Lew Wallace at Fort Donelson

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At Fort Donelson Lew Wallace finally found the battle he had been seeking since his fruitless year as a young lieutenant of Indiana Volunteers in the Mexican War. Wallace was a romantic, and he had a romantic's notions of what war was like; these were partly feudal, partly Napoleonic ideas in which suffering and destruction faded into the background. But he was also a lawyer and a politician, and prosaic political experience usually kept his high-flying imagination within reasonable limits. In fact, it was partly because of his political connections that Wallace got another chance for glory when the Civil War began. Indiana's governor, Oliver P. Morton, a colossus of midwestern Unionism, offered him the post of state adjutant general and with it charge of recruiting Indiana's first volunteer troop quota of six regiments. Once this was accomplished, Wallace resigned to take command of one of these regiments, the Eleventh Indiana Zouaves.1

About this time an obviously impressed lady, Cather-ine Merrill, gave this picture of the stalwart young commander:

LEWIS WALLACE is very American in appearance. His deep, flashing, black eye, straight, shining, black hair, and erect figure, would be no

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1 Irving McKee, "Ben-Hur" Wallace: The Life of General Lew Wallace (Berkeley, Calif., 1947), 11-36. Years after the Civil War, Wallace gave this description of the Gray Zouave uniform: "Our outfit was of the tamest gray twilled goods, not unlike home-made jeans—a visor cap, French in pattern, its ton of red cloth not larger than the palm of one's hand; a blue flannel shirt with open neck; a jacket Greekish in form, edged with narrow binding, the red scarcely noticeable; breeches baggy, but not netted; button gaiters connecting below the knees with the breeches, and strapped over the shoe. The effect was to magnify the men, though in line two thousand yards off they looked like a smoky ribbon drawn out." [Lewis Wallace], Lew Wallace: An Autobiography (2 vols., New York, 1906), I, 270; hereafter this work will be cited in this article as Wallace, Autobiography.

The map on the opposite page is reproduced without color from U.S., Military Academy, West Point. Department of Art and Engineering, West Point Atlas of American Wars (2 vols., New York, 1959). I, map 28 with the permission of Frederic A. Praeger, Inc. The solid lines in this map indicate the location of troops at noon, February 15, 1862. The dotted lines show previous positions and earlier movements of these troops.
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discredit to the haughtiest Aboriginal; and the boldness and sharpness, vigor and delicacy of his features, the insatiable yet controlled mental activity pervading the whole man, and still more the shade of sadness, tinged with scorn, resting on his face, and seeming to indicate a sort of self-pity, perhaps because of the contrast between the transitory nature of the goods of ambition or business, and the ardent employed in their pursuit, decidedly stamp him of the Anglo-American race, which, as a late English traveller says, "loses in the second generation all trace of European parentage," certainly the quiet and apparent stolidity of the genuine Englishman.2

In May, 1861, at the head of the Eleventh Indiana Regiment, gallant Colonel Wallace resumed his quest for La Gloire by going first to the Potomac (where the one small success he achieved was enthusiastically applauded in the Northern press) and then westward to inactivity in the opening moves of Grant's initial western campaign, including the battle at Belmont, Missouri. Wallace had not yet experienced the test of a real battle. Even so, rewards were not scarce for the politically prominent: in October, soon after his arrival in the West, Wallace was promoted to brigadier general, a promotion he was reluctant to accept because he considered himself unqualified for it. Fort Henry followed four months later, and on the eve of Fort Donelson Wallace was becoming desperately anxious to prove himself. He wondered if his chance would ever come.3

Fort Donelson and its companion town, Dover, were located on the south bank of the southern curve of the Cumberland River with Dover less than a mile east of Donelson. The surrounding country, punctuated by creeks, ravines, and rivulets, was flooded in February and covered with woods—hardly ideal conditions for land movement. Because of the bulging streams, Donelson and Dover were vulnerable to land attack on only two sides, the south and east. For this reason the Confederate outer defenses, consisting of formidable earthworks protected by strong abatis, were concentrated here. These outworks covered the south side of Dover, ran in an irregular semicircle along the crests of ridges fifty to eighty feet high to the west side of Donelson, and almost reached Hickman Creek on the north. In the center of this line a mild salient pointed southwestward.

