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Douglas Scott, an archaeologist with the National Park Service, discusses his recent discoveries at the Little Big Horn battlefield.

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Anthropologist Discusses Custer's Last Stand

JANE PAULEY: Everybody’s heard of Custer’s Last Stand at the Battle of Little Big Horn, but no one really knows what happened, how it was that Custer and his 215 Cavalry men were wiped out, none living to tell the tale. Even so, Douglas Scott has brought us a little closer to knowing the real story. He’s an archaeologist with the National Park Service, and for five weeks last summer, Dr. Scott and a horde of volunteers went over the Little Big Horn battlefield with a fine-toothed comb. And you probably now know more about that last hour of General Custer and his men’s lives than anybody else, which really isn’t a lot. But what do you know about how the battlefield was configured in that last hour?

Dr. DOUGLAS SCOTT: Well, we’ve learned based on our inventory of the battlefield with metal detectors and standard archaeological techniques that Custer deployed his men in a large “V,” and it’s very classic 19th century, West Point-trained tactical deployment.

PAULEY: Was it a good choice?

Dr. SCOTT: I think it probably was, under the circumstance, if you were facing either a massed frontal assault or an assault from the side. However, the other aspect of our research indicated that Custer was not assaulted just from the side or just from the front, but literally he was surrounded, by at least seven-to-one, outnumbered as far as Indians were concerned, maybe as many as twenty-to-one.

PAULEY: The battlefield is littered, would you say, with little artifacts or major finds or what?

Dr. SCOTT: Uh, it’s littered with the debris of battle: the cartridge cases, the bullets, the personal effects – a little of everything.

PAULEY: Let’s stop there. Look at this. This is an item, in my hand, that perhaps has no historical significance, but it’s a wedding ring.

Dr. SCOTT: Yes. One time silver-plated, and it was found, in fact, on a finger joint when it was originally discovered.

PAULEY: And, again here, this is a suspender clip. Once again, this is, as far as a historian is concerned,
what is the significance?
Dr. SCOTT: They’re poignant reminders of the individual. We’ve found that individually, these artifacts don’t tell us a great deal, except something about the individual himself — his personal taste – and it is a very poignant reminder that people did fight and people did die there.