

COLONEL Alexander
Wilkin, from a portrait
taken about 1863



The CIVIL WAR and ALEXANDER WILKIN

RONALD M. HUBBS

IN 1957 Mr. Hubbs, who is now president of the St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company, became interested in the story of the firm's founder, Alexander Wilkin. As a member of the Twin Cities Civil War Roundtable he was doubly intrigued, since Wilkin was also Minnesota's highest ranking casualty in the Civil War. His research yielded little new information until 1961, when a representative of the company, Mr. Robert Orr Baker, uncovered a collection of Wilkin's papers in Goshen, New York. They were owned by a niece, Mrs. Edward Dikeman, who generously presented them to the St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company. The original letters have been sorted, transcribed, and placed on file in the company's library, and photographic copies of the entire collection have been given to the Min-

nesota Historical Society. For this and other significant contributions to the cause of history, the company received a certificate of commendation from the American Association for State and Local History in October, 1964.

Wilkin's military career is the subject of the present article. It is based mainly upon his Civil War letters, most of which were addressed to his father and his younger sister in Goshen, and to his brother in St. Paul.

"IT IS generally said that after the first fire men become reckless and do not realize their danger, but I did not get enough excited and felt my danger all the while. Whenever I could conveniently get a tree or other object between me and the enemy I did so and probably saved my life by it. A battle like

that is a terrible affair. The firing of the artillery and musketry is perfectly fearful.”¹

These candid words were written by Alexander Wilkin a few days after the first battle of Bull Run. Three months earlier Wilkin had turned his back on a successful and varied career as lawyer, businessman, publisher, and politician in the frontier state of Minnesota. Responding to President Abraham Lincoln’s call for troops to put down the southern rebellion, he had accepted a commission as captain in the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry.

The role of soldier was undoubtedly that which Wilkin liked best, and it was one for which he was uniquely fitted by temperament. Military life appealed to him, and he identified completely with the nation and the state he served — with the company and regiment he commanded. Through three long years his zeal never flagged, and when his personal drama ended on the battlefield of Tupelo he became one of Minnesota’s martial heroes — the highest ranking officer from the state to die in the Civil War.

He was born on December 1, 1819, at Goshen, New York, the son of “Governor” Samuel J. Wilkin and the grandson of Major General James W. Wilkin, both of whom were politically active and had served in Congress. His brother Westcott was to become a distinguished judge in St. Paul. Alexander was educated at Yale, then practiced law in Goshen and in New York City. His first military experience was in the Mexican War where he served as a captain in the forces commanded by General Zachary Taylor.²

Following the conflict, Wilkin decided to go to Minnesota, arriving in St. Paul in June, 1849. There business and politics absorbed much of his time. He was a frequent candidate for office and held the post of secretary of the territory in the years 1851–53 under an appointment from President Millard Fillmore. Later he served as United States marshal. In 1853 he became the first president of the St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company.³

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Wilkin was forty-one years of age and still a bachelor. Physically he was a small man — five feet one inch in height, weighing little more than a hundred pounds. He was a fighter by nature. When challenged to a duel in Mexico, he had shot and killed a fellow officer, and his Civil War letters to his family frequently boil with indignation at examples of incompetence or cowardice. Nor were his criticisms always free from personal pride and resentment. At the same time he was generous with praise where he felt it was deserved, and he was unfailingly loyal to the men under him. General Christopher C. Andrews was to say of him: “He was uniformly quiet and reflective; deliberate in coming to a conclusion; prompt, earnest and daring in acting upon his judgment; without any showy manners and pretensions, and absolutely without personal fear.”⁴ The words reflect the solid confidence that Wilkin earned from his commanding officers and fellow soldiers.

His ardor for the Union cause is revealed in an incident of April, 1861. Wilkin was standing on Third Street with several other St. Paulites when news arrived of the firing

¹ Alexander Wilkin to Samuel J. Wilkin, July 23, 1861, Alexander Wilkin Papers, in St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company, St. Paul. Copies are in the Minnesota Historical Society. In the sections quoted, punctuation has been added for the sake of clarity.

² C[olin] F. Macdonald, “Narrative of the Ninth Regiment,” in *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:427 (St. Paul, 1890); Roswell C. Coleman, *Biographical Sketches and Reminiscences*, 27 (Newburgh, New York, 1909); J. Fletcher Williams, *A History of the City of St. Paul and the County of Ramsey, Minnesota*, 315 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 4, 1876); C[hristopher] C. Andrews, *History of St. Paul, Minnesota*, 215 (St. Paul, 1890); Thomas M. Newson, *Pen Pictures of St. Paul and Biographical Sketches of Old Settlers*, 176 (St. Paul, 1886); letter of recommendation by David Daggett, professor of law, Yale College, August 27, 1840, Wilkin Papers.

³ Williams, *History of St. Paul*, 315; Andrews, *History of St. Paul*, 189; William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 2:337 (St. Paul, 1961); A. B. Jackson, *The Story of “The St. Paul,”* (St. Paul, 1953). A copy of the last publication is the Wilkin Papers.

⁴ Andrews, *History of St. Paul*, 216.

on Fort Sumter. One of the group was a federal officeholder with southern leanings, who exclaimed, "I wish to God I had been there to fire the first gun!" Wilkin, "though scarcely half the size and strength of the would-be rebel, promptly slapped him in the face, and told him he would be hung if he uttered any more of his treason!"⁵

Fort Sumter fell on April 13, and the following morning Minnesota's governor, Alexander Ramsey, tendered the president a thousand men. On April 15 a St. Paul militia unit known as the Pioneer Guard took its first steps toward becoming Company A, First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry. Wilkin was chosen commander, and the company was known for a short time by his name. Its other officers had previously served under Wilkin in a political club called the "Little Giants," formed by free-soil Democrats campaigning for Stephen A. Douglas in 1860. Only one of them would survive the war.⁶

THREE DAYS later the new captain published a call for volunteers, asking them "to enroll their names at John K. Becht's saloon, on Third Street, without delay." The first to do so was Josias R. King.⁷ It has been claimed that King was not only the first volunteer in Minnesota, but also in the United States.

Thanks to Wilkin, he may also have been the first to shed blood in the Union cause.

⁵ The story was related by James H. Baker and appears in the *Mankato Review*, May 24, 1887.

⁶ *History of the First Regiment Minnesota Volunteer Infantry 1861-1864*, 3, 6 (Stillwater, 1916); Andrews, *History of St. Paul*, 189.

⁷ Richard W. Johnson, "Fort Snelling From its Foundation to the Present Time," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8:442 (St. Paul, 1898).

⁸ Johnson, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8:442.

⁹ Andrews, *History of St. Paul*, 190.

¹⁰ *Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:6-9, 88; *History of the First Minnesota*, 6.

¹¹ Wilkin to Sarah Wilkin, May 26, 1861, in Wilkin Papers; Ramsey Diary, April 26, 1861, Ramsey Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society. Willis A. Gorman had served as governor of Minnesota Territory from 1853 to 1857 and was a prominent Democratic politician.

