

WILDER'S BRIGADE IN THE TULLAHOMA
AND CHATTANOOGA CAMPAIGNS OF
THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

ABSTRACT

WILDER'S BRIGADE IN THE TULLAHOMA AND CHICKAMAUGA CAMPAIGNS OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR, by Robert E. Harbison, 115 pages.

The thesis is a historical analysis of Colonel John T. Wilder's infantry brigade in the Tullahoma and Chickamauga campaigns of the American Civil War. In 1863 General Rosecrans, commander of the Army of the Cumberland, authorized Wilder to mount the brigade on horseback and rearm it with Spencer repeating rifles, giving the brigade unsurpassed mobility and firepower. The thesis examines the mounting and rearming of the brigade, then examines the role the brigade played in the Army of the Cumberland through the Chickamauga campaign. The primary research question concerns how effectively the leadership in the Army of the Cumberland employed the brigade in light of its capabilities. Subordinate questions concern Wilder's leadership, the impact of technology on the performance of the brigade, and the brigade's potential for offensive operations. The thesis concludes that the leadership of the Army of the Cumberland, in particular General Rosecrans, did not employ the brigade well. Lack of a clear concept of how to employ the brigade and command and control problems led to ineffectual tasks and minimal contributions. Wilder's personality compounded the problem. During the campaigns, the brigade's Spencer repeating rifles proved to be an improvement over standard-issue rifled muskets. The mobility of the brigade was its most influential asset, but the army was not able to take advantage of it.

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Dedicated to the soldiers and families, both north and south, who lost so much during the greatest test of our system of government.

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INTRODUCTION

1863 was the third year of the American Civil War. When the year began, the war was still largely unsettled. This was the case in the western theater, where the Union Army of the Cumberland faced the Confederate Army of Tennessee, vying for control of Tennessee and its valuable resources and strategic rail interchanges. In the early months of 1863 the Army of the Cumberland was resting and reorganizing. General William S. Rosecrans, commander of the Army of the Cumberland, resisted pressure from Washington to commence his spring offensive against General Braxton Bragg, commander of the Army of Tennessee. The strategic importance of Tennessee at that point in the war was three-fold. First, many Union loyalists lived in East Tennessee. President Lincoln wanted to liberate the state and bring those citizens back under the umbrella of Union control. Secondly, Confederate rail lines connecting the resources of the western theater to Virginia ran through Tennessee. Those rail lines served as lines of communication and lines of supplying the Confederate armies not only in Tennessee but throughout the Eastern Theater as well. Third, Tennessee was rich in supplies needed to sustain the Confederate war effort. Food items such as pork, corn and mineral resources such as copper and saltpeter, two ingredients of gunpowder, were mined in Tennessee.¹

One of the reasons that General Rosecrans delayed his offensive was his concern over a lack of Federal cavalry. His cavalry force was approximately half the strength of the Confederate cavalry force. The spring campaign would lengthen supply lines, which were already subject to Confederate cavalry raids. General in Chief Henry W. Halleck would not supply General Rosecrans with additional cavalry, despite his adamant requests. General

Rosecrans's requests for more cavalry were just one of several requests that fell on deaf ears. Halleck considered Rosecrans's request for more cavalry just an excuse to not commence his offensive. Nonetheless, the army's lines of supply were long and under attack. It was against this background that Colonel John T. Wilder's brigade acquired horses and repeating rifles. What General Rosecrans could not do with traditional cavalry, he thought he could do with an infantry brigade mounted on horseback and armed with more firepower than an ordinary brigade.

At the beginning of the 1863 campaign, the Army of the Cumberland's supply line ran from Louisville, Kentucky to middle Tennessee. This was not a unique problem to Union armies during the civil war. As they conducted offensive campaigns in the south, the armies trailed behind them long supply lines along which ran food, ammunition, reinforcements, and communications with Washington. These lines of supply had to be protected with troops, either infantry, which put up a good fight but were relatively immobile, or cavalry, which could cover more ground but lacked the decisive firepower of the infantry. Although the railroads were efficient means to move the tons of supplies that the army consumed, they were fixed, immobile lines vulnerable to attack. Any disruption to the track created a temporary halt to the flow of supplies. Similarly, telegraph wires, the primary means of communicating with Washington, ran along the railroads and were easily severed. General Rosecrans had to protect the entire length of the stationary line. General Bragg's cavalry could pick the time and place of a raid to sever the line or attack supplies, giving it the tactical advantage in the fight for control of the Union supply line. For General Bragg, attacking the Army of the Cumberland's line of supply was an effective way to keep General Rosecrans from attacking. The longer Bragg could delay Roscrans's

attack, the more likely it became that reinforcements from General Robert E. Lee or General Albert S. Johnston might arrive to strengthen his force in Tennessee. His constant pressure on General Rosecrans's supplies had the desired effect. It kept General Rosecrans from starting the 1863 spring offensive. Wilder's mounted brigade was born out of the need to protect the Union supply lines from Confederate cavalry raids. Rosecrans felt that with more cavalry or mounted infantry he could finally secure his supply line.

The concept of mounting infantry was not new. European armies were using mounted infantry, called "dragoons" by the seventeenth century.² In early eighteenth century France, dragoons were mounted soldiers who normally fought on foot. Later, Napoleonic dragoons came to be considered a special form of cavalry. Dragoons either formed on the flanks to guard against surprise attacks, or served as security in the rear.³ The dragoon concept made its way to America by the late eighteenth century, when a few Continental regiments of dragoons participated in the American Revolution. The term was in use during the Civil War when some cavalry regiments described themselves as such. Dragoons were typically lightly armed, which is where the similarity with Wilder's brigade ends. Armed with Spencer repeating rifles, Wilder's brigade actually had more firepower than other infantry brigades did.

In the early spring of 1863, Wilder transformed his infantry brigade to a mounted brigade armed with repeating rifles. The transformation gave the brigade dramatic mobility and firepower advantages over the standard infantry brigade used by both sides during the war. The brigade fought during the Tennessee campaigns of 1863, where it had a chance to demonstrate the value of mounted infantry armed with repeating rifles. Wilder was a man who enjoyed success and recognition. Rosecrans wanted more cavalry and Wilder knew it.