2 [Catherine Merrill], The Soldier of Indiana in the War for the Union (2 vols., Indianapolis, 1866-1869), [1], 27.

Running south from Dover was the road to Charlotte and Nashville, and crossing this just east of the Rebel works protecting Dover was the Wynn's Ferry road, which ran from east to west roughly parallel to the Rebel lines. All in all, natural conditions made Fort Donelson a good place to defend. But human conditions were not so favorable. There was nothing wrong with the sixteen thousand Confederate soldiers holding the fort aside from their greenness, which at this time was not unique for either side. There were some good men in command, too, like Colonel Nathan Bedford Forrest and Brigadier Generals Simon B. Buckner and Bushrod R. Johnson. The trouble was that the two top men, Brigadier Generals John B. Floyd, the commander in chief, and Gideon Pillow were woefully short on military ability. This deficiency was to have important consequences.

On the morning of February 12, 1862, after several days of floody, impedient weather, tough, cigar-chewing Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant began his movement from Fort Henry by sending the divisions of Brigadier Generals Charles F. Smith and John A. McClernand, containing about fifteen thousand men and eight field batteries, along the soggy Dover (or Telegraph) and Ridge roads to positions two miles from the Confederate outworks. By two o'clock that afternoon, able old Smith, the West Pointer, and McClernand, the politician, had covered the ten miles from Henry to their positions after they had brushed back some of Forrest's cavalry. Smith's Second Division took the left of the Union crescent around the Confederate field defenses, and McClernand loosely held the center and right. Lew Wallace, the junior brigadier general, remained at Fort Heiman, across the Tennessee River from Henry, in command of his brigade: the Eleventh and

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Twenty-third Indiana and the Eighth Missouri regiments, Battery A of the Illinois Artillery, and a company of cavalry. At 4:30 P.M., shortly before Grant himself left for Donelson that day, five gunboats and twelve transports with eight regiments of infantry aboard arrived at Fort Henry. Grant ordered Wallace to send these boats around to land below Donelson to cooperate with Smith and McClernand.6

Wallace’s spirits sagged after Grant left. The fact that Grant had not given him a more important role in the Donelson operation nettled him.7 He made something of a nuisance of himself at army headquarters about the matter; at least that is the impression given in a letter written to him by Captain William Hillyer of Grant’s staff. Hillyer, in fact, warned Wallace: “Let me beg of you as your friend that you keep quiet for a day or two—and you will have a position that will suit you in every particular.”8 Hillyer doubtless meant that Wallace would have command of the regiments on the transports when they were put ashore. Nevertheless there would certainly be action over at Donelson in the meantime, and Wallace was stuck at Heiman, twelve miles away from it. Opportunity seemed about to pass him by again.8

But finally at midnight, February 13, there arrived the desired message from Grant, ordering Wallace to leave garrisons at Henry and Heiman and bring the rest of his brigade overland to Donelson. Wasting no time he immediately ordered the commander of the Eleventh Indiana, Colonel George F. McGinnis, to ferry his regiment across the Tennessee river to join Colonel Morgan L. Smith’s Eighth Missouri. With these regiments he set off for Donelson. He had decided to leave the Twenty-third Regiment and the

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7 Wallace to his wife, February 11, 1862, Lew Wallace Collection (Indiana Historical Society Library, Indianapolis); Wallace, Autobiography, I, 382-383.
8 William Hillyer to Wallace, February 11, 1862, Lew Wallace Collection. (The italics were in the original letter.)
cavalry behind. The men of Battery A had difficulty getting their guns aboard the steamers which were used to transport Wallace's troops over the river. By the time the gunners had their pieces and caissons ready to move inland, Wallace and the infantry were several hours ahead. A part of the Thirty-second Illinois Regiment, Company A, commanded by Captain Henry Davidson, had arrived recently by boat, and Battery A picked this up as an escort and started to march eastward. These two small units reached Grant's headquarters at dusk February 14.¹⁰

Around eleven o'clock that morning Wallace had reported with his infantry to Grant's headquarters at Mrs. Crisp's place, a one-and-a-half-story log house behind the center of Charles F. Smith's line. There Grant told him to return his Missouri and Indiana boys to General Smith, take command of the new Third Division, and keep Battery A as division artillery. The Third Division had materialized when the flotilla finally arrived with its cargo of troops.

