

Mark H. Dunkelman
Street
Providence, RI

"POOR OSCAR IS DEAD AND GONE HOME TO REST"

Exactly who sent Mrs. Sally Wilber the final, fatal word about her son Oscar is unknown. The mortally wounded young soldier was a member of a large family, but like so many others, he had neither family nor old home friends by his bedside to comfort him as he lay dying. In his last days, Oscar Wilber received his consolation from Samaritan strangers who visited the wards of Washington's extensive military hospitals, dispensing companionship and kindness to row after row of sick and wounded.

Two of those kind strangers left accounts of their visits to Oscar Wilber at Armory Square Hospital. One of them, A. J. Pratt, an employee of the Treasury Department, has passed on into obscurity. The other, a part-time copyist in the Paymaster General's office and freelance contributor to the newspapers, lives on in his writings as a giant of American literature. Walt Whitman, former printer and newspaper editor, author of Leaves of Grass, a slender volume of verses then in its third edition--a book with some critical acclaim and much public disregard, thought by some to be obscene--had rushed to the front after the Battle of Fredericksburg, to look after his wounded brother. His heart profoundly touched by the plight of the crowds of wounded and sick soldiers, Whitman stayed on in Washington, looking for a position and spending much of his spare time visiting the capitol's crowded hospitals, talking with the broken men, reading to them, writing letters for them, giving them little gifts--fruit, candy, pens, pencils, writing paper,

stamped envelopes, tobacco, small amounts of money--and in general lavishing them with affection.

It seems very possible that Pratt or Whitman wrote the last, sad letter to Sally Wilber notifying her that her son was dead. That final chapter of Oscar's story came to her a year after he enlisted and they parted--a year in which the young soldier voiced cautious optimism he would survive, and described ominous consequences of the war he had volunteered for.

*

Mother and son parted in the summer of 1862, when Oscar F. Wilber heeded President Lincoln's call for 300,000 three-year volunteers. For the previous two years, Sally D. Wilber--a widow since 1852--had depended on her eldest son, the third of eight children, for the family's support. The household included Oscar's older, invalid sister, a younger girl, three younger brothers, and Sally's mother. They owned and worked a small farm in the town of Humphrey, Cattaraugus County, New York. It was one of several Wilber farms in the valley of Five Mile Run, holdings settled by the seven sons of a Revolutionary War veteran, including Oscar's father Alanson, who came west from Onondaga County, New York about 1830. For generations, the stretch of the Five Mile valley astraddle the Humphrey-Allegany town line would contain a large population of Wilbers, and today Wilber descendants are still living on the Five Mile Road.

Five Wilber cousins left the valley to enroll in August and September of that summer--Oscar (age 21), Charles (24), Milo (18), and brothers Darius (20) and Lyman (18). Darius and Milo had already volunteered in the neighboring town of Hinsdale when Oscar enrolled there on August 11. In the following weeks, Lyman signed up in Olean and Charles enlisted in Allegany. Late in September, the Wilbers were mustered in as privates in the newly-formed 154th New York Volunteer Infantry, Charles in Company I and the other cousins in Company G.

Oscar Wilber's own story of his army experiences was told in a series of letters to his uncle, Nathan Wilber, back home in the Five Mile valley. Oscar had worked occasionally for Uncle Nathan in the past, and was relying on him to handle his financial affairs and look after his mother

and family in his absence. To his uncle, Oscar described the novel sights the new soldiers saw, and the hopes and fears of a young volunteer.

On October 5, 1862, he wrote from Camp Seward, on Arlington Heights, Virginia, describing the regiment's railroad trip from its rendezvous in Jamestown, New York to the seat of war--the stop in Elmira to receive their rifles and accouterments, a short layover in Baltimore and a slow final ride to Washington along the heavily-guarded tracks, and the march across the Potomac to their campsite. From Camp Seward, the sandy, rolling countryside was covered with tents, forts and rifle pits as far as Oscar could see, and the soldiers were "as thick as flies." He tried to visit one fort, and although he was not allowed to enter, he saw it housed cannon large enough for a man to crawl into. From its camp, the 154th had a fine view of Washington--"Old Abe has got a very nice house," Oscar thought. But all in all, the area looked very desolate, and it seemed like nothing had been raised on the nearby farms since the war began. "I have seen more than I ever knew before," Oscar declared, but "I like Cattaraugus the best."

