn River valley from the west, passing the Crow Agency, which manages the reservation territory surrounding the battlefield. While the Sioux won that day, the U.S. won the war, and when it was over the government deeded all the land around the site of its defeat to the one tribe on the white side of history.

There was a sense that morning that the class had entered a place caught in a negotiation between past and present. "It's just odd," said Smith, "seeing people, like, going to the gas station in the morning, part of their daily routine, and this is like a trip for us." It was different than the pristine parklands at Gettysburg they had seen a few days earlier; here, what had resided behind the glossy varnish within a history book was just some people's home.

An hour outside Billings, the group stopped near the Crow's Nest, the point in the Wolf Mountains where Custer's scouts first spotted the Sioux encampment near the river below, in late June 1876. Two years prior, Custer had commanded an expedition into the Black Hills, within the Great Sioux Reservation, where geologists he'd brought confirmed what miners had long suspected: The hills held gold. The U.S. economy was stagnant, the country on the brink of crisis. President Grant had a choice to make, and he chose gold. The government tried to bargain the Black Hills away from the Sioux, who flatly refused. Eventually, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs ordered every last member of the tribe to report to the rez. They didn't all show, and so there was Custer, an enforcer, roaming the territory and looking for a fight.

Ben Gardner-Gill, playing Custer, told how his scouts identified the village from 12 miles away. "I had to see this for myself," the bespectacled general said, adding, "I have the best eyes." Though Gardner-Gill had meticulously researched his role, it was odd listening to a 20-year-old puff himself up like the vainglorious Civil War hero he was portraying. Rounds of giggles broke the tension every few seconds as "Custer" pushed up his glasses and bragged about his keen eyesight.

It was near the spot where the students stood that Custer made the fateful decision to split his 7th Cavalry, directing Capt. Frederick Benteen's battalion away from the valley to protect the regiment's left flank, and, a few miles farther on, ordering Maj. Marcus Reno to attack the village's southern edge. (See diagram on page 58.) Custer led another detachment behind the high ridgeline along the river, hoping to sneak up on the village and capture its women and children, ending the fight. But the village had been alerted, and hundreds of warriors rode out to meet the cavalrymen. Reno's troops retreated up a hill where they were eventually joined by Benteen and his men, both battalions pinned down by the Indians. Custer ended up stranded five miles away on what is now called Last Stand Hill, where he and the last of his 200-plus soldiers were killed by a Sioux force estimated at 1,000 or more. Some military historians criticize Custer for a reckless attack based on weak intelligence; others point out that his tactic had worked in earlier engagements, including at the Battle of Washita. (It was after that battle that Custer forced 17-year-old Mo-nah-se-tah into his service, forever binding her name to his.)

In that same field where Gardner-Gill would lay out Custer's final battle, Carson Smith paused, reflecting. Visiting this land was why she'd applied for the course in the first place. She was a member of the Choctaw Nation, so her ancestors hadn't fought here, but as one of the defining sites in Native American history, it still held a special mystique for her. As she prepared to play Mo-nah-se-tah, she imagined the woman's fear and anger when she became Custer's trophy. "Her story is made special because of Custer," Smith said,

"but it's really the story of so many indigenous women."

When the time came, Smith stepped in front of the group. She spoke of being dragged from her lodge by soldiers, of singing lullabies so her infant wouldn't hear the screams of the dying, and then the feeling of Custer's eyes on her. Her voice rose louder, her words taking on the rhythm of a poem, filling the fields. "He has not only violated my body, but he has violated my soul!" she cried, channeling Mo-nah-se-tah's rage and her sorrow until it felt, for a moment, like the line between performance and reality had blurred.

BATTLE RIDGE

A narrow strip of asphalt connects Last Stand Hill with the Reno-Benteen Battlefield, the only two battle sites open to the public. As the class wound along Battlefield Road out to where Maj. Reno retreated, the scope of the fight sank in.

Picture that whole valley, a sea of teepees. Feel the way the sun bites, no cover for miles around. Imagine climbing these sheer bluffs.

