

ATTACK ON FORT DONELSON:  
TENNESSEE, FEBRUARY 1862

*Lew Wallace: from An Autobiography*

It was in the western theater that the Union war machine finally moved. In September 1861 Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant took command of the Union forces at Cairo, Illinois, at the junction of the Mississippi and Ohio. During the winter he and Flag Officer Andrew H. Foote, commanding the gunboat flotilla based at Cairo, made plans to gain control of the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers, which led into the heart of the Confederacy. Early in February Grant opened the campaign, his targets Forts Henry and Donelson, guarding the two rivers just below the Kentucky-Tennessee border. On February 6 Flag Officer Foote's gunboats bombarded Fort Henry, on the Tennessee, into surrender. Fort Donelson, on the Cumberland, proved a harder nut to crack. On February 15 the Confederates punched a hole in Grant's investing lines. Union division commander Wallace, author of the celebrated novel *Ben-Hur*, described the fighting in his 1906 autobiography.

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I HAD long since learned that proud men in the throes of ill-fortune dislike to have the idle and curious make spectacles of them; especially do they hate condolence; wherefore I refrained from going to take a look at the first division reorganizing in my rear. It seemed to me a good time to attend to my own business.

However, as the town clocks in cities of the country endowed with such luxuries were getting ready to strike three, an officer rode up from the rear, and hearing him ask for me, I went to him.

“Are you General Wallace?” he asked.

“I am—at your service.”

“Well,” he said, “I am—”

Just then a round shot from the fort, aimed lower than usual, passed, it really seemed, not more than a yard above us. We both “ducked” to it, and when I raised my head almost from my horse's neck the stranger was doing himself the same

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service. We looked at each other, and it was impossible not to laugh.

"I don't know," he said, jocularly, "in what school you were taught to bow, but that one was well done."

"Yes," I retorted, "mine was nearly as low as yours."

To which he added, "They were both behind time"; meaning that they were given after the ball had passed.

Then he took up his fractured remark.

"I was about to say I am General McClernand."

Now I had known General John A. McClernand by reputation as a Democratic politician. His speeches in Congress had been frequent and creditable. My predilections were all on his side, and I ran him over with interest. His face was agreeable, though weather-beaten and unshaven. The snow light gave his eyes a severe squint. His head was covered with one of the abominable regulation wool hats hooked up at one side. Besides being thin and slightly under average height, he was at further disadvantage by sitting too far back in his saddle, and stooping. We shook hands, and he was giving me the details of his battle of the morning, when General Grant joined us, mounted, and attended by a single orderly. I noticed papers in General Grant's right hand which had the appearance of telegrams, and that he seemed irritated and bothered trying to keep some active feeling down. Of course McClernand and I saluted, and gave him instant attention.

From the hollow in front of my position a dropping fire kept ascending.

"Pickets?" General Grant asked.

"My pickets," I replied.

"They will get over that afterwhile," he remarked; then, seriously: "Foote must go to Cairo, taking his iron-clads, some of which are seriously damaged. We will have to await his return; meantime, our line must be retired out of range from the fort."

He stopped. The idea was detestable to him—bitterly so, and, seeing it, I asked to make a suggestion.

He turned to me with a questioning look.

"We have nobody on the right now," I said, "and the road to Clarksville is open. If we retire the line at all, it will be giving the enemy an opportunity to get away to-night with all he has."

Grant's face, already congested with cold, reddened perceptibly, and his lower jaw set upon the other. Without a word, he looked at McClernand, who began to explain. Grant interrupted him.

"Gentlemen," he said, "that road must be recovered before night." Gripping the papers in his hand—I heard them crinkle—he continued: "I will go to Smith now. At the sound of your fire, he will support you with an attack on his side."

Thereupon he turned his horse and rode off at an ordinary trot, while following him with my eyes, wondering at the simplicity of the words in a matter involving so much, I saw Colonel Morgan L. Smith coming up the road beyond him at the head of some troops, and guessed who they were.