The little captain had been presented with a handsome sword, which is said to have been so long that he had to stand on tiptoe to draw it. King's position as first sergeant placed him directly behind Wilkin when the company was in line, and being a tall man, King — according to the story — "could look over the head of the Captain and see his feet." In bringing the sword to position for the first time, Wilkin struck King in the face, "inflicting a small wound which bled profusely."⁸

Wilkin's company was "accepted" into service on April 19. Ten days later its seventy men were taken by the steamer "Ocean Wave" to Fort Snelling, which had been hastily reactivated to serve as a recruiting center.⁹ The secretary of war suggested to Governor Ramsey that all men willing to enlist for three years be mustered in for that term. The three senior officers of the First Minnesota joined Captain Wilkin in making such a tender of their respective commands. Because those so mustered were to date their service from the original enlistments with the regiment on April 29, Captain Wilkin commanded the first company of what many claim was the first volunteer regiment in the federal forces.¹⁰

Shortly afterward Wilkin wrote to his sister Sarah, saying, "I am applying for a Major's Commission in the Regular Army. . . . Genl. McClellan and other officers are urging it and Gov. Ramsey has promised to do all he can. We have a very fine Regiment and I should have liked the command, and expected certainly to have it but was electioneered out of it after the Governor had pretty much made up his mind to commission me." He was right about this. Ramsey had noted in his diary, "My preference for Alex Wilkin for Col. is strong but all the people seem to ask for Gorman."¹¹

Captain Wilkin's initial duties took him north rather than south. On May 29 he marched with his company to Fort Ripley at the mouth of the Crow Wing River where he relieved the Second Infantry regulars who were wanted in Washington, D.C. He

was delighted with the post and pleased with his thirty-six dollars a month additional pay as commanding officer. But almost immediately the First Minnesota was ordered east. Company A left the state a short time after the rest of the regiment, joining it again at Washington.¹²

There on July 10 Wilkin, "sitting in my tent on the ground with a game leg, while a furious storm is raging outside," addressed a letter to his brother Westcott in St. Paul. He had high hopes of promotion to the rank of major. "I received a very kind letter from Gov. Ramsey. He offered to come on expressly to urge my appointment." Wilkin went on to say that Ramsey had tendered command of the Second Minnesota to Horatio P. Van Cleve "according to my suggestion." Leadership of this regiment had earlier been offered to Wilkin, but he had declined it, thinking that the Second would not see field duty.¹³

On July 16 Wilkin wrote confidently, "We leave today for Fairfax. . . . I suppose the rebels will retreat to Manassas. I doubt if they will make a stand there but will fall back on Richmond. . . . The Colonel wants me to remain behind . . . as I am lame footed . . . but I protested and suppose will go along." He had the soldier's usual complaint — "am continually out of money" — and was still concerned about his rank. Too late, he had telegraphed his acceptance of the Second Minnesota if the command were still open. "I do not think I shall get the Majority," he added. "If our [Congressional] Delegation choose to urge it I can get it. Others say they will; but there is little faith to be put in politicians."¹⁴

A COLLISION of the Union force based at Washington and the Confederate army operating from Manassas was fast approaching. On Sunday morning, July 21, the massive struggle was irrevocably joined, and the bloodletting that was to continue for four years began in earnest. The two armies were without battle experience. They confused each other by an odd mixture of uni-

forms, flags, and tactical maneuvers, and they moved into line under the critical eyes of visiting congressmen and picnic parties who had gone down from Washington to see "Johnny Reb" get his whipping. The fantastic and the real produced a strange and terrible contrast.¹⁵

The battle of Bull Run opened at 5:15 A.M. with a secondary attack by the Union army, and at 6:00 Colonel Samuel P. Heintzelman's division, of which the First Minnesota was a part, made its way to the vicinity of Sudley Church. The Minnesota regiment was ordered to support Rickett's battery at Henry House Hill — a maneuver which required the regiment to pass across the front of the enemy line for more than a mile. In a matter of minutes after the Minnesota men were in position, the concealed Fourth Alabama — a part of Stonewall Jackson's brigade — struck hard. The Confederate thrust at the center had been perceived, but such was the confusion of the day that Rickett's battery held its fire, believing the approaching force was friendly. Similar red shirts worn by the First Minnesota and the Alabamans prevented recognition until it was too late to avoid devastating fire.¹⁶

As Wilkin described the action: "We were ordered to the support of Rickett's battery but as we were passing around them and they were unlimbering their guns the batteries of the enemy commenced playing upon them. Not fifteen minutes after, Capt. Ricketts, his 1st Lieut., about 100 out of 120 men, and the same number of horses were killed on the spot. . . . We fired into the wood and the enemy's riflemen fired upon our left within 60 yards of us. A large number of our men fell. . . . Heintzelman's aid [*sic*] then ordered us to fall back upon the

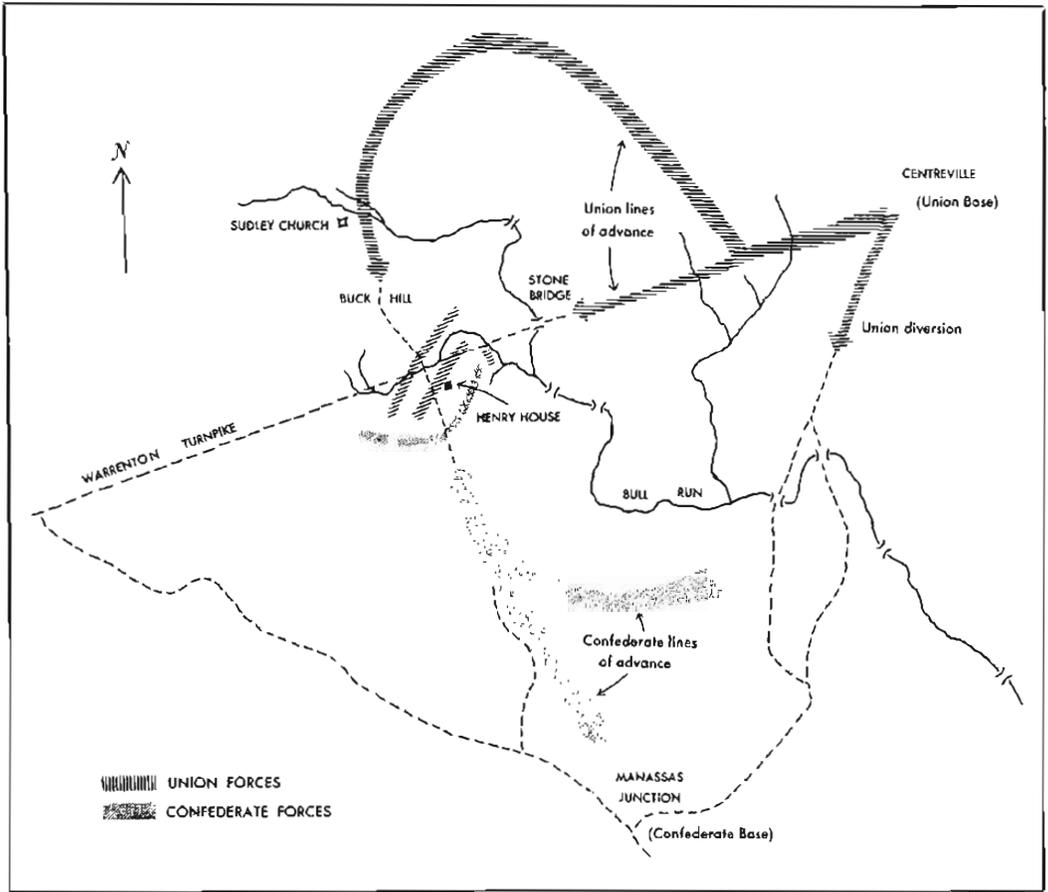
¹² Wilkin to Sarah Wilkin, May 26, 1861; William Lochren, "Narrative of the First Regiment," in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:5.

¹³ Wilkin to Westcott Wilkin, July 10, 1861, Wilkin Papers; Ramsey Diary, July 14, 1861.

¹⁴ Wilkin to Westcott Wilkin, July 16, 1861, Wilkin Papers.

¹⁵ Lochren, in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:8–12.

¹⁶ Lochren, in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:8–12.