For Colonel Wilder, seeking permission to gather horses for his men was the logical answer to the army's problem. Further, Wilder wanted to arm his brigade with the best rifle available. In the spring of 1863, Wilder managed to find it through the Spencer Repeating Rifle Company. Early in 1863, Christopher Spencer demonstrated his new repeating rifle to the officers of the Army of the Cumberland. The rifle fired metallic cartridges from a tubular magazine, dramatically reducing the time required to reload. Instead of having to go through the sequence of muzzle-loading each shot as with the Springfield Rifles, a soldier merely stroked a lever and cocked the hammer to reload a Spencer. Both sides had similar weapons and tactics, so neither held a significant tactical advantage when a battle occurred. Colonel Wilder's brigade was radically outfitted to change that. Not only did the Spencer rifles give the brigade a firepower advantage, but the horses also gave it a capacity to move much more rapidly than opposing Confederate infantry units.

Colonel Wilder's brigade also had more artillery than a typical infantry brigade. His battery, commanded by Captain Eli Lilly, fielded ten cannons whereas the typical brigade was supported by a battery of six. This additional augmentation of the brigade only further added to its potential for dramatic success in the upcoming campaign. Mounted on horseback and armed with a better infantry weapon, Colonel Wilder's brigade began the 1863 campaign. With greater mobility and greater firepower, his brigade had an advantage over Confederate infantry, and was at least at parity with Confederate cavalry, if not superior.

This thesis critically examines whether or not the leadership of the Army of the Cumberland fully exploited the brigade in light of its revolutionary mobility and firepower, and whether or not the leadership in the Army of the Cumberland missed opportunities to

more effectively employ the brigade. Subordinate questions that the thesis will address are 1. Why did the Army of the Cumberland not employ Wilder's brigade in an offensive role more often? 2. Could Wilder's brigade have contributed more to the Army of the Cumberland than it did? 3. How did the integration of new technology enhance or impair the effectiveness of Wilder's brigade? 4. Is Wilder worthy of his reputation as an exceptional leader?

The relevance of the thesis lies in understanding how new technology and organizations are incorporated into existing army structure, how commanders identify capabilities of new organizations, and how tactics are influenced by those changes. Armies are always changing. When the change is gradual and of minor importance, it may have little or no consequence. Occasionally, the changes are radical and force commanders to reevaluate "old school" thinking in light of new technology and system capabilities. This thesis examines how commanders in the Army of the Cumberland dealt with changing technology and how those leaders developed (or failed to develop) new ways to capitalize on that technology. The success or failure of those commanders lends a model for current army leaders to use for current and future periods of change.

The thesis will not attempt to analyze the larger concept of arming infantry with repeating rifles at other times during the Civil War, but instead it will focus on Wilder's brigade. Nor will the thesis explore the Ordnance Bureau's decisions with respect to selection and distribution of repeating rifles during the Civil War. The thesis analyzes the brigade through the battle of Chickamauga. The span of time from the brigade's transformation through Chickamauga is illustrative of how the army employed the brigade, capturing all of the types of operations that the brigade participated in during that and

subsequent years. Additionally, Wilder left the brigade shortly after the battle and never commanded it in battle again.

¹William Glenn Robertson, Edward P. Shanahan, John I. Boxberger, George E. Knapp, *Staff Ride Handbook for the Battle of Chickamauga 18-20 September 1863* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1992), 47.

²*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., prepared by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, vol. 4 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 1014.

³Albert Sidney Britt III, *The Wars of Napoleon*, The West Point Military History Series, Thomas E. Griess, Series Editor, (Wayne, NJ: Avery Publishing Group, Inc., 1985), 29, 32.

CHAPTER 1

FORMATION, CAPABILITIES, AND EARLY TRIALS

John T. Wilder was born in upstate New York in 1830 to a family with a tradition of military service. Wilder's father served in the War of 1812, his grandfather and great-grandfather served during the American Revolution. Wilder initially had no desire to follow in the family footsteps as a military man. He left home at age nineteen for Columbus, Ohio, where he found a job at Ridgeway's Foundry. While there, Wilder studied drafting, milling, and hydraulics. He moved to Greensburg, Indiana, to start his own foundry in 1857, and established himself as a hydraulics expert by patenting several pieces of hydraulics.¹ He was also interested in artillery, and just prior to the outbreak of the Civil War he designed and cast six-pound wrought iron artillery guns. In reaction to the call to arms, Wilder assembled a battery, organizing the men as well as making the guns. Indiana's Governor, Oliver P. Morton, needed infantry, not artillery. Wilder and a company of recruits were mustered in as a company in the 17th Indiana Infantry Regiment for a ninety-day term of enlistment. Wilder did not get to be a battery commander, but his men did elect him to be their company commander. When the regiment reorganized as a three-year enlistment regiment, Wilder was given command of the 17th, the unit's previous commander having been promoted to brigade command. He participated in the actions of the regiment in western Virginia at Cheat Mountain and Greenbriar, and the siege of Corinth in 1862. The highlight of Wilder's Civil War service, and the focus of this thesis, was his command of a brigade in 1863. Wilder's military career did not last through the Civil War. After leading his brigade through the campaigns in Tennessee in 1863, he left sick, and but for a brief return, was done with

military service. He was brevetted to brigadier general for his service at Hoover's Gap and at Chickamauga, but he never commanded again. Never shy or lacking ambition, Wilder increased his personal fortune after the war in Chattanooga and was a founder of the University of Chattanooga.

Wilder was an innovator and a thinker. He never seemed to suffer because of his lack of formal military schooling. Indeed, he may have been better off for lack of it. Wilder was constantly coming up with novel solutions to problems, an uncommon trait among most of the Union military leadership. Instead of looking to current military scholarly thought, Wilder would think through problems based on his own ingenuity and experiences in industry to solve problems. He was not afraid to be different and unconventional. Wilder was demonstrating his ingenuity well before mounting his brigade. During the fall of 1862, he procured hatchets for every man in the command. Ostensibly for use in battle, the hatchets were extremely useful in camp, much like the bayonet. They probably never killed any Confederates, but were welcome for opening cans, chopping wood, or digging entrenchments. Wilder's eagerness to raise his own battery also illustrates his resourcefulness and ingenuity. Still another example of his innovative if unconventional leadership occurred while his regiment was guarding a railroad bridge over the Green River in Munfordville, Kentucky, on 17 September 1862. Wilder found himself surrounded. He asked the Confederate commander, General Simon B. Buckner, for a meeting to get his opinion on the situation. To Wilder, it must have seemed the logical and gentlemanly thing to do: seek the advice and counsel of those more experienced than you. Buckner convinced Wilder that his situation was hopeless, and Wilder surrendered his regiment along with 450 Federal soldiers under command of

Colonel Cyrus L. Dunham. Wilder got his regiment out of a tight spot without getting anyone killed and, apparently, without loss of face among his commanders. He was soon paroled, and upon his return to the army he assumed command of his brigade on 22 December.