The 154th had made a two days' march to Fairfax Court House and was assigned to the 1st Brigade, Second Division, XI Corps of the Army of the Potomac when Oscar wrote again. The men thought their first fight could not be long off. Corps commander Major General Franz Sigel was regarded as a fighter--he had been boxing with the Rebels for some time, Oscar noted--and rumors of a move toward Richmond abounded. The captain of Company G, Matthew B. Cheney, thought the Wilber cousins and their comrades would have "to fight right along." With that sobering thought in mind, Oscar wrote, "All I have to say about it [is,] I don't want no one to trouble about me. All I want [is for] you [and] Aunt Rachel to pray for me and all the rest of the soldiers." He was trying as best he could to live like a good Christian, he averred, although temptations abounded to lead a man astray. He closed his letter on an upbeat note, saying he thought the war would close by spring, and "I expect to come home yet."

Oscar included a note in his letter for Nathan to hand to his mother. He told Sally that while he was near the enemy, "the Lord will save us if He thinks best. I don't trouble much about it." He pleaded to the family to write to him--he hadn't yet received a letter--noting that they had

more time to write than he did, busy as he was with drilling, standing guard, and other military duties.

The prospects of battle had assumed a horrifying reality when Oscar wrote again on November 6. In a movement towards Thoroughfare Gap, the 154th New York had passed over the Bull Run battlefields, and now Oscar thought he could tell the home folks a little about war. He catalogued the grisly scenes--the many corpses covered with a thin veil of dirt, the dead horses, a man's head, a dried and shriveled arm, a standing boot holding a leg shot off below the knee, the face of a man peering from the ground where the rain had washed the soil away. He couldn't explain how bad it looked, or how he felt, but he wrote, "I expect that I shall have to get use[d] to it."

In more pleasant news, Oscar described the bounty that daily foraging was providing the 154th. The regiment was feasting on pork, chicken, mutton and honey. One evening they confiscated some cattle and shot, butchered and broiled the beeves so rapidly, Oscar likened the men to wolves. One young bull made a doomed attempt to run away, and regimental wags bragged they had "whipped them at Bull Run." Oscar thought his uncle would have laughed at the scene.

By the time of his next letter, November 21, the 154th had returned to Fairfax Court House from Thoroughfare Gap, and Oscar was getting over a case of the mumps. He had been quite sick, very weak, and unable to eat hardtack--he was broke from buying expensive provisions from sutlers--but he was getting "quite smart" and "pretty stout" as he recovered. Several of the 154th boys had the mumps, and some were so sick they had to go to the hospital. The surgeons had recommended Oscar go, too, but he told them he wouldn't, unless his condition worsened.

Cousin Milo Wilber had also been sick but was recovering, and Oscar thought he and Milo could stay healthy if they were careful. But he estimated that out of nearly a thousand men at its muster-in, the 154th New York didn't have six hundred soldiers left present for duty. "Uncle Nathan," Oscar wrote, "you don't know nothing about how a soldier has to fare. He's outdoors in the rain and mud all day and then when night comes [has] to lay right down in the wet mud with a

little, thin cloth tent for a house, and the rain will run right through it....If we could have your barn to sleep in we would think that we was well provided for. We have to fare harder than your cattle does." The men's rations were sometimes as poor as their shelter, a single hardtack and a little piece of beef per day. Oscar's demoralization was further expressed in a bit of advice. "Uncle Nathan, if you are drafted you better hire a man to come in your place," he wrote, "if it costs you all that you are worth to hire him. For what is a man's property worth when he is dead?"

A week later, Oscar was feeling "middling well", but didn't have much news to write during a period he described as dull times. When he wrote again on December 23, however, he was in sight of Confederate pickets on the opposite bank of the Rappahannock River near Falmouth, where Companies G and B of the 154th New York were doing duty supporting a battery. Fortunately for the Wilber cousins and their XI Corps comrades, they had arrived in the area too late to take part in the Battle of Fredericksburg, or "General Burnside's slaughter yard," as Oscar noted the older regiments were calling the fight. Major General Ambrose Burnside's tactics in that disastrous defeat were widely criticized in the ranks of the Army of the Potomac. The men thought it was just plain wrong to advance across open lots to assault the Confederates in their strong positions. "It is hard work to hit a man if you can't see him," Oscar wrote, but "if the Rebs would come out fair, we could whip them."