THE battle of Bull Run, July 21, 1861

woods but I did not hear the command and supposed the regiment had got into a panic. I had determined before I went into action that my Co. should never retreat by my orders. I gave the command, 'Co. A stand fast' and part of my first platoon stood fast."¹⁷

The right wing of the regiment, including Wilkin's company, was separated from the rest and continued fighting under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Stephen A. Miller. Soon the battle became even more disorganized. Wilkin's account continues: "We saw a Mississippi regiment on our left. We turned and fired upon them for some time, knocking them down right and left, when it was said that they were our friends.

They were only about 75 yards from us. . . . I ordered the men to cease firing. One of them came up and I went up and spoke to him and asked him if they were friends. He said they were. I asked what regiment and he said Miss[issippi]. Someone said they wanted to deliver themselves up. I again ordered the men to cease firing but shortly after, one of my men fell by my side. I told the men to fire away and I borrowed a musket and fired myself. The enemy retreated and I and a few of my men followed."

At this point Captain Wilkin and those with him apparently became separated from the rest of the command. He describes his utter confusion as to the location and identity of friend and foe: "Seeing a large body of men drawn up to the left . . . I walked up to them passing a wounded officer of our

¹⁷ Wilkin to Samuel J. Wilkin, July 23, 1861, Wilkin Papers.

army who begged me to help him off. I said 'my poor man I would but you are heavy and I am not strong enough, but I will endeavor to get you help.' I then called to the troops near by and told them they had been firing upon their friends, but just as I spoke I saw by their uniforms they were enemies. I then turned leisurely to the right when I found another body. I was hemmed in and had no resource but to go through the gap, which I did with a cross-fire upon me from both. I did not think it possible to escape. The balls were falling around me like hail. I was much exhausted and soon laid down under cover of the bank of a little stream, between the enemy and a body of our men on the opposite hill. . . . After awhile I saw Col. Heintzelman and told him I did not know where the regiment was and asked him if I could be of any service. He said no and that he had seen our colors to the right. I went back and tried to find them but could not."

In the meantime a general withdrawal had taken place. The First Minnesota retired in good order from the Henry House plateau to Buck Hill. There they learned that the battle had been a disaster and they must continue the retreat. Angry, exhausted, humiliated, and not believing this repulse could be a defeat, the regiment made its way to Alexandria.¹⁸

Later Captain Wilkin wrote his brother Westcott that the men of the First Minnesota had "fought like tigers." He also succinctly described his own exit from the battlefield: "Upon looking around I found the regulars and everyone else had left, when I thought it about time for me to leave too."¹⁹

He was proud of the soldiers of Company A: "The men with me were perfectly cool and took deliberate aim killing great numbers of the enemy, many of them smiling and laughing all the time. I had a good many hunters and trappers and scouts. . . . Some of our men killed 3, 4, and 5 of the enemy."²⁰

He had his own notions about the performance of his fellow officers: "I have not

seen Gorman after we drew up at the woods. Lt. Col. Miller behaved nobly." He also voiced admiration for Dr. Jacob H. Stewart, who had calmly exercised his skill among the bloody and badly wounded. But for bravery and coolness he felt the top honors should go to Lieutenant A. Edward Welch, "a perfect hero," who had fought by Wilkin's side and been left wounded on the field. The captain feared that Welch was dead, but he proved to be a prisoner.²¹

Others felt that Wilkin himself had "fought like a hero." Javan B. Irvine, a visiting St. Paul civilian who had joined in the conflict, wrote that the captain "seized a rifle and shot down four or five of the rebels, and took one prisoner." In writing to his father, Wilkin acknowledged that he had received great credit for his conduct. As a result he was commissioned a captain in the regular army and was assigned to the Seventeenth United States Infantry. Before he had a chance to report, however, he received his long-sought promotion and was granted leave to join the Second Minnesota as a major because of "gallantry on the fatal field of Manassas."²²

ALTHOUGH Governor Ramsey wrote the secretary of war in September that "The Second Regiment will be ready to march in about two weeks, and will be found, in officers and material, not inferior to our First Regiment," Wilkin discovered that the men were practically without shoes, had only one uniform apiece, and were armed with inferior muskets. They had no opportunity to assemble and train as a unit before their

¹⁸ Lochren, in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:12.

¹⁹ Wilkin to Westcott Wilkin, July 30, 1861, Wilkin Papers.

²⁰ Wilkin to Samuel Wilkin, July 23, 1861.

²¹ Wilkin to Westcott Wilkin, July 30, 1861; to Samuel Wilkin, July 23, 1861.

²² Irvine is quoted in Edward D. Neill, *A History of the State of Minnesota: From the Earliest French Explorations to the Present Time*, 675 (Minneapolis, 1882). Wilkin to Samuel Wilkin, July 23, 1861; Special Order No. 251, Adjutant General's Office, September 23, 1861; John B. Sanborn to Wilkin, September 18, 1861, all in the Wilkin Papers.

departure in October for the western theater of operations. When the Second Minnesota disembarked from steamboats at Louisville, Kentucky, General William T. Sherman immediately ordered it to proceed by rail to Lebanon Junction. Riding on open flat cars in a cold rain at six miles per hour, Major Wilkin and his comrades made their way to the new station.²³

Shortly after they arrived, news came that the officers of the Third and Fourth Minnesota regiments had been commissioned, and Wilkin found that once again he had been passed over. He fired off a letter to Ramsey tendering his resignation and fumed to his brother "Weck": "I cannot consent to hold a Commission under a man who shows himself actuated by the motives he is. Had he not taken my inferiors out of the First Regiment and appointed them to positions where they will rank me I should have held on, although he might have appointed more civilians and politicians.²⁴ . . . He has acted throughout with reference only to his own political advancement, but he will find that he has carried it too far and will disgust many of his own party. I will oppose him hereafter by every means in my power. . . . He has openly repudiated the principle of fitness and qualification, thus jeopardizing the honor of the state, [and] sending Regi-

ments into the field with officers totally unqualified."

Guard duty, incessant drilling, and army routine absorbed time and cooled the major's temper until November 15 when the Second Minnesota was assigned to the Third Brigade, First Division, headquartered at Lebanon, Kentucky. There the volunteers met General George H. Thomas, who was to command them for the next three years, and there also began a strong friendship between the general and Alexander Wilkin.²⁵

The days spent at Lebanon had their lighter side, for, as Wilkin told his sister, the officers "formed some pleasant acquaintances and the girls were pretty and sociable. . . . If they like a fellow they have no reluctance about telling him so. They think nothing of engaging themselves to half a dozen men at the same time." The bachelor major also wrote: "The finest woman I have seen in the state is a married lady in Louisville. We are very good friends and if she was single I should be tempted to propose. As her husband is in feeble health and drinks hard there may be a chance yet."²⁶

The interlude was short, however, for on New Year's Day, 1862, the Second Minnesota struck camp, moving with the Third Brigade out along the Columbia Pike. Carrying forty-five-pound packs, the recruits found the going slow at first, but a soldier soon learns. Much of the equipment was "lost" along the way. On the eighth day the unit left the pike and began ten days of sloshing through mud and driving rains, exhausting marches, nights in the open, soggy countryside, and no canvas. The volunteers were also learning the boredom and wretchedness of war. It took them eight days to travel forty miles.²⁷

Thomas was reaching out for General Felix K. Zollicoffer's Confederate forces which were entrenched on the north side of the Cumberland River opposite Mill Springs, Kentucky. Before the battle Zollicoffer's superior, General George B. Crittenden, took over command. He knew the Union position and determined to attack be-

²³ *Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:44; [Judson] W. Bishop, "Narrative of the Second Regiment," in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:80.

²⁴ Wilkin no doubt referred to the appointments of Henry C. Lester as colonel of the Third Minnesota, Minor T. Thomas as lieutenant colonel of the Fourth, and A. Edward Welch as major of the Fourth. Lester had been, like Wilkin, a captain in the First Regiment, while Thomas and Welch had been only lieutenants. In the same letter (dated November 13, 1861) Wilkin avers that Lester "had less reputation as an officer perhaps than any in his Regiment, without energy or efficiency." Ramsey's reasons for appointing him are not clear. See *post*, p. 195.

