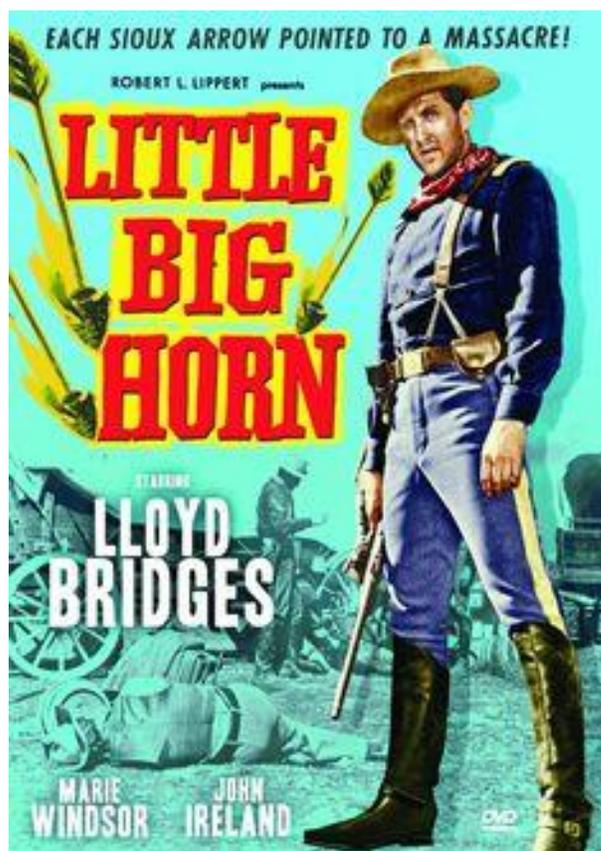


## Little Big Horn



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Written and directed by Charles Marquis Warren. Produced by Carl K. Hittleman. Production Supervision by William Magginetti. Cinematography by Ernest W. Miller. Art Direction by Frank Paul Styles. Music conducted by Paul Dunlap. Original songs by Larry Stock and Maurice Sigler. Edited by Carl Pierson. Key Costumer Alfred Berke.

Cinematic length: 86 minutes. Made and distributed by Lippert Films. Cinematic release June 1951; U tube release. Check for ratings. Rating 85%.

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## Cast

Lloyd Bridges as Captain Phillip Donlin

John Ireland as Lieutenant John Haywood

Marie Windsor as Celie Donlin

Reed Hadley as Sargent-Major Peter Grierson

Sheb Wooley as Quince the Scout

Larry Stewart as the bugler

Hugh O'Brian as Pvt. deWalt

Rodd Redwing as Akira

Jim Davis as Corporal Doan Moylan

King Donovan as Pvt. James Corbo

Wally Cassell as Pvt Danny Zecca

John Pickard Sargent McCloud

Barbara Woodell as Margret Owen

Anne Warren as Annie Owen

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## Review

*Little Big Horn* (1951) attracted little initial attention and remains an overlooked film. This disappoints, for it works as a fine example of what a talented writer/director can still do with a thin budget, a cast consisted of little knowns and unknowns and a predictable climax.

The story is not that of Custer and the actual Little Big Horn battle, told so many times in American culture, but of an attempt by a sixteen man patrol to warn

Custer of the trap he gallops towards. This means almost from the start that the audience knows that the patrol's mission will fail. Unpredictability and suspense will come from the interrelationships amongst the patrol's characters and the dangers they face on the journey to the Little Big Horn. Writer/Director Charles Marquis Warren also resolves the predictability problem by creating rounded characters. One way he does this is by skilfully delineating character through body language, close ups and succinct, astute dialogue. Another way develops through a sense of gritty realism; the cavalymen look tired and dirty in their worn out dirty clothes. Rather than bouncing along jauntily as many directors, particularly John Ford usually depicted them, they are often grouchy or wearily fatalistic, concerned with the next drink or a rest. This sense of reality goes to their motivations, their feelings and their hopes and fears. Most enlisted cavalymen appear in Hollywood films as virtual automations, not this time. Similarly the characters do not function as simulacra for a symbolic order, nor does Warren's script call on the fairies for a contrived happy ending against probabilities. This is a story where actions cause a flow of logical and unavoidable consequences that have no god given exceptions based on good character. One by one the Sioux reduce the patrol. Unlike most Hollywood films, here characters are not reserved from this process for the climax due to star power or initial emphasis in the story.