Things didn't get that easy for General Burnside's army, and in February, 1863, Oscar was describing his experiences in the dismal Mud March. Out day and night in the rain and mud, pontoons, cannon and teams stuck fast in the mire, soaked to the skin under a knapsack that seemed to weigh sixty pounds--it was the worst time that he had ever seen, and he declared with disgust that he would write about it no more.

Mud--foot-deep mud, knee-deep mud--kept coming up in his letters that winter. It confined the army to its camps, and made for more dull times. Oscar was feeling well, but cousins Charles and Darius Wilber had sick spells. The 154th moved its winter camp a few miles to the vicinity of Stafford Court House, and the boring routine continued. A rare note of homesickness crept into

Oscar's letter of February 21: "Nathan, I wish I was to your house today, where I could clasp my hands with you and your family. Oh, what a happy day that would be to me!"

By early March, an infirm Darius Wilber was in Washington, where Oscar correctly guessed he would receive his discharge. Both Darius and Lyman had spent all of the pay they had drawn without sending any home, Oscar noted with a hint of disapproval. He too was short of money--he had paid two dollars to have his photograph taken--but he had sent two-thirds of his pay home to Nathan, for Sally and his sisters and brothers.

Oscar's March letter is his last to survive.

*

The next voices to speak for Oscar Wilber were those of Walt Whitman and A. J. Pratt, writing of their hospital encounters with the wounded soldier. If Oscar himself wrote about the events that led to his wounding, the letters have not been preserved. But letters, diaries and accounts of other members of the 154th New York present a consistent story of the regiment's involvement in its first battle.

Along with the rest of Colonel Adolphus Buschbeck's 1st Brigade, the 154th marched in mid-April, 1863 to Kelly's Ford on the Rappahannock, where they spent a couple of weeks picketing the riverbank and foraging the countryside. That period of relative leisure ended when the rest of their corps, and two others, marched to the vicinity at the end of the month. Burnside's replacement as commander, Major General Joseph Hooker, designated that force the right wing of the Army of the Potomac. The 154th spearheaded the wing's movement toward the enemy on the evening of April 28, when the regiment boarded pontoons and pushed off for the south bank of the river. A hasty volley from the Confederate vedettes splashed harmlessly in the water, the riverbank was quickly secured, engineers rapidly spanned the river with a pontoon bridge, and the immense column of the right wing tramped across the Rappahannock, a process that took all night. After thoroughly plundering the plantation of the ford's namesake, the wealthy Mr. Kelly, the 154th took up the march at the rear of the long line. A pause was made at the crossing of the Rapidan River, where the men were cruelly amused at the travail of the army mules, balking, slipping, and being

swept away by the stream's rapid current. Another stretch of marching lasted until about midnight of April 30, when the exhausted regiment lay down to sleep in a place called the Wilderness.

The next day was warm and pleasant, and about noon the 154th packed up and resumed the march. But a half-mile down the road, they turned around and returned to camp. The men had no way of knowing it, but General Hooker had just relinquished the initiative of the campaign to his adversary, and General Robert E. Lee was quick to seize it. The 154th spent the remainder of the day digging rifle pits and warily listening to the distant sounds of battle. The next day, Saturday, May 2, 1863, was quieter--but it was an ominous quiet. From their picket lines in the deep woods surrounding Colonel Buschbeck's position at Dowdall's Tavern, men of the 154th and other regiments returned to camp with reports of a heavy Confederate force snaking its way toward the rear of the XI Corps--the extreme right flank of the army. But the reports were ignored at Dowdall's, where corps commander Major General Oliver O. Howard, who had replaced Sigel a month earlier, had his headquarters. The stage was set for one of the saddest disasters in the history of the Army of the Potomac.