²⁵ Bishop, in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:82; Andrews, *History of St. Paul*, 217.

²⁶ Wilkin to Sarah Wilkin, January 4, 1862, Wilkin Papers.

²⁷ For a full account of this expedition and the battle of Mill Springs, see Kenneth Carley, "The Second Minnesota in the West," in *Minnesota History*, 38:261-265 (June, 1963).



AN ARTIST'S VIEW OF THE CONFEDERATE ROUT AT MILL SPRINGS

fore Thomas could join forces with his First Brigade under General Albin F. Schoepf, some fifteen miles away.

The night of January 18 was black and cold and the rain fell. The battle commenced at daybreak and was fought amid underbrush so dense and smog so thick that visibility was reduced to a few feet. As the Second Minnesota advanced to relieve the two hard-pressed regiments which had received the brunt of the first attack, the men came without warning upon a rail fence bounding a large field. Dimly they glimpsed the enemy scarcely a hundred yards away. What they saw, however, proved to be the Confederate second line, for directly on the other side of the fence were the forward elements of the Twentieth Tennessee. The surprise was mutual, and for a while the contest was almost hand-to-hand.

At length the entire Confederate force

began to waver. The Union troops pressed their advantage, the rebel line broke into disorderly retreat, and soon the enemy was south of the Cumberland but without its equipment, trains, or artillery.

In one of his most vivid letters Wilkin described the encounter to his father:²⁸ "On Sunday morning the 19th about daylight we were awakened by Col. [Mahlon D.] Manson who came to our tent and informed us the enemy was approaching in force. We jumped up and heard the firing. In about ten minutes we were formed and off. The battle was going on about a mile from us. On the way we met men retreating and for awhile the firing ceased. I supposed the day was lost. The 10th Indiana and 4th Kentucky were engaged with them but had just

²⁸ Wilkin to Samuel Wilkin, January 21, 1862, Wilkin Papers.

retreated. Our Regiment and the 9th Ohio (German) came up . . . numbering together about 1000. We came to one side of the fence, they being on the other, and we fought for fifteen or twenty minutes in that way. I was on the left wing and several of the men near me were killed almost immediately. We came from behind the fence into the open field and outflanked them. They fought desperately but were obliged to give way. . . . The balls whistled around me worse than at Bulls Run, coming within an inch or two of my head. I rode my horse across the open field to obtain some information when they fired at me. The men called out to me to return but I kept on.

"We took two of the enemy's flags, one belonging to a Mississippi Regiment. We pursued the enemy and soon came to their Hospital where we took five of their surgeons — they took off wagonloads of their dead and wounded and we found over thirty of the dead thrown out of the wagons on the way. We followed on, taking some prisoners, until we came within half a mile of the entrenchments two hours before dark. Supposing that they might stand we did not enter but brought up the artillery and shelled their camp. They had a steamboat with which they crossed the river during the night leaving everything behind — artillery, camp equipage, private baggage, commissary stores and nearly two thousand horses and mules with wagons and harness. Such a complete panic never was known. Genl Crittenden escaped during the night. Our men had neither breakfast or dinner and laid upon the ground all night with only some biscuits and without overcoats or blankets. When we entered [the Confederate camp] . . . we took possession of horses and saddles and had a ride. [The men] dressed themselves in the enemy's clothes and had a jolly time. . . . The General says our Brigade, two Regiments saved the day. He was with

us during the engagement. The next day he saw two of our men with a goose. He rode up and swore at them ordering them to drop it. He then asked what Regiment they belonged to. They told him and he said, 'Pick up your goose you earned it.' The men did behave splendidly. We were so close that some of them had their faces burnt with the powder. They thrust at each other with their bayonets through the fence. The prisoners say their leaders need not tell them after this that the Northerners won't fight."

Of Colonel Van Cleve, commander of the Second Minnesota, Wilkin wrote: "He is a good, kind hearted and pious man and behaved with great coolness and gallantry in the action." The major disapproved of the regiment's lieutenant colonel, James George, but he asked his father not to mention it because "we want him appointed Colonel of the 7th which will promote me. If Col. Van Cleve is made Brigadier it will give me the command of the Regiment."²⁹

Colonel Robert L. McCook, commanding the Third Brigade, said in his official report that Wilkin "displayed great valor and judgment." But this did not satisfy the major. "The fact is," he wrote, "our Regiment did better service than any other and shot at least two thirds of the enemy's killed and wounded but Col. McCook commanding our Brigade does not of course give us more than equal credit with his own Regiment the 9th Ohio. They came up some time after we were engaged and about the time we were driving them the Colonel gave the order to 'charge bayonets,' but did not reach them, and none were killed by bayonet wounds."

He was angered at the Indianans because "Their Lt. Colonel in his report claims all the credit of the victory and describes the part taken by our Regiment and the 9th Ohio as that of his own."³⁰ In fact, Wilkin made charges against both the lieutenant colonel and the colonel of the Tenth Indiana — the one for making a false report and the other for absenting himself from his command during the battle. The latter was Colo-

²⁹ Wilkin to Samuel Wilkin, February 2, 1862, Wilkin Papers.

³⁰ Wilkin to Samuel Wilkin, February 2, 1862. McCook's report is in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:84.

nel Manson, who had told Wilkin and others of the attack, riding a half mile in person to summon help while his men met the enemy without their brigade commander.

THE SECOND MINNESOTA began the return march to Louisville on February 10. From there it moved by river to Nashville to be rested, resupplied, and brought up to strength. The regiment was on the move again by March 16, when the forces under General Don Carlos Buell left Nashville and marched toward Savannah, Tennessee, intending to make a junction with the army commanded by General Henry W. Halleck. Thomas' division was to protect the rear of Buell's column.³¹

As usual, progress was slow because of poor roads, floods, and destroyed bridges. On April 5 the column appeared to gather speed, and artillery fire could be heard in the distance. Convinced that there would be no major battle before they reached Corinth, Mississippi, Wilkin remained preoccupied by his feud with Colonel Manson and the Hoosiers. He wrote to his father on April 5: "As soon as I reach Genl Buell . . . I shall urge him to have Manson . . . tried. . . . I am going tonight to stay at the house of a wealthy widow, who was much annoyed last night by soldiers who came after midnight and ordered her to get up and cook supper for them. They were Indianians." Prosaically, he added, "I had an opportunity the other day to have my other shirt and drawers washed."³²

Next day the bloody battle of Shiloh was fought. The vanguard of Buell's army arrived in time to defeat the final effort of the Confederates at Pittsburg Landing, but the rear elements were too late to take part. Of Shiloh, Wilkin said, "The havoc has been terrible. . . . The enemy have been fighting desperately. . . . I think this battle will close the war if we are successful. . . . Grant is not a good General, but when Buell came up matters changed." The Second Minnesota went into camp six miles outside of Corinth after a "severe march, lying out

in the rain at night and part of the time with nothing to eat."³³

In the months that followed Wilkin was on detached service most of the time. He had been brevetted lieutenant colonel on March 21 — a fact that he first learned from the newspapers. When the Second took its place with the forces besieging Corinth, he was detailed inspector general and chief of staff at the headquarters of General Sherman, who had assumed command of the First Division.³⁴

From this position he reported, "The duties are pleasant and as I am not so much exposed my health is improving." He mentioned casually that "while I was out with General Sherman to visit one of our batteries a shell exploded near to us — we however get accustomed to these things and do not mind them much."³⁵

Even for such a dedicated soldier as Alexander Wilkin, the excitement and martial fervor of the war's opening months had faded and the tragic side of the bloody struggle was more evident. "Poor David Oakes," he wrote, "who arrived here within a fortnight was killed four days since. He came to see me the day before and brought me messages from Weck and was in high spirits. His family will feel his loss deeply. He leaves a young wife and several small children."³⁶

After the Confederates abandoned Corinth he observed: "The country about here is almost completely devastated and the inhabitants away — what the poor creatures are to do for the coming years I do not know.