Colonel Wilder's brigade was a newly formed organization in December 1862. When General Rosecrans took command of the Army of the Cumberland from General Don Carlos Buell in October 1862, he restructured it. One of the results of that reorganization was the formation of a new brigade, which became Wilder's brigade. It was organized in General Joseph J. Reynolds's Fifth (later Fourth) Division, of General George H. Thomas's newly formed XIV Corps. Wilder's command of his brigade spanned nine months from December 1862 to September 1863 when he turned command over to Colonel Abram O. Miller, one of his subordinate regimental commanders. At the time that Wilder assumed command of the brigade, it comprised four regiments and an artillery battery. Those regiments were, 17th, 72d, and 75th Indiana, the 98th Illinois, and the 18th Indiana battery. The 75th left the brigade in the spring of 1863, replaced by the 123d Illinois. Three of the regiments, the 75th Indiana, 72d Indiana, and the 98th Illinois, were newly recruited regiments from the same brigade. After mustering in August and September, they went to Kentucky to Miller's 40th Brigade, General Ebenezer Dumont's 12th Division in General Don Carlos Buell's Army of the Ohio. Miller had mustered with the 72d Indiana, but was offered a brigade command, so he turned the regiment over to his second-in-command, Lieutenant Colonel Kirkpatrick. At the time that Wilder's brigade was formed, the three regiments of Miller's brigade had still not seen any combat. Following the Tullahoma Campaign, Rosecrans added an additional regiment to

Wilder’s brigade, the 92d Illinois. From July through the end of the 1863 campaigns, the brigade consisted of the 17th and 72d Indiana regiments, the 92d, 98th, and 123d Illinois regiments, and the 18th Indiana artillery battery. The regiments were a mixed bag of combat experienced veterans and green recruits who had never fired a shot in combat. Each unit will be discussed individually, but a summary of which regiments served with the brigade initially and those that served through Chickamauga will provide a brief overview.

Units originally assigned to the brigade:

75th Indiana*
 98th Illinois*
 17th Indiana
 72d Indiana*

Units with the brigade at Chickamauga:

98th Illinois
 17th Indiana
 72d Indiana
 123d Illinois
 92d Illinois

*Units with no prior combat experience (mustered in August or September 1862)

Although initially a part of Wilder’s brigade, the 75th Indiana did not participate in the actions of the brigade after 6 May, and never served in what came to be known as “The Lightning Brigade.” The 75th mustered in August 1862, and immediately went to Louisville, Kentucky. Governor Morton appointed Colonel Milton S. Robinson commander of the regiment. In Louisville, the 75th was assigned to Miller’s brigade, Dumont’s division. The 75th was moved to Wilder’s brigade of Reynolds’s division during Rosecrans’s reorganization of the army. The regiment fought with the brigade in Kentucky in December 1862 through January 1863, and during the raids around Murfreesboro in 1863. In the spring of 1863, each regiment voted whether or not to

participate in the refitting of the brigade as mounted infantry. The 75th curiously decided not to mount, and the regiment was subsequently reassigned within General Reynolds's division.² On 6 May, the 75th transferred from Wilder's brigade to Colonel Albert S. Hall's brigade, Reynolds's division. The regiment fought with Hall's brigade through the battles of Chickamauga and Chattanooga. The regiment participated in the assault on Missionary Ridge, and in 1864 it participated in the campaigns in Georgia with General Sherman's Army of the Tennessee. The regiment mustered out of the service 3 June 1865.

The 98th Illinois was a green regiment of new recruits when it joined Wilder's brigade in December 1862. It mustered into service at Centralia, Illinois on 3 September 1862.³ The regiment's commander, twenty-seven-year-old Colonel John J. Funkhouser, had previously served as the A Company commander of the 26th Illinois Infantry Regiment during the ninety-day enlistment.⁴ The regiment went to Louisville on 13 September, having had virtually no time to train. It spent the fall of 1862 in Kentucky and Tennessee, mostly on security and engineering details around the army's lines of supply. The regiment did not see any combat in 1862, although it did sustain some casualties from a train accident. While en route to Louisville after mustering, the train the regiment was on derailed killing seven and wounding another seventy-five soldiers.⁵ The regiment served with Wilder's brigade during the entire period of Wilder's command. It continued to serve with the brigade after Chickamauga, and was with the brigade when it reorganized as a part of the 2d Cavalry Division. The regiment was with General William T. Sherman's army in the 1864 campaigns and march to Atlanta. In 1865 the regiment

participated in the attacks at Selma, Alabama, and it was finally mustered out of service 27 June 1865.

Wilder's own regiment, the 17th Indiana, mustered 12 June 1861.⁶ Commanded by Colonel Milo S. Hascall, the regiment served at Cheat Mountain and Greenbriar in western Virginia with Reynolds's brigade. On 25 March 1862 Hascall moved up to command the brigade, and Wilder assumed command of the regiment. The regiment fought at Shiloh in April 1862, and at Corinth in October. After Corinth, the regiment moved through Tennessee where at McMinnville it skirmished with General Nathan B. Forrest's cavalry. From there, the regiment moved into Kentucky with the rest of Buell's army. Wilder surrendered the regiment at Munfordville, Kentucky. Most of the unit was released, when, upon its return to the army, the regiment was organized into Wilder's brigade. Lieutenant Colonel Henry Jordan, the regiment's second in command, took Wilder's place as the new regimental commander. The 17th served with Wilder's brigade through the remainder of the war while Colonel Miller was in command and was mustered out of the service in June 1865.

