



## *Dakota Images*

A lonely government grave marker, located just off U. S. Highway 16A two miles east of Custer, is the sole memorial to Pvt. John Pommer, a long-forgotten soldier of the Fifth Regiment United States Cavalry. Pommer, who died there on 3 October 1876, had recently survived two dramatic battles of the Great Sioux War only to perish ignominiously, not of wounds but of chronic diarrhea.

The sometimes fulsome military records of the Indian-wars era are limited in the case of Pommer. The army's register of enlistment notes these few details: born in Lupo, Germany; twenty-six years old at enlistment; gray eyes, light-colored hair, fair complexion; five feet, five-and-a-quarter inches tall; and a farmer before joining the army. As did other immigrants of his day, Pommer may have enlisted to learn the English language. Maybe he sought an economic footing in the new land. However motivated, he joined the army in Saint Louis on 4 November 1871 and was assigned to Company I, Fifth Cavalry, captained by Sanford C. Kellogg. He spent the next several years in Arizona Territory at Camps Grant and Apache and at the San Carlos Agency. Intermittent field service against the Apaches broke an otherwise staid garrison routine at these southwestern posts. In mid-1875, his company was reassigned to Fort Gibson, Indian Territory.

During the early stages of the Great Sioux War, Pommer and Company I were among those called to Sioux country. He participated in the skirmish with Cheyenne Indians at Warbonnet Creek, Nebraska, on 17 July 1876. He came under sharp fire in the battle with American Horse and his band of Lakota at Slim Buttes, Dakota Territory, on 8 and 9 September. He also participated in Gen. George Crook's harrowing "Starvation March" into the Black Hills, subsisting on a diet of horse and mule flesh. The rigors of this ordeal may have been his undoing.

Most of Crook's soldiers spent the rest of September and October recuperating in the Black Hills. Full rations finally reached the troops, and a certain gaiety again pervaded the army camps. Pommer did not enjoy the respite, however. He had fallen on French Creek, a victim, at age thirty-one, of the hazardous conditions of the Great Sioux War.

by PAUL L. HEDREN

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