³¹ Bishop, in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:86.

³² Wilkin to Samuel Wilkin, April 5, 1862, Wilkin Papers.

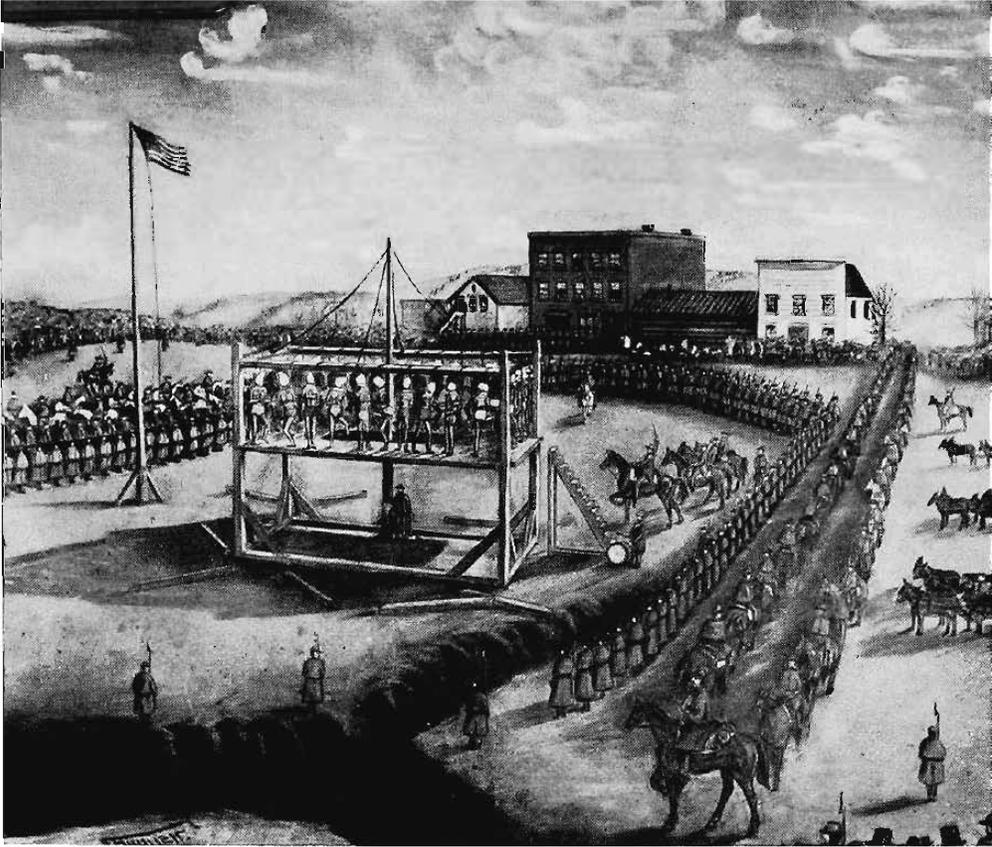
³³ Wilkin to Samuel Wilkin, April 9, 1862, Wilkin Papers.

³⁴ Wilkin to Samuel Wilkin, April 9, 1862; Bishop, in *Civil and Indian Wars*.

³⁵ Wilkin to Sarah Wilkin, May 19, 1862, Wilkin Papers.

³⁶ Wilkin to Sarah Wilkin, June 2, 1862, Wilkin Papers. David Oakes was the son of Charles H. Oakes, a prominent St. Paul fur trader and banker. See Warren Upham and Rose B. Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies*, 558 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 14, 1912).

HANGING the
Sioux
at Mankato



They are raising no crops and many must starve. Most of the inhabitants are very ignorant and only the highest classes are at all educated. . . . I went in Corinth yesterday. . . . It contained about 1000 inhabitants but is now nearly deserted.”³⁷

During the summer of 1862 Ramsey visited the Minnesota troops in the South, and the governor apparently mollified Wilkin with the promise that he would be appointed colonel of the Sixth Minnesota, then being raised. When the promotion did at last come, however, it was to command the Ninth Regiment.³⁸

ALTHOUGH the assignment was made in August, 1862, and Wilkin apparently returned to Minnesota early in the fall, he did

not assume his new duties until November. The three-month lag was undoubtedly due to the confusion resulting from the Sioux Uprising. Like the Seventh, Eighth, and Tenth regiments, the Ninth Minnesota Volunteers began in turbulence. Recruiting for its ranks had been announced early in August, and one company was formed in time to serve with Henry H. Sibley's expedition against the Sioux in September, 1862.³⁹ As rapidly as other companies could be organized and armed they were dispatched to patrol duty on the state's frontier. It was to be nearly two years before the regiment was assembled as a single unit.

Little more than a month after taking command Wilkin was called upon to help maintain order at the hanging of thirty-eight Sioux in Mankato. More than three hundred Indians had been condemned to death for taking part in the uprising, but President Lincoln had commuted the sentences of all except this handful, and the citizens of Minnesota were angry and restive. On December 4 a mob attempted to murder the prisoners, and in fear that the incident would be repeated the authorities assembled some

³⁷ Wilkin to Sarah Wilkin, July 19, 1862, Wilkin Papers.

³⁸ Wilkin to Sarah Wilkin, July 19, 1862; Bishop, in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:88.

³⁹ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:103, 177; Regimental Letter and Order Book of the Ninth Minnesota Infantry, November 26, 1862. This and the Regimental Record and Order Book cited later are in the records of the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 94, in the National Archives.

1,400 troops at Mankato for the execution three weeks later. Wilkin was present with 243 men of the Ninth and other commands. A few days earlier he had written his sister that "a great many citizens will no doubt go up and being disappointed may slaughter the whole 300. If they do we shall make it warm for them. I would shoot them down without hesitation." Fortunately the grim business of the execution went off without difficulty.⁴⁰

During the winter of 1862-63 Wilkin's headquarters were in St. Peter, and there he established a training school for the line and noncommissioned officers of the regiment, who "find so much difficulty in attending to the necessary duties at their Posts in consequence of their inexperience . . . that they do not find time to attend each day to all that is required."⁴¹

Wilkin's scattered command reflected the frontier and its unreadiness for war in other ways. Food, money, clothing, blankets, horses, wagons, weapons, ammunition—everything was in short supply. He wrote Sibley that Captain Asgrim K. Skaro "has now four different kinds of arms for which no fixed ammunition can be had." The colonel had also to deal with drunken enlistments, pillaging, petty thievery, daily discipline, desertion, and occasional Indian depredations. Red tape abounded, and like many another soldier, Wilkin found that "the Regulations are so blind and contradictory."⁴²

In the temporary posts and hastily constructed quarters sickness was a problem. On Christmas Day Wilkin wrote to one of his captains: "Your Company have to go through with the measles and it is better that it should be now than when you are in the Field. No company in the Service to my knowledge has escaped." A more serious threat was cholera, which had been brought to Minnesota in the 1850s and may have been the "malignant disease" which Wilkin reported was claiming many lives among his men in December.⁴³

The dreariness of garrison duty on the

frontier was relieved by some social events. "We are to have a grand ball here on Christmas night," Wilkin told his sister, and in the same letter he reported, "I met a couple of pretty Orange County [New York] girls at Mankato." His proximity to St. Paul may also have been an advantage. In February the *Saint Paul Pioneer* reported a petition to the president asking that Wilkin be promoted to brigadier general—"a recommendation which we think is deserving of every attention." Despite the compensations of being stationed in his home state, the colonel probably agreed with General Thomas, who wrote "I hope the Indian difficulties in Minnesota will soon be settled so that you may be enabled to come out and join us in Ga."⁴⁴

MISSOURI rather than Georgia was the regiment's next destination. In October, 1863, Wilkin set up headquarters at Jefferson City, and there he remained until ordered to St. Louis to serve as a member of a general court martial. His disappointment must have been keen. Again his old friend Thomas wrote: "I regret as deeply as you do that you have been sent to Missouri, and you may rest assured that I will use all the influence I have to get you with me."⁴⁵

But Wilkin confronted the new situation with his usual energy. "Our regiment is looked upon here as something wonderful," he reported. "All say they never saw any

⁴⁰ Kenneth Carley, *The Stoux Uprising of 1862*, 65-67 (St. Paul, 1961); Letter and Order Book, December 7, 1862; Wilkin to Sarah Wilkin, December 17, 1862, Wilkin Papers.