Like the 17th and 98th, the 72d Indiana was a part of Wilder's brigade from the start. It formed in August 1862, mustered by Colonel Abram O. Miller. Miller was appointed colonel of the regiment, but was soon made brigade commander, so Lieutenant Colonel Samuel C. Kirkpatrick took command. The 72d was a green unit when it joined Wilder's brigade, having done nothing of any significance since its muster four months earlier. Miller, however, was a veteran of the ninety-day enlistment, having raised and commanded Company C of the 10th Indiana Infantry in 1861. Aside from Wilder, Miller was probably the most experienced commander in the brigade. With the 10th Indiana,

Miller fought in western Virginia at Rich Mountain and Carrick's Ford in July 1861.

Later while commanding the 10th, Miller participated in battles at Shiloh and the siege of Corinth. When Wilder's brigade formed, the 72d was one of its original regiments.

Interestingly, Colonel Miller gave up his brigade command and followed the 72d to serve in Wilder's brigade. The 72d fought with Wilder's brigade throughout the duration of Wilder's command, and when Wilder left the brigade due to illness, the regiment's commander assumed command of the brigade. Lieutenant Colonel Kirkpatrick, Miller's second in command, took his place as commander of the regiment. Miller commanded the brigade through the rest of the war, including the Atlanta Campaign and the siege of Selma.

The 123d Illinois joined the brigade in the spring of 1863, after the 75th Indiana voted against mounting. The two regiments were switched within Reynolds's division on 6 May.⁷ The regiment mustered at Camp Terry, Illinois 6 September 1862 under the command of Colonel James Monroe. Colonel Monroe had been the Major of the 7th Illinois during the ninety-day enlistment. The regiment left Illinois on 19 September for Louisville, Kentucky, and joined the 33d Brigade (General W. H. Terrill), 4th Division (General James S. Jackson), McCook's Corps, of Buell's Army. Constantly on the move chasing General Bragg's Army through Kentucky, the regiment did not conduct much drill or training of any sort. On 8 October 1862 the regiment fought for the first time at Perryville, Kentucky. The regiment was routed in its first fight, losing 36 killed and 180 wounded. General Terrill and General Jackson were also killed at Perryville. Following Rosecrans' reorganization within his army late in 1862, the regiment was assigned to Colonel Albert S. Hall's brigade in Reynolds's division. In late December and January

the regiment chased Confederate General John H. Morgan's cavalry, along with Wilder's brigade, without success. In March, Confederate cavalry attacked the regiment while it camped near Stones River. Later in March Confederate cavalry attacked the entire brigade near Milton, Tennessee. The regiment had watched Wilder's mounting activity and by vote decided to petition for transfer to Wilder's brigade. Since the 75th Indiana was still dismounted and not in favor of mounting, the commanders involved switched the two units. Colonel Monroe was killed shortly after the battle of Chickamauga, in an engagement while pursuing General Joseph Wheeler's Confederate cavalry in middle Tennessee.

The 92d Illinois was a later-comer to the brigade. Mustered on 4 September 1862, it did not join the brigade until July 1863, after the Tullahoma campaign. Consequently, the 92d was behind the rest of the brigade in terms of mounting and rearming. Although Wilder managed to mount the 92d Illinois, only three companies were armed with Spencers at Chickamauga, the rest carried Enfields and a small assortment of other weapons.⁸ By the time the regiment joined Wilder's brigade, it was a veteran regiment with a capable commander. Its commander, twenty-seven-year-old Colonel Smith D. Atkins was a newspaperman and a lawyer in Illinois prior to the war. He previously had commanded Company A, 11th Illinois at Fort Donelson. While home on leave in 1862 he collected new volunteers and formed the 92d.⁹ The regiment left Illinois in October 1862 with Colonel Cochran's brigade, General Baird's division in the Army of the Kentucky. It saw some action in Kentucky where it moved from Sterling through Danville and finally south towards Nashville, when it was transferred to the Army of the Cumberland in January 1863. Colonel Atkins was an aggressive abolitionist, and when the regiment

joined Wilder's brigade it brought with it 350 freed slaves from Kentucky.¹⁰ Colonel Atkins had been given command of a brigade when the regiment transferred to the Army of the Cumberland, so Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin F. Sheets took command of the regiment. On 19 July the regiment joined Wilder's brigade while it was in Decherd, Tennessee. When Colonel Atkins heard that the 92d was mounting and rearming with Colonel Wilder, he resigned his post as a brigade commander to rejoin the 92d.¹¹

Wilder's artillery battery was the 18th Indiana. Commanded by Eli Lilly, the battery joined the brigade prior to the actions at the turn of 1863 against Morgan's cavalry. Lilly, born 8 July 1838 was the oldest of eleven children.¹² He was a pharmacist before the war and originally served as an infantry lieutenant with the 21st Indiana Infantry. Lilly was more interested in the artillery than the infantry, his interest sparked by watching coastal artillery practicing around Baltimore in 1861.¹³ He took command of the 18th Indiana on 6 August 1862. The battery guns were six three-inch Ordnance Rifles (also called Rodman guns) and four mountain howitzers. The 3-inch Ordnance Rifles were favored by artillerymen because of the cannon's strength, range, and accuracy. The 3-inch Ordnance Rifle was manufactured entirely from wrought iron, as opposed to the Parrott and Napoleon guns, which were reinforced cast iron and bronze, respectively. The wrought iron construction gave it more strength, which reduced the rate of ruptures and further enhanced its reputation among artillerymen.¹⁴ The rifling of the three-inch Ordnance Rifles gave them greater accuracy than the more common smoothbore cannons.