General McClernand then spoke. "The road ought to be recovered—Grant is right about that. But, Wallace, you know I am not ready to undertake it."

The significance of the remark was plain. The road in question ran through the position his division had occupied in the morning; and feeling now that General Grant had really been addressing him, General McClernand was asking me to take the proposed task off his hands. I thought rapidly—of my division, by Cruft's return intact, and reinforced—of the Eleventh Indiana and the Eighth Missouri so opportunely arrived—of Colonel Morgan L. Smith—of the order holding me strictly to the defensive now released.

"Did you send to General Charles F. Smith for assistance?" I asked McClernand.

"Yes."

"Well, I see some troops coming, ordered probably to report to you; if they are, and you will direct the officer commanding to report to me, I will try recovery of the road."

At McClernand's request one of my aides—Ross, I think—rode at speed to meet Colonel Morgan L. Smith. Returning, he said, "It is Colonel Smith from General Charles F. Smith, ordered to report to General McClernand."

"Go back, then," said McClernand, "and tell the colonel that I request him to report to General Wallace."

Whereupon I said: "It is getting late, and what is done must be before night. If you will excuse me, I will go at it."

“Certainly,” McClernand replied, adding, “I have two or three regiments in order under Colonel Ross, of my division, whom you may find useful.”

“All right; send them on.”

And as General McClernand left me, I sent to Colonel Smith directing him to halt his regiments behind the battery; with my staff, I then set out to see as much as possible of the ground to be recovered, and decide how best to arrange the attack. My horse objected to the dead men still lying in the road; but getting past them, the hill dipped down into a hollow of width and depth. At the left there was a field; all else appeared thinly covered with scattered trees. The pickets in the hollow were maintaining a lively fusillade, so I turned into the field. I could then see the road ran off diagonally to the right. A bluff rose in front of me partially denuded, and on top of it Confederate soldiers were visible walking about and blanketed. Off to the left the bluff flattened as it went. In that direction I also saw a flag not the stars and stripes, and guessed that the fort lay in studied contraction under it. I saw, too, a little branch winding through the hollow, and thought of my poor horse, then two days without water. The men keeping the thither height caught sight of my party, and interrupted me in the study of their position. Their bullets fell all around us. One cut a lock out of the mane of a horse of one of my orderlies. But I had what we came for, and got away, nobody hurt.

Upon my rejoining them at the battery, the old regiments (Eighth and Eleventh) cheered me; whereat the fort opened, firing harmlessly at the sound. The Eleventh, from their stacked arms, crowded around John—“Old Bailey,” they called him—and filling a capful of crumbled crackers, some of them fed him what he would eat. They would have given him drink from their canteens had there been a vessel at hand to hold the water.

While that went on, I got my orders off. Cruft was told, by messenger, to take his brigade down into the hollow, and form line at the foot of the hill held by the Confederates, his left resting on the Wynne’s Ferry road. When in position he was to notify me.

Smith was informed of what I have called the bluff, and told that it was to be his point of attack—that he was to conduct

the main attack, supported by Cruft on his right and by Ross on the left, and that he was to make the ascent in column of regiments.

Thayer I directed to keep his present position, holding his brigade in reserve with the battery.

By-and-by Colonel Ross—he of Illinois—came up, bringing the Seventeenth and Forty-ninth Illinois regiments that had behaved with distinction in Colonel Morrison's misassault of the 14th. To him I explained that his position would be on the left of the main attack as a support.

I also gave notice to Smith and Ross that I would personally put them in position.

When these preliminaries were disposed of, I looked at the sun and judged that there were at least two hours left me for the operation.

While waiting to hear from Cruft, I chaffed with the old regiments. Of the Eighth Missouri I wanted to know at what hotel they had put up for the night.

"At the Lindell, of course," one of them responded.

"How were the accommodations?"

"Cold, but cheap."

This excited a great laugh.

Halting in front of the Eleventh, I said: "You fellows have been swearing for a long time that I would never get you into a fight. It's here now. What have you to say?"