These boats had made good progress after they left Fort Henry until they entered the Cumberland River at Smithland, Kentucky. The heavy February rains had sent the Cumberland boiling over its banks and the river swept up many objects in its path. The transports were jammed to capacity with troops and equipment, and it was all they could do to make headway against this rushing flood. Three more boats joined the original twelve near Smithland, and a total of fifteen steamers struggled slowly up the river. It wasn't until the dark hours of early morning, February 14, that they reached the landing site three miles below Fort Donelson. The boats bunched closely together near the landing and in turn chugged up to disembark their passengers. Then the men marched down the gangplanks, drew forty rounds of ammunition, and trudged off along the road which led to

¹⁰ Wallace to his wife, February 13, 1862, Lew Wallace Collection; Wallace, Autobiography, I, 383-384; Charles B. Kimbell, History of Battery "A," First Illinois Light Artillery Volunteers (Chicago, 1899), 38. Captain Davidson's company appeared on the scene rather mysteriously since none of the sources on the Battle of Fort Donelson record its arrival. Wallace knew nothing of this company until it showed up in his battle line on February 15, and as late as 1906 he still did not know how it had arrived there (Wallace, Autobiography, I, 407). The page in Kimbell's book cited in this note contains the most information of the movements of Company A.
Mrs. Crisp's house, where Lew Wallace was waiting with increasing impatience.\textsuperscript{11}

Wallace took command of his division when it arrived around 2:30 P.M. It consisted of eight regiments organized into two brigades. The Seventeenth and Twenty-fifth Kentucky and the Thirty-first and Forty-fourth Indiana regiments formed the First Brigade, which capable Colonel Charles Cruft commanded. Wallace was lucky here: this brigade had served as a unit in Brigadier General Don Carlos Buell's Army of the Ohio since December, 1861, and thus could almost be called a veteran outfit. A second brigade (officially styled the Third Brigade for some reason) was a different matter. Compared to Cruft's troops the regiments of the Third Brigade (the First Nebraska, Fifty-eighth, Sixty-eighth, and Seventy-sixth Ohio) were alarmingly innocent of military training and experience. For many of the men in the brigade the miles just covered from the boat landing constituted their first march in the field. But these western boys possessed qualities which partly compensated for their military deficiencies. Some of them were from frontier territories, and many were from relatively unsettled areas of established states. Consequently they possessed physical toughness, boisterous enthusiasm, courage and self-reliance, and—an important asset—extensive experience in the use of firearms.\textsuperscript{12}

Wallace, of course, knew nothing of this as he prepared to start his command toward its position. The position itself was unfamiliar, too, and Grant sent his assistant adjutant general, Captain John A. Rawlins, with the Third Division to show the way. The going was rough. Previous troop movements had churned the rain-soaked road into a river of mud, and, to add to the discomfort of the men, a heavy wet snow began to fall. But the column pushed on through woods


and occasional open spaces. The snowfall increased, coming in thick sheets: to one Indiana soldier it was as heavy as anything he had seen at home. At last Rawlins asked for a halt and showed Wallace where to place his men.

Darkness was closing in as the young captain described the situation. The Third Division was in the center position which McClernand had just vacated. The Confederate works, screened by dense woods, were less than six hundred yards in front. There was no visible road to Smith on the left but only a wall of trees and falling snow. Smith’s right wing was about a quarter of a mile away, and McClernand’s left wing was more than a quarter of a mile distant. Rawlins’ recital did not particularly reassure Wallace, and as he ruefully watched his erstwhile guide ride off into the gloom, Wallace reflected that his division was not solidly anchored in position but was one of three isolated segments; and he had left his cavalry—his only possible link with Smith and McClernand—back at Fort Henry.¹³