In February and March of 1863, the battery acquired its four mountain howitzers. These bronze smoothbore cannon had short tubes and weighed only 220 pounds. The howitzers had the same bore diameter as the twelve-pound Napoleon guns (4.62 inches),

but fired a reduced charge. The guns could effectively fire 800 yards,¹⁵ and were light enough to operate in difficult terrain. They were pulled by two mules, which gave the battery its nickname, “Jack Ass Battery.” The battery used eight horses to tow the cannon and limbers as opposed to the typical six of other batteries.¹⁶ Batteries were typically divided into two-gun sections to support regiments of a brigade. In September 1862, the battery went to Kentucky and served in defenses around Louisville with General William Nelson of the Army of the Ohio. The battery was later assigned to General Dumont’s 12th Division in October, where it participated in the occupation of Frankfort. During this time, the battery skirmished with Morgan’s Cavalry in the vicinity of Frankfort, chasing but never quite causing any serious disruption to the Confederate Cavalry. The battery marched to Scottsville just north of the Tennessee border by November, and in December, it was transferred to Wilder’s brigade. The battery had more guns than normal, lighter guns than normal, and more horses than normal. That extra firepower and mobility was an excellent augmentation to the infantry of the brigade.

How Colonel Wilder’s brigade came to have the light of opportunity shine on it was not by accident. In December of 1862 Colonel Wilder’s brigade was protecting the Union line of supply along with the rest of General Reynolds’s division. Colonel John Morgan’s Confederate cavalry was continually outmaneuvering and attacking the Union supply line. Wilder seemed to grasp the situation as hopeless unless something changed. In a noble but unsuccessful effort, he ordered one of his regiments to mount supply mules to pursue Morgan’s cavalry. Although unsuccessful, the seed was planted in Wilder’s head for what he needed. Wilder’s failure to defeat or interdict Morgan’s cavalry raids was a failure of mobility. Dismounted infantry were not capable of keeping pace with

cavalry on horseback. For Colonel Wilder, seeking permission to gather horses for his men was the logical answer to the army's problem.

The brigade spent the majority of the winter and spring of 1863 refitting for its new role as mounted infantry. On 16 February, General Rosecrans granted Wilder permission to mount.¹⁷ That order started a lengthy process of sweeping the Tennessee countryside to round up enough horses to outfit the entire brigade. Gathering horses was a major undertaking. February and March were spent sending out patrols in search of horses. Moving out from their base camp in Murfreesboro, the patrols roamed the local civilian population and confiscated horses and mules for their purposes. Early efforts turned up horses that were often leaving much to be desired in terms of a capable mount for a soldier, but Wilder's men were not picky. They took whatever they found. The government's policy was that quartermasters gave receipts for property received,¹⁸ but in reality the soldiers simply took what they wanted without reimbursement or promissory note. Acquiring horses brought a multitude of new requisitions. Horses required saddles, feed bags, grooming equipment, and other necessary items in order to use them effectively in a scouting/mounted infantry role. The brigade's trains also had to be expanded. The influx of new equipment along with the horses demanded more wagons, mules, and supplies to support the brigade.

As the brigade gradually found a horse for each infantryman, the focus turned to establishing appropriate tactics. The close order drill of a dismounted infantry regiment was not suitable for mounted soldiers on the march. Once on the battlefield however, Wilder intended to fight his brigade as infantry, not cavalry. Adapting some concepts from the cavalry, the brigade established its tactics and standard procedures for combat.

One of the early drills was transitioning from a movement on horseback to forming up for engagement with the enemy. In the morning, the men counted off by fours. The number four man was the designated horse holder for that day. When dismounted, he would fall back with the horses while the other three took their place with the regiment for battle. Tactical training occurred concurrently with the never-ending problem of finding forage and the continual search for better horses and tack from the countryside. By the end of March most of the brigade was mounted, and Wilder could begin to turn his attention to his primary purpose: interdicting the Confederate cavalry causing General Rosecrans so much trouble.

Always eager to acquire new equipment, Wilder wanted to arm his brigade with the best rifle available. His inventors mind probably started working on getting repeating rifles after his experiences at Shiloh. Wilder's first choice was the Model 1861 Henry, a 16 shot breech loading lever action rifle.¹⁹ While Wilder was trying to negotiate a deal with the Henry Company, he witnessed a demonstration of the Spencer rifle. Early in 1863, Christopher Spencer demonstrated his new repeating rifle to the officers of the Army of the Cumberland. The rifle fired metallic cartridges from a tubular magazine, dramatically reducing the time required to reload. Instead of having to go through the sequence of muzzle loading a paper cartridge as with the Springfields and Enfields, a soldier merely stroked a lever and cocked the hammer to reload a Spencer. Christopher Spencer was trying to sell more rifles to supplement a recent government contract. The War Department started purchasing Spencer rifles in limited quantities in December 1861.²⁰ Despite favorable reports within the Navy and from some field commanders of the army, Brigadier General James W. Ripley, the Chief of the Ordnance Bureau, was not

in favor of mass purchases of the rifles.²¹ Ripley has been criticized by some historians for his failure to see the implications and importance of the new repeating rifles.²² However, Ripley had valid concerns about fielding a new rifle. The Spencer was a relatively sophisticated mechanism, untried in combat. Its capabilities were unknown. Also, the rifle fired a different cartridge from what was already fielded. Adding Spencer rifles to the government armaments would complicate an already taxed supply system. The rifle was three times as expensive as a Springfield, so the potential costs of large contracts for new rifles were unattractive. Finally, while Christopher Spencer was pressing for government contracts, he had no factory, no machinery, no capital, and no workers to produce mass quantities of his repeaters. Ripley was finally pressured into contracting with Spencer for some rifles by December of 1861, but the flow was slow, and only two thousand were shipped to Rosecrans in 1863.

When Christopher Spencer came to Tennessee in the early spring of 1863 to peddle his rifle to the field commanders, Colonel Wilder was a captive audience. Spencer promised to deliver on private contracts for his rifles, and General Rosecrans approved Wilder's request to arm his brigade with the new rifles. Wilder demonstrated an innovative approach to the question of how to pay for the \$35 rifles. He convinced the soldiers of the brigade of the superiority of the weapon, and then convinced them that they ought to buy them with their own paychecks. Facing another year of war on the bloody Civil War battlefields, it was an easy sell on the soldiers of the brigade, whose immediate desire for self preservation probably outweighed their desire for the government to provide their equipment. Wilder, a wealthy man, arranged a loan from a bank in Indiana to cover the cost of the total contract for the rifles, with each man

agreeing to pay his portion. That was a substantial commitment on the part of the privates in the brigade, because at their pay rate it would have taken three months to pay for a rifle. The government intervened before anyone's pay was deducted, however, and paid Spencer for the rifles.²³