*The leads, John Ireland and Lloyd Bridges*





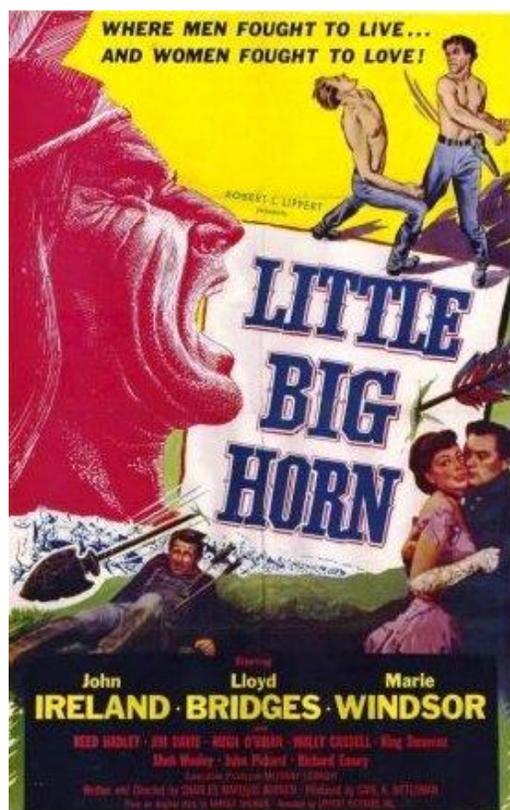
*This still shows Warren's cinematic skill with mise-en-scene. The tortured, propped up scout stays exactly centre screen and so becomes the focus for the unfolding situation. By placing his rescuer at a lower level and the Sioux on a higher, their power and the rescuer's lack of it are emphasised. This is reinforced by the way the Sioux stands and the cavalryman lies down. Like the tortured central scarecrow, this emphasises a combined sense of failure and doom which permeates the film.*

*Below: Unlike in many westerns, arrows do not immediately kill.*





*Ernest W. Miller's excellent cinematography provides another reason to reevaluate this film. The kitschy poster may be one reason Little Big Horn was underrated.*





*Reed Hadley as Sargent-Major Peter Grierson*



*Marie Windsor as Celie. A studio shot*

is The love triangle between the two commanding officers, Captain Phillip Donlin (Lloyd Bridges) Lieutenant John Haywood (John Ireland) and Donlin's wife, Celie (Marie Windsor) does provide one plot development that becomes a bit Hollywoodish She dreams of escaping the dreary world of frontier fort life by encouraging Haywood to resign and go back east. Donlin is part of the frontier life she dislikes; stodgy, duty bound, rather humorless, he patrols for weeks at a time leaving her alone with charming, attentive, slightly naïve Haywood.

Faced with the humiliation of a disintegrating marriage, Donlin turns a routine patrol into a suicide mission to warn Custer: the fact that he can take Haywood with him adds to the fatal attraction. Haywood has his guilt to deal with and so complies. Several of the enlisted men have other motives that also have nothing to do with saving the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry. Resentful Sargent-Major Peter Grierson (Reed Hadley) was once an officer and wants an opportunity to prove himself worthy of regaining rank. A young trooper worries about his father who serves in Custer's 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry and hopes to provide a personal rescue. Another worries about the bride who must be with a nearby wagon train and hopes the patrol will find her; with ironic cruelty this happens. One of the film's most affecting moments comes when he finds the wagon train's people massacred. She sits propped up in a wagon lifelike, a simulacra he looks up to and talks to the way a Catholic believer might talk to the image of a saint. This scene that could have easily become maudlin, kitschy or ridiculous, but is not.

Whatever their motives, upon reaching the Little Big Horn, the patrol's survivors are shorn of their personal concerns and focus on the task of saving the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, at the cost of their lives.

The film was finished under massive financial constraints; scenes were abandoned, pages of script were cut. Even so what remains has a completeness to it.

Charles Marquis Warren, who started in Hollywood in the 1930s working with his godfather Scott Fitzgerald, would go on to be a regular writer/director/producer in Hollywood films and television. His specialty was in westerns, many of them of high quality, but he never got the attention given to many others. Why?



*Charles Marquis Warren (1912-1990)*