While Wallace’s new command marched to position, other events were shaping the character of the siege. The first was McClernand’s ill-advised assault of February 13 on the Confederate rifle pits opposite the left of his center. The Rebels repulsed this attack with heavy loss to the three attacking regiments. The next day, the conqueror of Fort Henry, Federal Flag Officer Andrew Foote, commanding the flotilla, made an attempt to repeat his earlier triumph and run his gunboats past the fort to prevent a Confederate escape on the east side. But the enemy water batteries mauled these ships so badly that they had to retire north for repairs. And on the afternoon of the same day McClernand inched his line farther around to the right to menace Dover from the east and make room for Wallace’s division. By nightfall of February 14, the Rebels had whipped the Yankees on two successive days, the gunboats were no longer a factor in the siege, and McClernand’s division was dangerously strung out along the right.¹⁴

The night was uncomfortable in the extreme for Wallace’s men. The march to the front line had left them exhausted, hungry, and thoroughly drenched. Wallace’s orders, probably

¹³Wallace, Autobiography, I, 390-392; Butler, My Story of the Civil War, 99; Rerick, The Forty-fourth Indiana, 35; Stuber, Tagebuch, 16.
passed on from Grant, prohibited the building of fires because of the proximity of the enemy lines. Thus no coffee was boiled, no bacon fried, and no clothing dried. Even sleep was difficult, for the regimental tents were back at the landing, and the ground was covered with snow and small puddles of water. Some of the men, too tired to care one way or another, forced down raw bacon with hardtack or stumbled off to drop to the ground in a relatively dry or sheltered spot and catch some sleep. Those that stayed awake talked little. Civil War soldiers were as loquacious a lot as any, and camps and bivouacks were especially fertile grounds for impromptu discussions. But there were none this night. Occasionally an erect figure covered by an officer's hat and cape was seen through the darkness moving among the men. It was Lew Wallace, trying to keep up their spirits and find out whether they could stand a fight if a battle came in the morning.15

Riding around his encampment to check the disposition of his troops, Wallace was in the saddle well before dawn of what was to be a crisp, sunny day. He was the very picture of a general astride his fine horse, John.16 Hearing the sound of firing from the right shortly after dawn, he immediately roused his staff. From the direction and intensity of the firing they concluded that, as one aide put it, "the Johnnies are out pitching into McClernand."17

McClernand's stringy line had proved too tempting for even Floyd and Pillow who had been casting about for a way out of their tight squeeze. Seven thousand Confederates, led by Pillow, had smashed at McClernand's right end and, after a fierce two-hour fight, they began driving it back towards his center. But, because Wallace had no cavalry and McClernand sent no information, Wallace was ignorant of the battle for several hours. Then at nine o'clock Buckner attacked McClernand's left with about three thousand men, a part of his division, and McClernand was in serious trouble.18

At 8:00 A.M. a message had arrived finally from McClernand informing Wallace of the Confederate attack and asking for re-enforcements. Grant's orders had explicitly

16 McKee, "Ben-Hur" Wallace, 43.
enjoined Wallace to hold his position and not to take independent action, so Wallace sent the message on to Grant who, it turned out, had left Mrs. Crisp's house to visit the wounded Foote on his gunboat. Half an hour later the hard-pressed McClernand's second appeal arrived stating in substance that the enemy had turned both of the First Division's flanks and that the whole division was in danger. This was too much for Wallace. Word had come back from Grant's headquarters that the commander in chief was absent and thus the decision was left squarely up to Wallace. Disregarding Grant's orders, he immediately sent Cruft's seasoned brigade to McClernand. But on his way to the right Cruft got tangled up in the countryside and finished his trip on the far right of the Union position without reporting to McClernand. By the time Cruft put his brigade into action, between nine and ten o'clock, McClernand's line had begun to disintegrate, and the fragments were fleeing back toward Fort Henry.  

Wallace, meanwhile, held his one remaining brigade under Thayer in position. A short time after the last of Cruft's troops had disappeared into the woods, First Lieutenant Peter Wood brought into Wallace's camp a section of the errant Battery A still accompanied by Captain Davidson's company of the Thirty-second Illinois. Then Captain Rawlins rode up, and Wallace gave him the news of McClernand's disaster. The sounds of battle rang more harshly in their ears as Buckner and Pillow pressed their advance.  