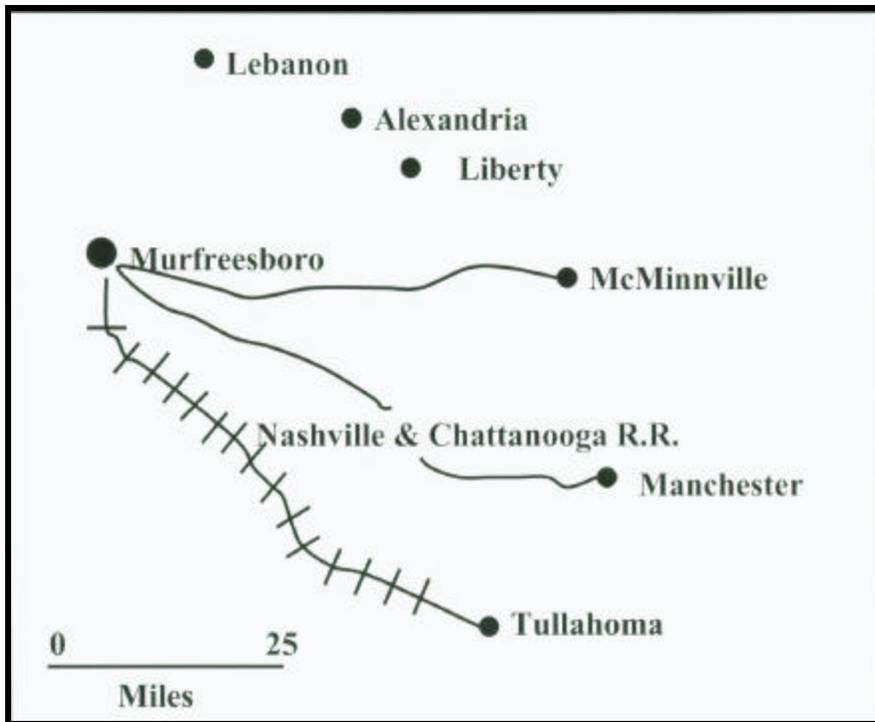


Fig. 1. Spring Raids

During the months of April and May, Wilder's brigade made three excursions from Murfreesboro, the brigade base camp. The movements were a combination of

raiding the Confederate cavalry operating nearby, destroying Confederate stores of supplies, and foraging for horses, food, and material for the brigade. On the first task, all three missions generally failed to decisively engage or deter Confederate cavalry forces, aside from temporarily forcing evacuation of a town. On the second and third tasks, the brigade performed well. The three movements of consequence were an early April movement to Lebanon and Liberty, a late April movement to McMinnville, and an early June movement back to Liberty (Figure 1). During the first week of April, the brigade conducted scouting operations in Rome, Lebanon, and Snows Hill. At Snows Hill, three of the regiments and the battery came into contact with elements of Wharton's Brigade of CSA cavalry. No decisive battle occurred, and both units left the town. Wilder later wrote his wife that he was intending to cut off the enemy,²⁴ but Wharton's men retreated before any encirclement was accomplished. Again on the 13 April the brigade scouted in Lavergne and Franklin, without enemy contact.

In late April, General Rosecrans issued orders for a larger operation to McMinnville to destroy the enemy cavalry and destroy the stores of resources they were using to conduct their raids. Rosecrans told both General D. S. Stanley, his cavalry corps commander, and General Reynolds that they had command of Wilder's brigade.²⁵ Rosecrans told Stanley in written orders on the 16th that Wilder was under his command for the operation to McMinnville, he told Reynolds the same thing on the 18th. Reports after the actions from all involved indicate that Wilder's mounted force worked closely with Colonel Eli Long's cavalry, while the 75th Indiana (not mounted) operated with the other dismounted infantry of the division. On the twenty-first, the cavalry and Wilder's men entered McMinnville, occupied by pickets of Lieutenant Colonel R. Thompson's

CSA cavalry regiment of Morgan's Brigade. Both sides claimed that the other left the field.²⁶

Rosecrans's orders clearly stated that he desired the force to engage and destroy the Confederate cavalry. However, this was not accomplished. In his report, General Reynolds states that he purposely waited to attack the enemy, without clearly stating why. Reynolds and Wilder were successful in sacking the town and its stores of supplies. Wilder destroyed or captured the train depot, 600 blankets, several thousand pounds of bacon, 200 bales of cotton, a cotton factory, 2 mills, the courthouse, and some private homes. He also captured 200 prisoners.²⁷

The lack of pursuit or full engagement of the enemy cavalry is not explained in the battle reports. Rosecrans specifically ordered the destruction of any enemy encountered, but Wilder balked when he had a chance to do so. Of the three tasks given to the force at McMinnville, certainly pursuit and destruction of the enemy was the most difficult and dangerous. The enemy fought back and never stood still. Sacking the town and rounding up horses was a fairly easy chore in comparison. Whatever the reason, Wilder focused on the latter two and complied with that portion of Rosecrans' orders. In addition to the destruction in McMinnville noted above, Wilder went back to Murfreesboro with 678 horses and mules.²⁸ The apparently confused command structure may have played a significant role in Wilder's lack of pursuit or decisive engagement of the enemy in McMinnville. A soldier in the 18th Indiana wrote that the reason for not pursuing the enemy was that "...the officer in command of the advance would not allow the men to go ahead of him in pursuit...".²⁹ This is probably a reference to Reynolds, who, by his own admission in the battle report, would not allow a pursuit.

During the month of May, the 75th Indiana left Wilder's brigade, replaced by the 123d Illinois. The brigade went out on foraging expeditions to find horses and gear for the 123d. By mid month, the Spencers arrived, and the brigade was fully engaged in learning to maintain and shoot the new rifles. The brigade conducted a scouting/raid mission in June back to Liberty. There they encountered two regiments of Wharton's cavalry. On the evening of the 4 June and into 5 June, Wilder's men fought an inconclusive skirmish with Wharton's Brigade.