A spokesman answered: "We're ready. *Let her rip!*"

Very un-Napoleonic, but very American.

Then heavy firing arose out of the hollow, and soon afterwards a man galloped up the hill to tell me that Colonel Cruft was in position, his left on the road.

"It is time to move," I said to Smith.

"Wait until I light a fresh cigar."

That done, and Colonel Ross told to follow, we set off down the road. Hardly had Smith, with whom I was riding, got half-way across the hollow, going straight for the bluff, when a fire ran along the top of it and bullets zipped angrily through the trees, showering us with leaves and twigs. To reply would have required a halt. At the foot of the ascent I left my Missouri friend, saying, "Try the Zouave on them, colonel, and remember to deploy McGinnis when you are nearly up."

Colonel Ross, to whom I rode next, had deployed his command. Going with him until clear of Smith's ground, I asked, "You understand your part, colonel?"

"Yes," he said, "it is to take care of the left of the main attack."

It took me but a moment to get to Cruft, who was exchanging a ragged fire with the enemy above him.

"Colonel Smith is next you on the left," I said to him. "Keep a little behind his line, and when you have cleared the hill, swing left towards the fort, pivoting on him."

I hurried then to the open field spoken of; and by the time I reached it, selected a stand-point for general oversight, and adjusted my field-glass, the advance had become general where Ross and Cruft were ascending slowly, inch by inch, the musketry had risen in measure, and the trees stood half veiled in a smoke momentarily deepening.

Presently my glass settled on Colonel Morgan L. Smith and the climb in his front, which I judged of three hundred short steps. In the patches of snow on the bluff breast I also noticed some clumps of shrubs and a few trees, and here and there what appeared to be outcropping of rock. The disadvantages were obvious; yet, counting them as odds in the scale of chances, they were not enough to shake my confidence in the outcome, for there were advantages to be taken into the account—among them the Zouave training of both the regiments, meaning that they were nimble on their hands and knees far beyond the ordinary infantrymen, that they could load on their backs and fire with precision on their bellies, and were instinctively observant of order in the midst of disorder. Indeed, *purpose* with them answered all the ends of alignment elbow to elbow.

While making these observations my attention was drawn off by musketry blent with the pounding of artillery in the distance over at the left. It was General Charles F. Smith's supporting attack as promised by General Grant. Then it came to me suddenly that the crisis of the great adventure was on the army, and that as it went the victory would go. A feverish anxiety struck me. My tongue and throat grew dry and parched. I have the feeling now even as I write, such power have incidents at times to stamp themselves on memory.

Returning then to Colonel Smith, I saw skirmishers spring out and cover the front of his column. To my astonishment I also saw the man himself on horseback behind his foremost regiment, bent on riding up the hill—a perilous feat under the most favorable circumstances.\*

I would like to describe the ascension of the height by the regiments under Smith, but cannot, for, take it all in all, it was the most extraordinary feat of arms I ever beheld. In the way of suggestion merely, the firing from the top was marked by lulls and furious outbursts. In the outbursts the assailants fell to their hands and knees, and took to crawling, while in the lulls—occasioned by smoke settling so thickly in front of the defenders that they were bothered in taking aim—yards of space were gained by rushes. And these were the spectacles impossible of description. To get an idea of them the reader must think of nearly two thousand vigorous men simultaneously squirming or dashing up the breast of a steep hill slippery with frost, in appearance so many black gnomes burrowing in a cloud of flying leaves and dirty snow. As they climbed on the alignment with which they started became loose and looser until half-way up it seemed utterly lost. There was no firing, of course, except by the skirmishers, and no cheering, not a voice save of officers in exhortation. Occasionally we heard Smith or McGinnis, but most frequently the enemy flinging taunts on the laborers below. “Hi, hi, there, you damned Yanks! Why don’t you come up? What are you waiting for?”