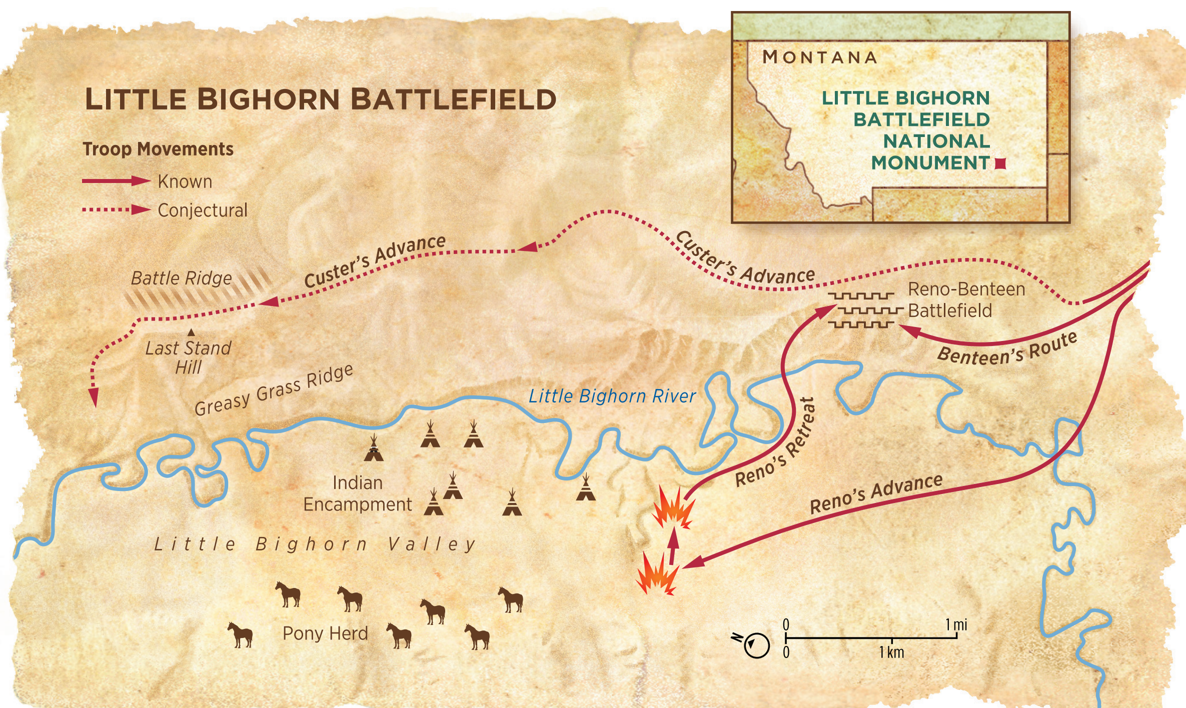
The students listened to speeches at Reno Hill about the panic and confusion during the battle, and the soldiers' frantic retreat to the top, where they lay under siege all night. They walked along the path circling the hill's crown, Sagan and Felter peppering them with questions: What do you think Custer was doing now? Why would Reno have camped out up here? Would you have heard shots from Custer's battle way over that ridge?

As they came around the path, the students reached the spot where Reno and his men literally dug in. A century and a half later, the dirt mounds they hid behind had nearly settled into the hill. Felter invited everyone to imagine desperately scraping at the ground with tin cups, fingernails, anything to shape a tiny battlement, while arrows and bullets whipped past overhead. Many young men, most of them the students' own age, faced unspeakable horrors that day. Although modern sympathies typically side with the Sioux, who would soon lose everything, it was impossible to stand there and not feel conflicted. On the one hand, the men "signed up to fight and [were] paid by the U.S. government," mused Bridges, who as a Native woman and a Marine practically embodies this gray space. "But I don't think people ever really know what they signed up for."

An hour or so later, the class gathered at Battle Ridge, adjacent to Last Stand Hill. The ground was dry and hot, the sun now burning those who'd forgotten sunscreen. Edelson lay down in the grass and spoke as Capt. Myles Keogh, an Irish mercenary who died there. The students were solemn, gazing down as he described lying crushed under his wounded horse, waiting for his fate. "They were swarming! The Indians were swarming all around us, there were dust clouds in the air," he said. "Every body I saw: Tortured! Mutilated! Dead!" Graves now cover the ground where bodies lay that day, and instead of a whirlwind of warriors, a slow parade of tourists rolled by, pink faces passive and unreadable behind the trucks' open windows.

