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Hero of Beecher Island: The Life and Military Career of George A. Forsyth

David Dixon

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George A. Forsyth took a determined stand against Sioux and Cheyenne Indians at the Battle of Beech Island in 1868 and in the process transformed this minor frontier skirmish into a legendary symbol of the American West. This engagement helped mold popular conception of Indian warfare and provided Forsyth with the reputation of being an intrepid Indian fighter like George Custer and Buffalo Bill. Although this image of Forsyth is not necessarily incorrect, it is certainly incomplete.

Forsyth began his military career with the firing on Fort Sumter in 1861. Like many other officers who would subsequently gain distinction in the Indian campaign of the West, he learned the art of warfare in the great battles of the Civil War. His ascendancy through the ranks paralleled the rise of the Union cavalry as an effective combat arm during the war, and his education as a cavalryman came under the watchful eye of Phil Sheridan, one of America's most compelling soldiers. The Forsyth-Sheridan relationship began on the Virginia battlefields and continued until 1881.

During this long period George Forsyth was one of Sheridan's most trusted aides, serving as the general's eyes and ears in countless military missions that took him from the banks of the Yellowstone to the sacred Black Hills and from the bayous of Reconstruction Louisiana to the palaces of Europe and Asia. Forsyth's varied military career was truly reflective of the army's role in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In addition to serving as an instrument of government Indian policy, the army carried out other important missions designed to foster internal development in the United States. These activities included exploring and mapping the remnants of the uncharted West: escorting railroad survey and construction crews and building forts along the major lines of commerce. As a staff officer, George Forsyth played an important part in all of these activities and more. Therefore, while this biography chronicles the life and military career of a remarkable soldier, it also provides fresh insight into the role that the United States Army played during the post-Civil War period.

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