⁴¹ Letter and Order Book, December 3, 1862.

⁴² Letter and Order Book, December 8, 1862; Record and Order Book of the Ninth Minnesota, January 25, 1863. Entries in these books through the winter months of 1862-63 reveal the many difficulties Wilkin dealt with.

⁴³ Record and Order Book, December 25, 1862; Letter and Order Book, December 18, 1862.

⁴⁴ Wilkin to Sarah Wilkin, December 17, 1862; *Saint Paul Pioneer*, February 24, 1863; Thomas to Wilkin, September 2, 1863, Wilkin Papers.

⁴⁵ Macdonald, in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:418-420; Thomas to Wilkin, November 19, 1863, Wilkin Papers.

to be compared to it. It is better than either the 1st or 2nd were at a similar period. We work hard, having drill whenever the weather will permit and a school of instruction every evening. I mean to make it the crack regiment of the State."⁴⁶

Not long after reaching Jefferson City, the men of the Ninth Minnesota constructed fireplaces in their Sibley tents to ward off the cold, wet weather. Rail fences and other burnable material disappeared so rapidly that Colonel Wilkin found it necessary to order the fireplaces dismantled. That night the stovepipe of his tent was capped with grass sod. Soldiers were up and watching when morning came. It was not long before the colonel's unsuspecting orderly entered the tent, arms loaded with firewood. In a matter of minutes clouds of smoke poured from the tent. The orderly and Wilkin emerged, choking and wheezing, and a spontaneous cheer rose from the men. At dress parade that afternoon the regimental adjutant intoned a new order: a detail would chop wood for all; teams for hauling would be supplied. The colonel spoke no more concerning fires in the Sibley tents — nor about the prank on him. The commander and his men had reached an understanding.⁴⁷

Less than a month after his arrival Wilkin described to his father the execution of a bushwhacker. After commenting on the stoicism with which the condemned man's sister had witnessed the event, he went on to observe: "In this state the people have suffered so much as to become callous. . . . I fear this must be a war of extermination and be prolonged for years."⁴⁸

Reflections such as this may have been

⁴⁶ Wilkin to Samuel Wilkin, October 30, 1863, Wilkin Papers.

⁴⁷ Macdonald, in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:419.

⁴⁸ Wilkin to Samuel Wilkin, October 30, 1863.

⁴⁹ Circular Number 1, First Military District Headquarters, Jefferson City, Missouri, December, 1863. A handwritten copy is in the Wilkin Papers.

⁵⁰ Wilkin to Samuel Wilkin, January 27, 1864, Wilkin Papers.

⁵¹ Wilkin to Sarah Wilkin, February 7, 1864, Wilkin Papers.

in the commander's mind that winter when he composed a lengthy circular to his troops. Referring to the occupying forces, he told the men that they were "in the absence of power, on the part of the Civil authorities, conservators of peace and good order. Nearly the whole State is suffering from the lawless acts of desperadoes, not all of whom are to be found among aroused Rebels and Traitors. The prosperity of the State for years to come depends upon the efforts to put down these men and punish their guilty acts, and it is the duty not only of all good citizens but of the Military, to use their best exertions to accomplish this object. . . . All who are living quietly under the laws, must be protected by them."⁴⁹

Wilkin still longed for action. He felt the regiment was ready, and he pulled every string to get it sent to the front. In January he noted: "Yesterday I saw General Grant who is here. My regiment had been highly spoken [of] to him by an old intimate friend who afterwards introduced me to him. He recollected me and said he should like very much to have me with him and would speak to General [John M.] Schofield on the subject."⁵⁰

If persuasion did not serve him, Wilkin felt that the force of events would, "as Longstreet is expected to attack Knoxville with a strong force and will probably do so before our veteran Regiments return." With an unconscious note of prophecy he added, "I presume we shall have warm work. . . . There will be a fine opportunity for glory or death."⁵¹

ON MAY 15, 1864, the regiment was under orders to rendezvous at St. Louis. It was bound for Memphis to operate against the famed Confederate cavalry leader, Nathan Bedford Forrest. Sherman wanted his lines of communication clear as he pressed toward Atlanta; they were threatened by Forrest. In Memphis Colonel Wilkin reported to General Samuel D. Sturgis who had been placed in command of an expedition that was "to proceed to Corinth . . . cap-

ture any force that might be there; then proceed south, destroying the Mobile and Ohio Railroad to Tupelo and Okolona and as far as possible toward Macon and Columbus; then . . . back to Memphis." The mission was to involve eight thousand men — and disaster.⁵²

Wilkin wrote to Sarah, "I arrived here on the evening of the 31st May, having been for some days quite ill and scarcely able to get about. That night we received orders to join an Expedition going out early next Morning. I was told to take no luggage and supposed we were to be gone but two or three days. So we took no change of clothing, tents, or anything to eat for the officers."⁵³

The Ninth left Memphis on June 1 for the assembly area at Lafayette, Tennessee. There Colonel Wilkin was assigned to command the First Brigade of infantry under Colonel William L. McMillen, who commanded the first division. On June 3 the expedition moved out toward Ripley, Mississippi, and on June 8 patrols reported that the enemy was close by and in strength. Wilkin wrote: "We are marching towards Tupelo and are in Mississippi. . . . They say Forrest is concentrating a large force and will give us battle. . . . Genl Sturgis told me [he] had no complaints to make with my Brigade and knew that I understood my business."⁵⁴

To Sarah he said, "We had constant rains and were obliged to sleep on the ground with the rain pouring in torrents on us. . . . I had been advised by the General to turn back as I was so unwell. My health however constantly improved. I put my Brigade in the best shape I could, considering that I was a stranger to all but my own Regiment, now under command of Lt. Col. [Josiah F.] Marsh."⁵⁵

On the night of June 9 the Union force camped fourteen miles south of Ripley and eleven miles from Brice's Crossroads. Sturgis was looking for Forrest — reluctantly, many believe — while the latter was eagerly and aggressively seeking out the federal

troops. Thus it was the Confederate general who selected Brice's Crossroads for the battlefield, shrewdly guessing that he could deceive the Union commander as to the size of the force opposing him. Forrest hoped to defeat the cavalry before the infantry could come up, and he gambled that after a rapid march the footsoldiers would be too exhausted when they did arrive to make much of a fight. He was right.⁵⁶

THE BATTLE (to be known as Guntown, Brice's Crossroads, or Tishomingo Creek) commenced in earnest the morning of June 10 at about 9:30 A.M., when the Union cavalry collided with Confederate forces near the crossroads. After an initial repulse the Confederates launched another assault from the cover of a wood. Fighting furiously, the Union cavalry slowly began to give way. When the first infantry unit arrived about 1:30 P.M., the cavalry force was exhausted and nearly out of ammunition. To relieve it each infantry regiment had to be committed as it came up. Without mounted troops to cover them, the flanks were unprotected. For the soldiers it had been an exhausting march. The day was hot and humid, the roads still deep in mud. The terrain was dense with underbrush which limited visibility.