At the head of the Confederate column was, of course, Lieutenant General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, poised to crush the Yankees in the victory that would accord his name immortality. When his attack was unleashed that evening, heralded to the hapless XI Corps by a rush of wildlife from the woods and the piercing chill of the Rebel yell, Howard's men--arms stacked, dinners cooking, blankets unrolled for the night's sleep--were powerless before the storm. Outnumbered three to one, unprepared, and facing the wrong way, the Union brigades were routed one after another, occasional stubborn lines of resistance soon swept away with the others.

At Dowdall's Tavern, Colonel Buschbeck's brigade was the farthest from the attack, so they had time to form a line to meet the assault. A few regiments rallied on their line, but most of the retreating XI Corps men rushed right by the position and into the darkening woods to the rear, seeking the security of the rest of the army. Then, supported by a battery, Buschbeck's brigade made its stand, holding its little, backward rifle pit until the corps trains and reserve artillery made their escape. But the relentless Confederate attack was only momentarily checked, and the

overwhelming force had soon outflanked the small Union line and threatened to surround it. The brigade's three veteran regiments rushed for the woods, and for a few, foolhardy moments, the 154th New York stood alone between the victorious Rebels and the rest of the Federal army. Finally, perhaps twenty minutes after they had first come under fire, the 154th reeled in retreat, leaving their killed and severely wounded behind, and suffering still more losses as they crossed the open field in their rear to reach the forest.

In the tangled woods, more men were shot down or captured by the closely-pursuing Confederates. Captain Matthew Cheney somehow managed to keep Company G pretty well together, but got separated from the rest of the regiment in the chaotic scramble through the dark woods. A number of men from other companies of the 154th fell in with Cheney and his men as they fell back, and when they finally reached the Union lines, the main body of the regiment was nowhere in sight, having rallied on a different portion of the line.

That night the two segments of the 154th New York witnessed the continuing battle from reserve lines, and about midnight the main portion of the regiment was moved still farther to the rear. Company G, however, stayed on the front line and took part in the fighting on the next day, May 3, suffering a few more casualties. That afternoon, Captain Cheney learned the whereabouts of the regiment, and led his survivors to the rear to rejoin their comrades. For the next two days, the 154th lay inactive in trenches under a heavy rainfall. At daybreak of May 6, the regiment crossed the Rappahannock and began the retreat to its old camp at Stafford Court House.

Chancellorsville decimated the 154th New York. Nearly one half of the regiment was killed, wounded or captured during the regiment's forlorn, futile stand against Jackson's attack on the evening of May 2. That ratio held true for the Wilber cousins. Milo and Lyman Wilber survived the battle unscathed. Charles Wilber was captured. Oscar Wilber was wounded--a dangerous gunshot wound in his right thigh.

*

In the humid heat of Washington's summer, Oscar Wilber lay dying. His wound had never healed, and it was dripping pus. Chronic diarrhea left him weak and exhausted. He knew his

condition was fatal, and he didn't have much time to live. His immediate world was reduced to his narrow iron bed, the whitewashed walls of the barrack-like pavilion, the comings and goings of surgeons and nurses, his constant pain--and the comforting visits of his new friends, Whitman and Pratt.

On the afternoon of July 22, 1863, Walt Whitman made the familiar trip through Washington's streets to Armory Square Hospital, just east of the turrets of the Smithsonian Institution on Independence Avenue. There, he wound his way through the pavilions and rows of beds until he came to the side of Oscar Wilber. He spent a long time with the young soldier. Whitman noted the suppurating wound, and how the diarrhea had prostrated Oscar. "I felt that he was even then the same as dying," Whitman wrote that evening.

Oscar asked Walt to read a chapter of the New Testament to him, whatever he chose. Whitman turned to one of the evangelists, and read about the last hours of Jesus, and the crucifixion. "The poor, wasted young man asked me to read the following chapter also, how Christ rose again," Whitman wrote. "I read very slowly, for Oscar was feeble. It pleased him very much, yet the tears were in his eyes." Oscar asked Walt if he enjoyed religion, and received an equivocal answer: "Perhaps not, my dear, in the way you mean, and yet, maybe, it is the same thing." Oscar replied, "It is my chief reliance." He talked with Walt about death, and said he did not fear it. "Why, Oscar, don't you think you will get well?" asked Whitman. It wasn't possible, the young man responded. "He spoke calmly of his condition," Whitman noted, and "behaved very manly and affectionate."

