

offered an opinion about Uncle Don's enlistment or his death, and he never made any commentary about the contrast between his outlook and the decision my uncle had made. Never any sign of the troubled remorse psychologists refer to as "survivors' guilt," no indication that my father had ever said to himself, "The Germans killed my brother-in-law, but I survived. I renounced any sense of duty and he'd embraced it."

In the late Sixties, I faced my own war—Vietnam—and I admit my feelings were similar to my father's. No way in hell was I going to allow myself into that politically manufactured disaster. When I turned eighteen, I was busy planning how to evade the draft. My first line of defense was the hope of a medical deferment; although looking back, I see that it was a threadbare strategy. I'd endured a sickly childhood because of emotional stress and bad luck, but nothing substantial enough to keep me out of the military. My second option was Canada, and I'm certain I would have deserted my homeland as a last resort.

But by the time I was nineteen, with the introduction of the draft board's lottery system, the government computer spit out a high number attached to my birth date, and with that random piece of luck the threat of Vietnam vanished. So I never had a war forced on me, never had a war to call my own, no necessity to confront what my uncle and great-grandfather had faced.

Watson fumbled with his saddle cinch as Great-grandfather held the horse's reins. Troopers trotted by kicking up dust as they headed down the gentle slope deeper into Medicine Tail Coulee. When the last two cavalrymen passed, Watson pulled his carbine from its saddle case, took it in hand like a baseball bat and swung the heavy barrel into his horse's front knee. The stunned animal reared and jerked his head but my great-grandfather, though shocked by Watson's sudden and bizarre action, managed to hold the reins. Moments later the frightened horse settled down, gingerly lifting its injured leg.

"Turn your mount loose," Watson said. Sweat dripped from under his hat and made grimy trails on his dusty forehead and cheeks. Great-grandfather hesitated, as if confused. Watson lunged forward and snatched the reins from him, waving his hat wildly in the horse's face. The startled animal threw back his head and bolted after the last of the cavalry column now more than a hundred yards down the ravine.

"If someone comes up on us, we say my horse went lame and you stopped to help, and then yours ran off, so we're following the command on foot. Got it?"

"But wait ... what if—?"

"Goddamnit, boy, there ain't no what ifs. Only thing that matters right now is we don't go down there." Watson pointed a sun-darkened hand toward the valley and the Little Bighorn River.

It wasn't until late in the twentieth century that improved archeology more clearly illuminated what had long been the mystery of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. These recent excavations proved that assertions made by Watson and Thompson were essentially accurate. Capt. Yates had in fact led two companies down the Medicine Tail Coulee as Custer and three other companies rode northwest through the hills. While Watson and my great-grandfather stayed back, Yates' command approached the riverbank and met fierce resistance, forcing them to turn north and rejoin Custer as he arced west in an attempt to escape hordes of warriors closing from three sides. Because my great-grandfa-

ther's story remains three generations removed, I can't say what happened after Watson injured his own horse. It is likely the two men stalled for as long as Watson deemed prudent and then gradually followed the two companies.

By the time they heard gunfire and were close enough to see what was unfolding, Yates had already ordered his troops up another ravine to the southeastern end of Battle Ridge, toward the position Lt. James Calhoun was holding in a rearguard action. Realizing that they had committed themselves to defection and a host of possible consequences, Watson and Great-grandfather doubled back and headed on foot for what they hoped would be either Reno's or Benteen's companies.

Once reunited with either commander, they would need a credible story as to how and why they had failed to follow Custer's command into battle. If it didn't hold up, the worst-case scenario might include execution for desertion. Yet with the ominous circumstances growing grimmer by the minute, such a fate may have proved preferable to slaughter at the hands of enraged warriors numbering in the thousands.

Watson's was a gamble wrought in the intensity of the moment and in abandonment of duty over the prospect of death. My great-grandfather was a lucky recipient who went along with an opportunity he alone might have never conceived or had the courage to pursue.

So ... there it is, four generations of men in my family who either lived through or died during the ugly reality of war. Great-grandfather was too young for the Civil War but came of age for the Indian campaigns of the Great Plains. Grandfather escaped World War I because he was also too old, although, had the war lasted longer, he probably would have been called in as the death toll exhausted the supply of younger men. My dad used an effective strategy to keep himself out of the World War II, whereas my uncle Don volunteered.

When it came my time, I was ready to do whatever necessary to stay out of Vietnam. I guess that makes me more like my father, despite having spent much of my life trying not to be like him—a strange irony, no doubt.

Perhaps war is the common denominator, and individuals are the numerators. In this way, the value of the fraction results from how the numerator expresses itself. My great-grandfather was the progeny of Scots-Irish immigrants. He was poor and joined the army to provide himself with a roof over his head and a hope of a better life. To his credit, he did go on to make a good life for himself and his family.

He left the Seventh Cavalry a few years after the Battle of the Little Bighorn and used money he'd saved to buy land in Montana to start a cattle ranch. Many years later he left the ranch to his two sons, and they built it into a major producer of beef, making themselves prosperous men.

Believing we are masters of our fates is a tricky proposition, and my great-grandfather's life perhaps serves as a paradigm. If we take stock in the proposition of free will, it is clear that every decision my great-grandfather made after the great battle was predicated on that single day, that hour, that moment—the moment he decided to follow Watson's lead and not follow General Custer's. In that sense, we could argue that he was indeed the master of his fate because he made a specific choice at a critical moment, and by all indications saved his own life. On the other hand, without Pvt. Watson as the catalyst, I believe Peter Thompson would have dutifully ridden to his death