As the day progressed, the absurdity of students in sunglasses or Stanford T-shirts soliloquizing about dying in battle had faded, overshadowed by the gravity of what had happened here. The contradiction between the quiet calm of the battlefield sites and the bloody chaos that made each hill venerable was palpable, but after a day of marching along the ridge, it had become easier to conjure the scene from 140 years ago. Standing there, taking in the brutal contours of the terrain—one of many factors out of the soldiers' control—it was possible to imagine how the land itself shaped decisions, how many things might have gone differently on a different plot of ground. The students began to see the combatants as people, each fighting to stay alive.

And as that awkward tension subsided, it became clearer that, irrespective of the performances' contrivances and affectations, this struggle to depict the past is exactly how



KAREN MINOT

SITTING BULL AND BUFFALO BILL

MO-NAH-SE-TAH

D.F. BARRY/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION (LEFT); WILL S. SOULE

history takes shape. After all, the record is incomplete. No one knows, for example, who killed Keogh up on that hill. It is but one of many missing facts, an open space we may read any number of ways. All we have is a story, or a story of a story—imperfect, protean. As Freeland recounted at the ClockTower Inn, history is malleable even in the moment. It was no accident that Buffalo Bill donned a velvet vaquero suit with silver buttons when, a few weeks after Little Bighorn, he killed Yellow Hair in battle and declared his "the first scalp for Custer!" The outfit became the costume he wore in subsequent reenactments of the duel: the authentic revenge suit itself, reality bent to conform to the narrative he'd designed.

And yet, for some reason, we hold on to the notion of history as a static thing forever behind us, fixed and immutable. We tend to act as though the present moment were ahistorical, but it's not—strategically, Afghanistan is just another Bighorn, even though they seem worlds apart. We exist only on the forwardmost part of a spectrum with no beginning and no end, one that occasionally folds back on itself in certain places so that voices from the past speak to us about what happened then, and what still lies ahead.

GREASY GRASS

The sun sank low. Long shadows stretched out from the headstones in Custer National Cemetery, each one a story unto itself. Gardner-Gill stood before the class again, pacing among the graves.

For the last speech at the battlefield, he was to play Sitting Bull, the Lakota leader who foresaw Custer's defeat in a vision, but also what would come after. It would be a tough part to play under any circumstances—the irony of a white man speaking for Sitting Bull did not escape Gardner-Gill—but was especially challenging because representatives from the Crow Nation had joined to watch the last few performances. Gardner-Gill turned inward a moment before speaking.

"June 25, 1876, was a victory on one day, but it was not a victory overall," he said, speaking as Sitting Bull. Word of Custer's defeat reached Washington on July 4, in a twist too dramatic for fiction, as the country celebrated 100 years of independence. Revenge was swift. "They sent more guns, more horses, more men," Gardner-Gill said, explaining how the next year, after the battle at the place he knew as Greasy Grass, Sitting Bull led his people into Canadian exile. They starved for four years "in the one land we thought might protect us, and so we had to come back to the land that would not accept us."

In December 1890, 14 years after the events at Little Bighorn, Sitting Bull was arrested by reservation police under orders from Indian agent James McLaughlin. As two officers dragged the great Lakota leader from his lodge, a brief skirmish ensued and one of the officers was shot. The wounded officer put a bullet into Sitting Bull's side; his companion put one through the chief's head.

Sitting Bull's horse, a gift from Buffalo Bill, began an elaborate dance. A show animal, it was trained to "die" at the sound of gunfire, so as Sitting Bull fell to the ground at Standing Rock, so did his horse. Reality bending to a narrative. "I was shot," Gardner-Gill said, "by two Lakota policemen; my own people. My vision, like every vision, came to pass."

As Gardner-Gill finished, the cemetery was quiet.

Sagan asked the students for a moment of silence, "for the men who are buried here, and for the women and children who died in the village." Their eyes closed, their heads bowed forward.

"Thank you," he said, and the students broke character. Scattering to the parking lot, they were all smiles and laughter, relieved after the long day, and ready to go home. A park ranger drawled over the loudspeaker, reminding everyone that winter hours were in effect, and the park was closing. The students clambered into the vans. Someone called out the door, "Brendan, don't get left again!" Edelson laughed and shook his head, quickening his pace.

A few moments later, the doors closed, the vans started up. They pulled out of the parking lot, past the monuments and the graves, past the gas station, and out onto the interstate, their noses pointed toward the setting sun. ■