By mid-June, the brigade had had a chance to try out its new capabilities against the enemy. The bulk of the logistical effort to mount everyone was complete, although throughout the summer Wilder's men would continually seek to find a better horse than the one they were riding. The Spencer rifles had arrived by mid June and the men had a chance to familiarize themselves with the new weapon. What Wilder and Rosecrans wanted back in January, they now had: a lethal, mobile strike force to interdict the Confederate cavalry raids on the Union supply lines. Surprisingly however, Rosecrans did not fully implement Wilder's brigade that way. During May and June, the brigade took on a role most like Union cavalry. What Wilder actually contributed could best be characterized as harassing raids. From Wilder's own reports it is apparent that Wilder deemed his mission to be to travel around in Confederate country and destroy stores of food, equipment, and property. Wilder boasts of burning cotton and tearing up railroad track, while glossing over his opportunities to deal a serious blow to any Confederate cavalry force. This is a fundamental shift from what his primary purpose started out to be, that of protection of the Union supply line by interdicting the Confederate cavalry raids.

Too many opportunities came and went to say that Wilder just never got a chance to fight the Confederate cavalry.

Why Wilder either lost focus or simply decided against direct battle with the Confederate cavalry can be partially explained, at least at McMinnville, by Rosecrans's orders. Rosecrans orders to Wilder are vague, leaving much room for interpretation of what ought to be accomplished. The orders in many cases only specify where to go, and how much supplies to take along. In fact, on 21 May General Thomas directs Wilder to venture out to drive away enemy reconnaissance, but "not go so far as to get into any serious engagement."³⁰ The one exception is Rosecrans's orders to General Stanley issued 16 April for the operation to McMinnville. Stanley was given control of Wilder's brigade for the operation. In that order, Rosecrans directs Stanley and Wilder to "destroy the rebel forces", as well as directing them to destroy supplies. To add emphasis, Rosecrans wrote words to the effect of "get it right this time," seemingly dissatisfied that Confederate cavalry was still operating freely around the Union headquarters. If Wilder misunderstood his instructions from previous missions, the orders for the McMinnville operation should have removed all doubt. Rosecrans was looking for a fight from Wilder. "Destroy the rebel forces" is about as unambiguous as it gets. Yet at McMinnville, as at Liberty, Wilder's focus was on destroying cotton and rounding up horses.

Among the many possible explanations for Wilder's failure to attack the Confederate cavalry, two seem most likely. Wilder was not an experienced military commander. Although he had seen combat, he was new to brigade command and was not formally trained in military matters. Wilder may have simply not grasped the larger context of what he was doing on his missions, and simply got lost in the opportunity to

inflict damage to obvious Confederate targets like food and cotton. The other possibility is that having spent months building up his brigade into the proud, extraordinary unit that it was, Wilder may have been hesitant to risk losing horses or men killed by decisive engagement with the enemy. Wilder had seen enough combat to know what happened when pitched battles occurred: men died and so did horses. Equipment left on the field by the loser became the winner's booty. Given an opportunity to chose between ripping up railroad and burning cotton or chasing down General Forrest's cavalry for a fight, it is easy to see how Wilder could choose the former. If General Rosecrans was going to get Wilder to do anything significant to thwart the problem with Confederate cavalry, he was going to have to change Wilder's fundamental view of his purpose.

One very successful trend emerges from the missions in April, May, and early June. Wilder's brigade was indeed highly mobile, and was working well as a mounted unit. Although this wasn't anything new to cavalry, Wilder's men successfully made the transition from foot soldier to mounted infantry. The somewhat daunting process of converting the brigade had been accomplished fully. Every man had a horse and all of the paraphernalia that accompanied the mounted warrior. The complicated drill peculiar to horse units was mastered gradually. The men were learning how to pack for long expeditions, and how to care for their animals. The success of the brigade in moving around on horseback came at a price, however. The brigade had acquired a voracious new appetite for food, new horses, and supplies. Everywhere the brigade went it scoured the local towns for more of everything from horse blankets to food, as well as picking up less necessary items like whiskey and tobacco.

By the middle of June, the transformation was complete and the brigade was only days away from its first real test as the Army of the Cumberland finally began its campaign season. Wilder's brigade was very different from how it started in December 1862. The mobility of the brigade gave commanders a capability to place the brigade at a decisive place on the battlefield much more rapidly than it could place foot infantry. General Rosecrans could react to information more quickly with Wilder's brigade. Cavalry also offered a highly mobile force, but cavalry was not often used in an offensive role in 1863 because of its inability to defeat defending infantry armed with modern rifles. Wilder's brigade was armed to break the parity of weaponry between the two armies. What contribution the brigade would actually make was about to be tested.

¹Glen W. Sunderland, *Wilder's Lightning Brigade and its Spencer Repeaters* (Washington, IL: The Book Works, 1969), 19.

²David Bittle Floyd, *History of the Seventy-Fifth Regiment of Indiana Infantry Volunteers, its Organization, Campaigns, and Battles, (1862-65.)* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1893), 82.

³T. M. Eddy, *The Patriotism of Illinois*, Vol. II (Chicago: Clark & Company, 1865), 370.

⁴State of Illinois, *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Illinois*, revised by Brigadier General J. W. Vance, Adjutant General, vol. 2 (Springfield, IL: H. W. Rakker, State Printer and Binder, 1886), 356.

⁵*Ibid.*, 521.

⁶Richard A. Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning, Wilder's Mounted Infantry Brigade in the Battle of Chicamauga* (Huntington, WV: Blue Acorn Press, 1997), 9.

⁷*Ibid.*, 36.

⁸*92d Illinois Volunteers* (Freeport, IL: Journal Steam Publishing House and Book Bindery, 1875), 92.

⁹Eddy, 375.

¹⁰Ibid., 371.

¹¹*92d Illinois Volunteers*.

¹²John W. Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen: Through the Civil War with Eli Lilly's Indiana Battery* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975), 5.

¹³Ibid., 8.

¹⁴Ibid., 26.

¹⁵Ibid., 59.

¹⁶Baumgartner, 25.

¹⁷U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C. Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, vol 23, part II, 74. (hereafter cited as "OR", Series I)

¹⁸Rowell, 61.

¹⁹Baumgartner, 31.

²⁰Roy M. Marcot, *Spencer Repeating Arms* (Irvine, CA: Northwood Heritage Press, 1983), 50.

²¹Ibid., 30.

²²William H. Hallahan, *Misfire: The History of How America's Small Arms Have Failed Our Military* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994), 133.