As he was about to leave, Whitman bent and gave Oscar a kiss, which the dying soldier "returned fourfold." Oscar gave Walt his mother's address. Perhaps that night, after he wrote in his journal, Whitman wrote to Sally Wilber of his encounter with her son. Or maybe he wrote to Oscar's mother on other nights, for, he noted, "I had several such interviews with him."

A few days later, on the evening of July 28, Oscar showed another visitor, A. J. Pratt, a letter from Sally, and asked Pratt to answer it for him. He was "very grateful" for his mother's letter, but unable to sit up and write himself. So the next day, Pratt took a sheet of Treasury Department

stationery and sent news of her son to Sally Wilber. Like Whitman, he noted Oscar's religious faith was his solace. "He desires me to say that he is daily growing weaker and feels that his earthly career is drawing to a close," Pratt wrote, "but that his mind is calm and in perfect peace being stayed on the Lord Jesus Christ who he feels is near to support and comfort him as he passes through the dark valley."

Oscar had bad news for his mother about his physical condition. "His wound he desires me to say is running very much," Pratt wrote, "and he is unable to keep anything on his stomach." Oscar had sent Sally twenty-five dollars via another visitor, a Mr. Shaw. Now the son sent his mother his farewell. "He sends his kind love and blessing to you whom he calls his dear Christian mother, and also to all the children...and to Grandma," wrote Pratt. "He knows that altho' about to be taken from you and never more to see you on this side the grave that the Good Lord our Heavenly Father will watch over and protect the dear ones at home. He asks you all to seek Christ and endeavor daily to become more like him, says this world has no allurements for him, that he is ready to go & feels it will be better for him."

The evening after Pratt wrote his letter, he stopped by Armory Square and visited Oscar again. The following day, July 30, he added a short postscript to the letter. "Saw Oscar again last evening," Pratt wrote. "He had not eaten anything during the day & is rapidly fading."

The next day, July 31, 1863, Oscar Wilber died.

*

His body was sent home, and laid to rest in the Five Mile Cemetery. In August, Sally Wilber was entered on the pension rolls as a dependent mother, at a rate of eight dollars a month. At the front, the three remaining Wilber cousins--Charles, Milo and Lyman--followed the fortunes of the 154th New York. Charles was paroled soon after his capture at Chancellorsville, but weeks later, Milo was taken prisoner by the Confederates, captured along with almost the entire remainder of the regiment in the fighting at Gettysburg on July 1. Both had been exchanged by the new year, and the 154th had been transferred to the west, when Lyman Wilber addressed a letter to their Uncle Nathan from Lookout Valley, Tennessee. All three cousins were doing well,

Lyman noted, but his thoughts turned to the one departed. "Poor Oscar is dead and gone home to rest," he wrote. He thought the regiment would have to march again before long, but hoped not. "I should not care so much about it if I was agoing to march home," Lyman wrote, "but this marching up to be shot at ain't a very pleasant thing." But Lyman Wilber never faced the enemy again. In February, 1864 he was simultaneously stricken with congestion of the lungs and typhoid fever, and the combination carried him off quickly. He died on February 25, 1864, at the brigade hospital in Lookout Valley, and his body was sent home, to rest near his cousin Oscar.

Walt Whitman perhaps provided the best epitaph for Oscar and Lyman Wilber, and the multitude of soldiers who died in the hospitals he knew so well--"These hospitals, so different from all others--these thousands, and tens and twenties of thousands of American young men, badly wounded, all sorts of wounds, operated on, pallid with diarrhoea, languishing, dying with fever, pneumonia, etc., open a new world somehow to me," he wrote. In Oscar Wilber's world in Armory Square Hospital, Whitman discovered humanity tried by terrible, fearful tests, bodies and souls probed deeply by tragedy, "bursting the petty bonds of art"--the real war, that would never get in the books.

The End.

Sources.

This article is based on materials located during research for The Hardtack Regiment (East Brunswick, N. J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1981), the history of the 154th New York by myself and Michael J. Winey, and information found since the book was published, including: the letters of Oscar and Lyman Wilber, courtesy of George and Beverly Geisel, Hamburg, New York; Oscar Wilber's pension file in the National Archives; and Specimen Days, by Walt Whitman (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1892).