Wilkin was with his brigade when "firing was heard several miles ahead and soon

⁵² Macdonald, in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:420.

⁵³ Wilkin to Sarah Wilkin, June 18, 1864, Wilkin Papers.

⁵⁴ Wilkin to Sarah Wilkin, June 18, 1864; Wilkin to Samuel Wilkin, June 9, 1864, Wilkin Papers. The First Brigade was made up of the Ninety-third Indiana, the Ninety-fifth and Seventy-second Ohio, the Hundred-and-fourteenth Iowa, and the Ninth Minnesota.

⁵⁵ Wilkin to Sarah Wilkin, June 18, 1864.

⁵⁶ Claude Gentry, *The Battle of Brice's Crossroads*, 3-7 (Baldwyn, Mississippi, 1963); John A. Wyeth, *The Life of General Nathan Bedford Forrest*, 400 (New York, 1899). For general accounts of the battle, see also E. Hunn Hanson, "Forrest's Defeat of Sturgis at Brice's Cross-Roads," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4:419-421 (New York, 1884); Macdonald, in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:420-426.

reports came that our Cavalry had been attacked and driven back. The Brigade in advance . . . was ordered forward on double quick and I was ordered to come on in quick time, but not get ahead of the trains of wagons. We passed many men who had fallen out sun struck and exhausted. Hearing that the 2nd Brigade was sorely pressed I sent forward for permission to hurry on, leaving the train with the 3rd (colored) Brigade. Receiving permission from General [Benjamin H.] Grierson I put the command on the double quick and arrived near the scene of action."⁵⁷ Wilkin was ordered by Colonel McMillen to take a position near Brice's house with the Seventy-second Ohio to prevent the enemy from enveloping the Union left flank and thus reaching a supply train stalled on the road from Ripley.

But the retreat had already commenced. "The enemy's batteries had got our range and were firing shells and canister all about us." The pressure on the flanks caused the Union forces alternately to fight and withdraw. General Sturgis reported later that "order soon gave away to confusion and confusion to panic."⁵⁸ Wilkin had "received directions to form another line and fight until night if possible, as the safety of the command and the train depended upon it. . . . The other Brigades when too sorely pressed were to retire through my lines and form again in the rear, to take our place when we in turn should be driven back. I threw out skirmishers to feel the enemy, which they did, losing several men. We fired fearful volleys into them and our men fell quite fast. Members of my staff and others came to me saying that our supports had left and we were alone. I ordered the line to retire, loading, facing the rear and firing, contesting every inch."

After withdrawing some distance, Wilkin again formed a line. "The enemy poured into

the fields in great force when we kept up a fire for about twenty minutes, causing great slaughter and driving them back. They then brought up their Artillery and shelled us. I ordered the command to retire which they did in good order, the enemy pursuing us no further. It was so dark. I marched about three or four miles and halted to rest, but learning that our troops ahead were in full retreat and receiving orders to move on, I did so and about 8½ o'clock came upon the rear of the main body composed of the Negroes. We were obliged to halt upon account of the train and Artillery which was impeded by a swamp ahead. About midnight learning that they were irretrievably stuck and most of the animals taken off, I ordered the remainder to be unhitched and the command to move on. . . . With difficulty we got through the swamp. Cannon, wagons and ambulances were in the mud. Horses were floundering about and men were rushing past each other in the wildest confusion. The darkness of the night was hideous."

Abandoned wagons, set on fire by the fleeing "mule whackers," spiked and dismantled artillery pieces, discarded muskets, haversacks, and clothing lined the road. From the mired ambulances the wounded begged to be taken along or to be given a drink of water, but nothing could be done for them. The exhausted marchers, wading in mud up to their knees, were scarcely able to drag themselves along. In the words of Sergeant Colin F. Macdonald, who was later to become the regimental historian, "Colonel Wilkin displayed great coolness and bravery, and constantly encouraged his men to keep on, and to fire on the pursuing force at every opportunity."⁵⁹

Wilkin's force reached Ripley at 7:30 on the morning of the eleventh. There the colonel found "everything . . . in confusion and the enemy . . . firing into the town and even from the houses. The main body had arrived several hours and had been fighting. I could find no one to give orders and as the rest of the Infantry had left after a while I went on. We were like all the rest nearly

⁵⁷ Wilkin's descriptions of the battle are all drawn from his letter of June 18, 1864, to Sarah Wilkin.

⁵⁸ *Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:476.

⁵⁹ Macdonald, in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:423.

out of ammunition and many of the men, being exhausted had thrown away their arms and everything else."

Wilkin decided to abandon the main road and, using country roads, he made his way towards Memphis under constant harassment by the enemy. "At Davis Mill we found the bridge partially destroyed and while we were repairing it our rear was fired upon and our negro troops answered it with spirit. Everything was in confusion and the stragglers from other Brigades, who had joined us, having thrown away their arms, and the men on the horses and mules embarrassed me. I formed a line as best I could in the dense swamp and threw out flanking. We finally got through and after a while learned that a considerable force of the enemy was in the neighborhood. . . . About 150 or 200 of [General Abram] Buford's Cavalry charged upon our rear just before dark, but met with a warm reception and several were tumbled from their saddles."

An advance guard "ran the gauntlet successfully to White's Station fourteen miles from here and informed Genl Sturgis of our situation. He was thunderstruck as he had been informed that I had been killed and my command captured. A train of cars with reinforcements and some bread were immediately sent back. . . . We moved on skirmishing as we went and soon heard the whistle of the train. Such shouting you never heard. The reinforcements got off and formed lines some distance in our rear when a large body of the enemy's Cavalry rode up and quite a sharp contest ensued. The bread was distributed to the men who had eaten nothing with few exceptions for three days. Nearly all men barefooted and nearly naked and their feet terribly blistered and poisoned. Their condition was truly pitiable. . . . The negroes both in the action and on the retreat behaved admirably. My health is much improved by the Expedition." The Ninth Minnesota lost a total of 281 men. Of these 239 were captured by the Confederates, and 119 of them later died in the prison at Andersonville, Georgia.⁶⁰

PRAISES from commanders and from the ranks were showered on Wilkin for his bravery and skill in holding intact and in some semblance of fighting order so large a group on that disastrous expedition. Minnesota historian William W. Folwell was to say in 1924: "The conduct of Colonel Alexander Wilkin in remaining with his command when the commanding general, most of the mounted officers, and the cavalry had fled ingloriously to the rear, leaving him to handle the rear-guard fragments, deserves a worthier recognition than has yet been accorded."⁶¹

A Union force twice the size of the Confederate opposition had been beaten badly. Forrest was justified in claiming that "This victory may be justly considered one of the most complete of the war . . . over vastly superior numbers," and years later Grant acknowledged that the defeat had "left Forrest free to go almost where he pleased."⁶²

Fixing the responsibility for the fiasco was a burning question in the Union camp and most of the blame fell upon Sturgis. Seeking to defend himself, the general asked Wilkin for a formal opinion on the causes of the defeat. Although the colonel had already filed his official report, he proceeded to write a dispassionate and discerning critique of the battle.⁶³ In it he pointed out that the units under Sturgis' command had been new to each other and to the general; that the cavalry often had to operate independently and out of communication with the main force; and that rain, bad roads, and lack of forage had slowed the advance.