Shortly before ten o'clock the two Federal officers caught sight of the first tangible evidence of the battle—stragglers. Filtering out of the dark forest to the right, they came first in small, dark clouds against the snow; soldiers only minutes ago, they now lacked leadership and needed only ammunition to be soldiers again. A roar rose from the woods to the right. An aide, sent away to find the cause, returned and reported that the Wynn's Ferry road was jammed with horsemen,  

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19 Battles and Leaders, I, 417-418. McClernand's official report on the events of February 15, 1862 contains several remarkable statements. Among other things, he wrote that Cruft's brigade was "generously brought forward by Colonel Cruft upon his own responsibility, in the absence of General Wallace, ... in compliance with my request." Official Records, Ser. I, Vol. VII, 175. But Cruft, who should have known, and Wallace wrote in their reports that Wallace had given Cruft the order to move. Though McClernand had asked for aid twice within half an hour, he wrote that Cruft's brigade was put in reserve when it arrived and was not immediately committed to action. Later McClernand contradicted himself by saying that he knew nothing about the actions of Cruft's troops because Cruft did not officially report to him. This later statement Cruft supported. Ibid., 175, 179, 237, 243-244.
men on foot, and wagons, and that the whole mass was moving toward Wallace’s command.\(^{20}\) As he rode by on a steaming horse, an Illinois colonel shouted: “We are cut to pieces.”\(^{21}\)

Confusion and discouragement mounted and threatened to engulf Wallace’s men. Later he admitted that, “when I saw McLernand’s [sic] thousands come driving back, I thought of Bull’s run.”\(^{22}\) Just then the leading elements of the Twentieth Ohio Regiment appeared from the thick underbrush on the other, left, side of the encampment. The Twentieth was bound for Colonel John McArthur’s brigade on McLernand’s right flank, but Wallace took it and added it to Thayer’s command. He turned to see three more fresh regiments, the Forty-sixth, Fifty-seventh, and Fifty-eighth Illinois, push their way through the milling fugitives who blocked the road from Mrs. Crisp’s. He ordered these regiments to join Thayer. Wallace now made up his mind. He told Rawlins that he would move Thayer’s oversized force to the right along Wynn’s Ferry road to meet the enemy advance. Rawlins then galloped off to headquarters with this information.\(^{23}\)

Wallace, riding down the road ahead of Thayer’s brigade, came upon elements of the brigades of Colonels Oglesby, McArthur, and W. H. L. Wallace of the First Division retiring in good order and demanding ammunition. “Colonel Wallace,” he later wrote, “whose coolness under the circumstances was astonishing, informed me that the enemy were following and would shortly attack. The crisis was come. There was no time to await orders. My Third Brigade had to be thrust between our retreating forces and the advancing foe.”\(^{24}\)

The excited Lew Wallace moved his troops up the road and formed them into a line across it on the lip of a tree-dotted gorge sometime between eleven o’clock and noon. He then ordered up Wood’s guns and sent word to General Smith to inform him of the situation and ask for re-enforcements. Wallace’s line consisted of the First Nebraska, Fifty-eighth Illinois, and Twentieth Ohio regiments on the right, and the


\(^{21}\) Official Records, Ser. I, Vol. VII, 237. In his War Memoranda (p. 35), Whittlesey, who had seen this demoralized officer, identified him only as “an Illinois colonel.”

\(^{22}\) Wallace to his wife, February 19, 1862, Lew Wallace Collection.