They were nearing the top, probably a third of the distance remaining, when the Eleventh, in loose array as it was, rushed by the left flank out of column. They stumbled, and slipped, and fell down, but presently brought up, and faced front, having uncovered the Eighth. To get into line with the latter cost but a moment. About the same time I saw the skirmishers drop and roll out of sight, leaving the line of fire unobstructed. A furious outbreak from the enemy and both regiments sank

\*I asked Colonel Smith afterwards what he meant by riding. He gave me a characteristic reply. “I thought the sight of me would encourage the boys.” In further illustration of the man under fire, a bullet cut his cigar off close to his lips. “Here,” he shouted, “one of you fellows bring me a match.” The match was brought, and, lighting a fresh cigar, he spurred on and up.

down, and on their bellies half buried in snow delivered their first ragged volley. The next I saw of them they were advancing on their hands and knees. That they would win was no longer a question.

I gave a glance in Cruft's direction and another to Ross. Both were well up in their sections of attack. Just then some one near by broke into a laugh, and called out, "Look there!"

"Where?" I asked, not relishing the diversion.

A party of surgeon's assistants, six or eight in number, seeing us in the field, and thinking it a safe place, started to come across. A shower of bullets overtook them, and when my eyes reached them they were snuggling in the snow behind the kits they carried. And when I remembered how thin the kits were, nothing but oil-cloth, and not more resistant of a minié-ball than tissue-paper, I excused the laugh by joining in it.

Another look towards Cruft, another to Ross, then a brief study of Smith's forlorn hope, by that time nearly to its goal, and I took action.

Regaining the road, I hastened into the hollow, and when about half-way across it noticed a slackening of the enemy's fire; then, hardly a minute elapsing, it ceased entirely. The meaning was unmistakable. We had won! Calling Kneffler, I told him to go to General McClermand and tell him we were on the hill, and that he would oblige me if his artillery did not fire in our direction.

In these moves my horse had answered me readily but with his head down—a thing that had not happened before. The other horses of the company were worse off. There was need for me up on the height, but we stopped by the little brook and broke through the ice. While the poor brutes were drinking greedily, Colonel Webster came to me.

"General Grant sends me," he said, "to tell you to retire your command out of range of the fort and throw up light intrenchments. He thinks it best to wait for reinforcements."

I gave a thought to the position just recovered, with loss unknown, and asked the colonel, "Does the general know that we have retaken the road lost in the morning?"

"I think not," he replied.

"Oh, well! Give him my compliments, colonel, and tell him *I have received the order.*"

Webster gave me a sharp look and left me. I had resolved to disobey the direction, and he saw it, and justified me without saying so—as did General Grant subsequently.

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THE SUN was just going down when, with my staff, I rode on to the height just won. To my eager search for what of war and combat it had to offer there was at first nothing which one may not find in any neglected woods pasture; only the air was heavy with the sulphurous smell of powder burned and burning, and through the thin assemblage of trees there went an advancing line of men stretching right and left out of sight. My first point was to catch that line.

The enemy had not waited the coming up of the Yanks. His main body had retired towards his works, and the three commands, Cruft's, Ross's, and Smith's, with just enough resistance before them to keep their blood up, were pushing forward at a pace calling for energetic action if they were to be brought to a halt. That done, however, the three were closed on the centre; then, skirmishers being thrown to the front, we advanced slowly and cautiously.

It was not long until we came on the aftermath of General McClelland's morning struggle. Dead men, not all of them ours, were lying in their beds of blood-stained snow exactly as they had fallen. And the wounded were there also. These, fast as come upon, were given drink and covered with blankets, but left to be picked up later on; and there was no distinction shown between the blue and the gray. The wonder was to find any of them alive.

While following the line I saw a man sitting against a stump in a position natural as life. Besides the Confederate homespun of which his clothes were made, he sported a coon-skin cap with the tail of the animal for plume. His eyes were wide open and there was a broad grin on his face. I would have sworn the look and grin were at me, and, stopping, I spoke to an orderly.

"Find out what that fellow means by grinning that way. If he answers decently, help him."