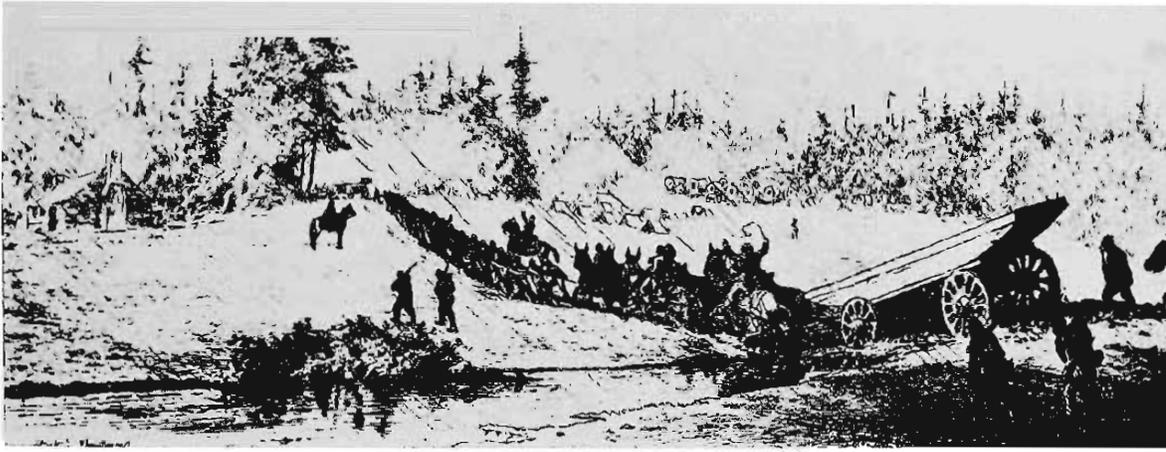
He mentioned Sturgis' fear of the outcome, but "you failed to give the orders to return, in consequence of having positive instructions to proceed." The enemy chose

⁶⁰ Lucius F. Hubbard and Return I. Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 3:188 (Mankato, 1908).

⁶¹ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 2:306.

⁶² *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:425; Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, 2:306 (New York, 1886).

⁶³ This letter, quoted below, appears in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:473.



A Union army detachment contending with southern mud

the ground on which to fight, ground which was highly favorable to the attacking force. Their intelligence was good while "we could gain no reliable information." The Union troops were confined to one road, and heat, mud, and forced marches had brought them into action greatly fatigued. But, added Wilkin the drill master, "If they had marched in the cadence, and with the proper length of step required by the tactics for double-quick, which troops seldom do, they would have been in better condition."

He also noted the difficult terrain and the piecemeal nature of the Union attack, going on to say that "The enemy could undoubtedly have moved around the flanks of any position which we could have taken." The retreat, he thought, might have been better organized. He concluded his report by commenting on a critical issue: "In regard to statements circulated, charging you with being intoxicated during the march and on the field of battle, I can safely say, from my own observation, that they are entirely false."⁶⁴

Like all of Wilkin's official correspondence, the letter to Sturgis was straightforward, factual, and reserved. It justifies the common verdict of his contemporaries that Wilkin was a modest man. More revealing, however, is the enthusiastic letter that he addressed two days later to his father:⁶⁵ "I arrived here yesterday in good health and

excellent spirits. I am in command of one of the best Brigades in the service. . . . I have been amused to overhear some of them talk about me and my size. Some of the officers are no doubt a little jealous and General Sturgis told me that some damned scoundrels were endeavoring to claim some of the credit which belonged to me, but that the official reports do me justice."

Typically, a good deal of his pride centered around the conduct of his beloved Ninth Minnesota: "An escaped prisoner . . . says that Forrest's men say the 9th Minn. whipped them and drove them and they thought from their fire that it was a Brigade. Everybody talks of its conduct. Lt. Col. Marsh managed it admirably and was perfectly cool under fire. Not an officer was killed or wounded. They were so well disciplined, fought in such good order and obeyed orders so well that the officers did not have to expose themselves to the sharpshooters."

WILKIN was still in high spirits when he wrote to Sarah from Moscow, Tennessee, what may have been his last letter. "I wish you could be for a while at my Head Quarters to see some of the 'Pomp and Circumstance of War,'" he told her. "I have a tent for myself and a deserted house for offices. Staff Officers and Clerks are busy writing and Orderlies are riding with orders and Orderlies arriving with orders from my Superiors."⁶⁶

On June 22, 1864, Wilkin's brigade was on the move as part of an expedition led by Major General Andrew J. Smith, who had

⁶⁴ Macdonald thought differently. See his account in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:422.

⁶⁵ Wilkin to Samuel Wilkin, June 24, 1864, Wilkin Papers.

⁶⁶ Wilkin to Sarah Wilkin, June 25, 1864, Wilkin Papers.



WILKIN'S statue in the Minnesota Capitol.

been ordered by Sherman to "renew the offensive so as to keep Forrest off our roads."⁶⁷ Smith proposed to penetrate in the direction of Tupelo, where the Confederates had concentrated to protect the Mobile and Ohio Railroad. As the blue-clad column drove toward its objective on the afternoon of July 13, Forrest struck twice at its flank with no success. The second attack was repulsed with a determined assault directed by Colonel Wilkin.

That night Smith went into camp at Harrisburg, Mississippi, near Tupelo, expecting another attack in the morning. He chose his position well: it was elevated, protected by timber, with open fields to the front, and provided good cover for the wagon trains on the reverse side of the slope. He posted his forces with Wilkin's brigade in reserve.

The enemy opened fire at 7:30 A.M., and in the two-and-a-half hour engagement that followed they were driven from the field with considerable loss. The Union casualties were not great, but among them was Alexander Wilkin. "We were . . . under a heavy fire from the guns of the enemy,"

wrote Colonel John D. McClure, who succeeded to command of the brigade. "The Forty-seventh Illinois and the Eleventh Missouri were ordered out on the right of the train to protect it from an attack on that side. . . . It was after placing these two regiments in position that Colonel Wilkin went forward to attend to the [remaining] half of the brigade, and was killed upon reaching the right of his line, a minie-ball passing through his body from the left side to the right."⁶⁸

The official reports all made mention of Wilkin, with heavy emphasis on his bravery. Eulogies and tributes included that of Minnesota's Governor Stephen Miller, who as lieutenant colonel of the First Minnesota had fought with Wilkin at Bull Run. He asked President Lincoln to promote Wilkin posthumously to brigadier general. The Minnesota legislature in 1868 named Wilkin County in the colonel's honor, and later the Mankato post of the Grand Army of the Republic bore his name. Finally, in 1910 the State of Minnesota through its legislature caused a statue to be erected in the Capitol at St. Paul to "one of Minnesota's most distinguished soldiers of the Civil War." Frowning in timeless dignity from a niche at the northeast corner of the rotunda, it symbolizes what his friend and fellow warrior, Governor Miller, asked for him, "Honor to his memory."⁶⁹

⁶⁷ William Tecumseh Sherman, *Memoirs of General W. T. Sherman*, 2:52 (New York, 1886). Information on the expedition is from Macdonald, in *Civil and Indian Wars*, 1:426-428.

⁶⁸ *Civil and Indian Wars*, 2:487.

⁶⁹ Stephen Miller to Abraham Lincoln, August 5, 1864, Executive Journal B, p. 366, in Minnesota State Archives, St. Paul; *Pioneer Press* (St. Paul), September 8, 1910; Minnesota, *General Laws*, 1909, p. 441.

THE ENGRAVING of Wilkin is from J. Fletcher Williams. *A History of the City of Saint Paul* (1876); the picture on page 180 is from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated History of the Civil War* (1895); the one on page 183 is from a pastel by J. H. Thullen owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. The drawing on page 189 is from a collection by Edwin Forbes, published as *Life Studies of the Great Army* (New York, 1876), and the photograph above is by Eugene D. Becker.



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