Fifty-eighth Ohio Regiment and Captain Davidson's company on the left. Wood's section roared up, flipping over one of its own guns in its haste, to take the center of the front line on the road itself. Some of the guns from the Illinois Artillery's Battery B of McClernand's division with Captain Ezra Taylor in command also joined the line. Lying on the ground some fifty yards behind the First Nebraska as a reserve was the Seventy-sixth Ohio. On Wynn's Ferry road to the rear were the Forty-sixth and Fifty-seventh Illinois regiments, and on a road to the left was the Sixty-eighth Ohio.25

The Confederates were still driving ahead, now on Wynn's Ferry road, as they came into view on the crest of the opposite rim of the gorge. Then three regiments of gray and butternut-clad soldiers spread out into a line of attack and, supported by one battery of guns, advanced down the slope towards Wallace's waiting line. Wallace's men opened fire, but the Rebels held theirs until they could get close enough to make it effective. Twenty-five years later Wallace, who remembered the ensuing scene vividly, wrote: "The Confederates struggled hard to perfect their deployments. The woods rang with musketry and artillery. The brush on the slope of the hill was mowed away with bullets. A great cloud rose and shut out the woods and the narrow valley below."28

The opposing batteries started a thundering duel, and the shells which began to fall among Wallace's men killed and wounded several. The gray infantry now opened fire and delivered a number of punishing volleys, but their advance stopped. Wood's guns began to concentrate on them and were firing double charges of canister at a furious rate.

About one hundred yards from the Federal position the gray line slowly melted away and receded across the gorge.

28 Battles and Leaders, I, 421. The smoke that Wallace saw in the valley seems to have seeped into the official reports of some of the participants. How big a battle was there in that valley? Colonel Thayer and Lew Wallace stated very firmly that their men repelled a Rebel attack, and Thayer wrote that his troops repulsed no less than three attacks in the space of forty-five minutes. Official Records, Ser. I, Vol. VII, 238, 252-253. Colonel W. H. L. Wallace wrote in his report that "the advance of the enemy was checked and he was driven within his intrenchments . . . ." Ibid., 196. Captain Taylor's description is substantially the same. But Buckner and his regimental commanders, the Confederate leaders involved in the attack, described a brief, disorganized charge which was defeated largely by its own disorganization. The Confederates also claimed that Thayer and his men were forced to retreat, a statement that is rather absurd since Thayer had superior numbers solidly placed. Ibid., 210, 352, 344-345, 349-350, 353, 355-356. The account of this fight given in the text is an attempt, taking into account the casualties Thayer's brigade suffered, to reconcile all of these divergent views.
and up the hill. The Confederates were mostly raw troops, and they had been marching and fighting since dawn. They needed time to regain some of the energy which they had expended. Then, if they received the re-enforcements of men and guns they expected, they would attack again. But a message arrived from Pillow ordering them back to their entrenchments. So reluctantly they left, abandoning the field to the jubilant Yankees.27

Wallace and his men had had a nice, straightforward little fight, in many ways an ideal introduction to a battle of larger than regimental size. Fighting on the defensive with plenty of ammunition and reserve troops close at hand, they blazed away steadily without flinching. Wood's gunners had had an especially hot time. They had been firing canister and shrapnel (with fuses cut short for point-blank effect) double-shotted just as fast as they could serve the guns. In the smoke and uproar of the fight three charges were mistakenly rammed into one of the guns, and, according to the battery historian, "the result of firing this triple charge was a graceful somersault by most of the gun squad."28 It was also recorded that one of the men of this crew was thereafter stone-deaf in one ear and hard-of-hearing in the other. Although divisional losses in the engagement were small, there were men in every one of Wallace's units killed or wounded. But, all in all, Wallace and his men must have felt proud when they saw the Confederates retreat.29

After the enemy had disappeared, Wallace rode over to the right to see how his First Brigade had fared. Meanwhile, McClernand's troops procured ammunition from Wallace's supplies and reformed behind his line. Wallace found Cruft in a good spot a hundred yards or so to the right and rear, protecting the field hospital which had been set up in the Cherry house. Cruft had only to advance a short distance and throw out skirmishers and he would be connected with the right of Thayer's line. This Wallace ordered, and the Third Division was united once again. The time was about one o'clock.30


When the Confederates retired they gave up any chance they might have had to extricate themselves from the growing web which Grant, with the arrival of more re-enforcements, was continuing to build around them. By breaking off action, they relinquished the initiative and the momentum they had accumulated in the morning. By retreating to their entrenchments, they also lost possession of the Charlotte-Nashville road by which they could have escaped.