The orderly dismounted and shook the man, then said, "Why he's dead, sir."

“That can’t be. See where he’s hit.”

The cap when taken off brought away with it a mass that sickened us. A small bullet—from a revolver, probably—had gone through the inner corner of his eye leaving no visible wound, but the whole back of the head was blown off and the skull entirely emptied.

On a little farther we rode over the body of a Confederate lying on his back spread-eagle fashion. A gun clutched in his hand arrested me.

“Get that gun,” I said, and one of my men jumped down for it.

It is in my study now, a handsomely mounted, muzzle-loading, old-style squirrel rifle. Sometimes I take it out to try at a mark, when, as a souvenir, it strikes me with one drawback—touching it is to revive the memory of its owner looking up at the sky from his sheet of crimson snow; and that he brought the piece to the field with him intending to kill Yankees as he was in the habit of killing long-tailed rodents does not always suffice to allay the shiver it excites.

It is to be remembered that, in common with my whole command, I was profoundly ignorant of the topography of the locality. That we were moving in the direction of the fort I knew rather as a surmise than a fact. The skirmishers kept up their fire; otherwise the silence impressed me as suspicious. Once I heard the report of a great gun in the distance, and shortly a shell of half-bushel proportions went with a locomotive’s scream through the tree-tops; whereupon we knew ourselves in the line of fire from the gun-boats in the river. Disagreeable—yes, vastly so—but there was no help for it. Right after—indeed, as if the unearthly scream of the big shell had been an accepted signal—the holders of the fort awoke, and set their guns to work—how many I had no means of judging.

Through the woods then there sped a peculiar short-stop whistling; nor was there need of one of greater experience in battle to tell us that we were objects of search by cannister and possibly grape-shot. Fragments of the limbs above us rattled down, and occasionally—the thing of greatest impression upon me—a sharp resound, like the cracking of green timber in a

zero night, rang through the woods; and that we also instinctively knew to be bullets of iron embedding themselves in some near-by tree-trunks.

Now, as I have no wish to take credit not strictly my due, the effect of this visitation startled me—the more so as it came in the nature of a surprise. I asked myself, however, “Where are we going?” And as the answer did not come readily, I made haste to order another halt.

It happened that my position at the moment was behind Cruft’s brigade in what I took to be the road to Charlotte, also the object of anxious solicitude. Making way through the halted line, the situation revealed itself. There, not farther than three hundred yards, a low embankment stretched off on both sides, and behind it, in the background, rose an elaborate earthen pile which a drooping flag on a tall, white staff told me was Fort Donelson proper. Some field-pieces behind the low intrenchment were doing the firing, supported by men lying in the ditch. The heads of these bobbed up and down; and every time one of them bobbed up it was to let loose a streak of brilliant flame, with a keen report and a rising curl of smoke as close attendants. In front of the outwork far extending were our skirmishers behind stumps and logs, and in every depression affording cover, and they, too, were shooting. The interval of separation between the enemies ranged from eighty yards to a hundred and fifty.

The scene was stirring; but it must not be thought it held me long—far from it. While I looked, a sense of responsibility touched me with a distinct shock. What next?

Two things were possible; to continue on or go back out of range. The first meant an assault, and I doubted my authority to go so far. It seemed a step within the province of the commander. Perhaps he was not ready to order it. To be successful, moreover, there was need of support, otherwise the whole garrison could be concentrated against me. So, resolving the skirmishers as they were into a grand guard, Colonel Morgan L. Smith in charge, I retired the line five or six hundred yards.

There was nothing for us then but another night in bivouac without fires, and nothing to eat but crackers; literally suffering from the pinch of hunger added to misery from the pinch of

cold. Yet I did not hear a murmur. This, I think, because there was not a soldier there so ignorant as not to know the necessity of keeping a tight grip upon our position.

With the advent of darkness the gun practice ceased, and later even the pickets quit annoying one another. Then silence, and a February night, with stars of pitiless serenity, and a wind not to be better described than as a marrow-searcher.