A short period of inert equilibrium followed before Grant finally arrived back on the scene to order the resumption of action. When he got to Wynn's Ferry road around half-past two he found Wallace and McClernand talking between their lines. He had already told C. F. Smith to attack on his front, and now, after a brief look around, he calmly ordered McClernand to strike back and retake the ground lost in the morning. Then he rode off. After Grant left, McClernand asked Wallace to make the proposed attack, because most of McClernand's troops were not sufficiently recovered from the morning's activities to take offensive action.

Wallace thereupon organized an assault force of the following units: the Eighth Missouri and Eleventh Indiana regiments, from his old brigade, brought over by Morgan Smith on C. F. Smith's order; Cruft's brigade, moved up next to Morgan Smith's command; and, in reserve, the Seventeenth and Forty-ninth Illinois regiments, from the First Division, led by Colonel Leonard F. Ross, and the Twentieth Ohio led by Colonel Charles Whittlesey. The lead regiments were the Eighth Missouri on the left and Colonel Hugh B. Reed's Forty-fourth Indiana, and the objective was the enemy line of entrenchments to the right of the central salient. C. F. Smith was already moving ahead as Wallace was preparing his forces.31

In the following heroic prose, which he could not resist inserting in his official report, Wallace described the begin-
ning of the assault: "Well aware of the desperate character of the enterprise, I informed the regiments of it as they moved on, and they answered with cheers and cries of 'Forward!' 'Forward!' and I gave the word." And forward they went, lying down when they saw the flashes of Rebel volleys from the crest of the hill and then rising to charge on. Under the unerring direction of Cruft, Reed, and Morgan Smith they reached the top of a ridge, drove the foe half a mile into his works, and halted to catch their breath. They were only one hundred and fifty yards from the Rebel rifle pits. During the fighting Colonel Joseph D. Webster from Grant's staff arrived with an order to withdraw to the foot of the hill. Wallace disregarded this order as he did a subsequent communication of the same nature. He did, however, postpone continuation of the assault until the next day because darkness was descending. Meanwhile, General Smith's well-planned and well-executed assault had been similarly successful. The night of the fifteenth was little better than the previous one except that no snow fell. Fires were again forbidden, and many of Wallace's men were without food for the second night. There was apparently no exhilaration among them at the results of the day's events. The constant movement along the moonlit roadways of troops, guns, supplies, and ambulances with their melancholy burdens warned of another attack in the morning and of the price it would demand. Details had been sent out to gather in the wounded, some of whom had been frozen to the places where they fell. As dawn approached the word went among the men to prepare to advance; Wallace wanted to be ready to push on as soon as it was light enough to do so.

But all of it—the tension, the preparation—was unnecessary. In the light of early morning the Federals saw a white flag flying over the Confederate works. In the hasty absences of his seniors, Floyd and Pillow, who had slipped away across the Cumberland during the night, Buckner was surrendering Fort Donelson. Wallace, the first Union general to meet the surrender party which Buckner sent out, was escorted into Dover by Bushrod Johnson of the Confederates. Once there

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33 Ibid., 238-239; Battles and Leaders, I, 424-425; Grant, Personal Memoirs, I, 308; Berick, The Forty-fourth Indiana, 39.
34 Complete History of the 46th Illinois, 40; Cluett, History of the 57th Illinois, 8-9; Whittlesey, War Memoranda, 36-37; Stuber, Tagebuch, 17-18; Reed, "Personal Recollections," in Berick, The Forty-fourth Indiana, 224.
he went to see his old friend Buckner, who was at a tavern waiting to surrender formally. Wallace knew every officer in that taproom since he had met them all at a Kentucky State Guard encampment before the war. Later Grant rode in at the head of the Forty-fourth Indiana to put an official conclusion to the first great Union victory in the war.86

The conquest of Fort Donelson was indeed a great victory for the North and for Grant. For Grant it was, in fact, the first link in the chain of achievements that led to fame and promotion. Not only had he cancelled off better than 12,000 men (about 2,000 killed or wounded and over 10,000 captured) as a fighting force for the South, but he had also made the Confederate defensive system in Tennessee untenable. And his own losses had been relatively slight—2,608 men (500 killed, 2,108 wounded). Lew Wallace's division itself had lost only 293 men (44 killed, 231 wounded, 18 missing).86

Yet, from a professional standpoint, Grant's conduct was not all that it should have been due to his carelessly confident attitude on every day of the Donelson campaign. This attitude, however, produced important positive results without which victory could not have been achieved. On the twelfth, at the first break in the weather, Grant hustled Mcclernand's and Smith's troops over to besiege the fort although they weren't nearly enough to do the job. This act, bottling the Rebels up early, made possible an early victory and the capture of a large garrison. And on the afternoon of the fifteenth he ordered Mcclernand to attack despite a morning disaster which would have given many pause and which had, in fact, shaken him considerably; and thus he rendered victory certain. Knowing how deficient Floyd and Pillow were in

86 Wallace, Autobiography, I, 426-433; Wallace to his wife, February 17, 1862, Lew Wallace Collection. Using all available water transport—that is, the steamer, General Anderson—Floyd took about 1,200 of his own Virginia troops out with him across the Cumberland River. Forrest took out five hundred men, mostly from his own command, by a sunken road east of Dover, a road which Confederate scouts had earlier reported impassable. In his report Forrest stated positively that he hadn't seen a single Federal soldier on his way out. Official Records, Ser. I, Vol. VII, 275, 386. It is not mentioned in the official records of the Donelson campaign, but it seems probable that, if the Confederates had possessed enough boats, they could have evacuated the bulk of their forces without a battle.

86 Official Records, Ser. I, Vol. VII, 159, 169, 275, 291, 386; Grant, Personal Memoirs, I, 314-315; Thomas L. Livermore, Numbers and Losses in the Civil War in America, 1861-65 (Bloomington, Ind., 1907), 78; Stanley F. Horn, The Army of Tennessee: A Military History (New York, 1941), 96-97; Force, From Fort Henry to Corinth, 63-64. Estimates of the number of Confederate prisoners vary because an unknown number of Rebel soldiers walked out unnoticed in the days immediately following the surrender of the fort.
military ability, Grant made these decisive, winning moves because he didn't believe he could play it in any other way.37

But between these two actions he made errors which could have cost him victory and the chance to bag the Confederate garrison at Donelson. First, there was no satisfactory reason why he could not have ordered the reinforcements on the boats to disembark at Fort Henry on February 12 and march overland to Donelson instead of having them make the longer trip by water. Then these troops would have arrived before Donelson at least a day earlier and might have been placed to strengthen the weak Federal right wing. But worse than this, on February 15, when Floyd and Pillow woke up almost long enough to make the whole Donelson venture a catastrophe, Grant was unable to hinder them. On Foote's gunboat, he was absent from the battlefield during the whole time of the crisis, and he had neglected to appoint a deputy to exercise over-all control while he was gone. Thus the Federal reaction to the Rebel breakout missed the benefit of unified central direction and each division commander was forced to fend for himself.

Viewed in this way, Wallace's conduct on February 15, 1862, deserves more credit than it generally has received. Acting only on his own authority and in disobedience to explicit orders, he re-enforced McClernand and then made the stand that stopped the Rebel advance and preserved the chance for victory. Captain Hillyer considered these actions decisive. He wrote Wallace on February 16: “I speak advisedly. God bless you—you did save the day on the right.”38 And, to top off a good day's work, Wallace ably organized and led the successful assault of the afternoon. For these services he did receive official recognition. He thoughtfully sent a copy of his official report to Governor Morton and early in March, shortly after Grant was given his second star, Wallace was also promoted to major general along with C. F. Smith and McClernand.39 It seemed that his military career was definitely prospering.

Clearly in this test which his romantic spirit had so long demanded, Lew Wallace came out with nothing but credit.

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37 For further evidence of this attitude of Grant's, see John H. Brinton, Personal Memoirs of John H. Brinton, Major and Surgeon U. S. V., 1861-1865 (New York, 1914), 116-118, 128-129, 144-145.
38 William Hillyer to Wallace, February 16, 1862, Lew Wallace Collection. (The italics were in the original letter.)