²³W. H. H. Benefiel, *Souvenir, the Seventeenth Indiana Regiment*, unpublished brochure for the 17th Indiana Regiment Association. The brochure, printed for the dedication of the dedication of Chickamauga Park, contains the disclaimer by Colonel Wilder contradicting the commonly held misconceptions that either Wilder or the soldiers paid for the Spencer rifles.

²⁴Glen W. Sunderland, *Wilder's Lightning Brigade and its Spencer Repeaters* (Washington, IL: The Book Works, 1969), 25.

²⁵OR, vol 23, part II, 248, 242.

²⁶OR, vol 23, part II, 268, 277.

²⁷Rowell, 71.

²⁸Rowell, 72.

²⁹Rowell, 71.

³⁰*OR*, vol 23, pt II, 351.

CHAPTER 2

THE TULLAHOMA CAMPAIGN

The Tullahoma Campaign was the Army of the Cumberland's opening movement of the summer offensive in 1863. The campaign spanned nine days, during which the Army of Tennessee withdrew from its positions at the Highland Rim to Chattanooga. Rosecrans effectively used deception and flanking movements to force Bragg to withdraw three separate times. During the campaign, Wilder's brigade played a significant role through a variety of assignments. The brigade operated with its parent division and corps during the initial days of the campaign, but also operated somewhat independently in the later days. It was during this campaign that the brigade got its moniker, "The Lightning Brigade."

The terrain over which the Tullahoma Campaign was fought was marked by a series of mountains and river valleys (figure 2). The prominent terrain, included hills, rivers, and valleys generally ran southwest and northeast. From Murfreesboro heading southeast towards Chattanooga, the first significant piece of terrain was the Highland Rim. This ridge of high ground, which generally runs east--west, was cut by several gaps. The broadest was in the west, called Guy's Gap. Moving east, Bell Buckle Gap contained the Nashville and Chattanooga Rail Road. Next was Liberty Gap, then Hoover's Gap. Beyond the Highland Rim the Duck River and its branches cut valleys through the mountains. Moving further southeast towards Chattanooga, the terrain rose again to a high plateau of unfertile ground thirty miles wide called the Barrens. From there, the terrain was cut southwest--northeast by the Elk River. Southeast of the Elk

River the terrain rose again, forming the Cumberland Plateau, another wide expanse of relatively flat, unfertile ground like the Barrens. The Sequatchie River formed a valley southwest to northeast, separating Walden's Ridge to the southeast from the rest of the Cumberland Plateau. The Tennessee River lay beyond Walden's Ridge, with Chattanooga on its southern bank.

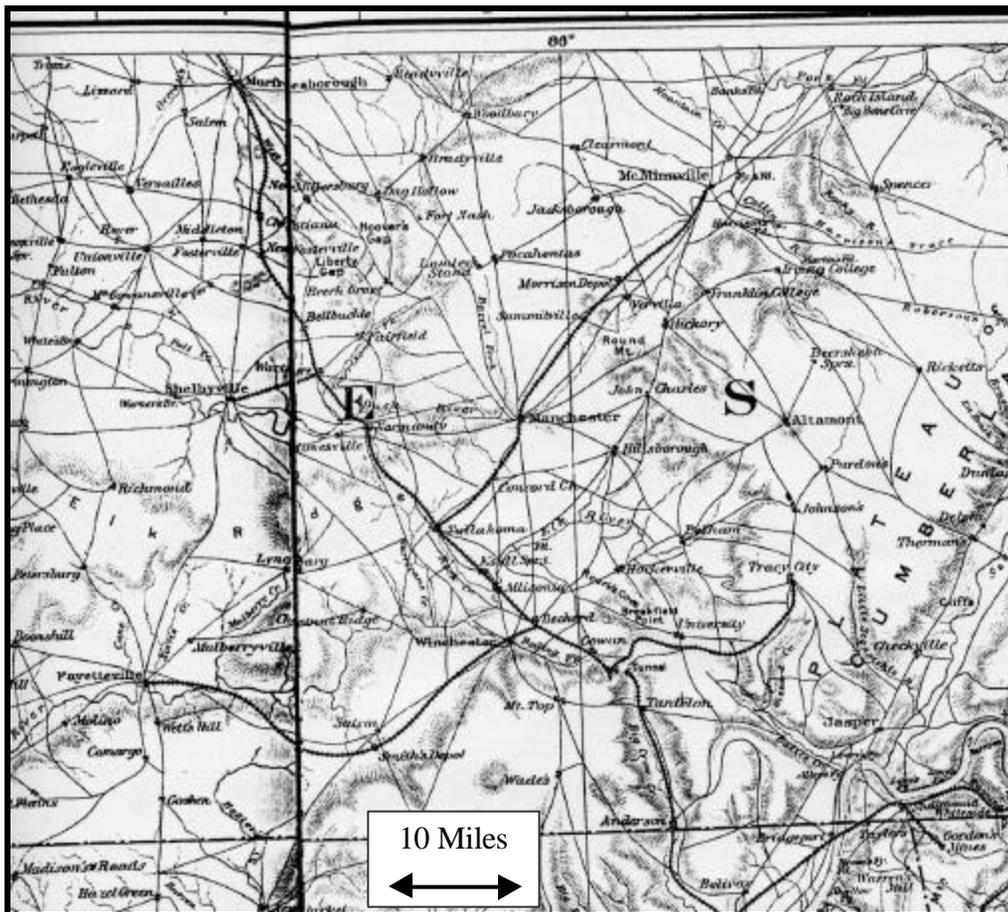


Fig. 2. Tullahoma Campaign Terrain. *Source:* George B. Davis, Leslie J. Perry, Joseph W. Kirkley, *The Official Military Atlas of the Civil War* (New York: Arno Press Crown Publishers, Inc., 1978).

Rosecrans's strategy for the offensive was to seize Chattanooga, then subsequently secure east Tennessee in accordance with orders from Halleck.¹ Bragg had his army spread out generally along the southeast side of the Highland Rim. This terrain was a significant obstacle between the two armies. In order to advance, Rosecrans would have to cross it or bypass it. Bragg needed to cover the gaps through the Highland Rim, but he was also concerned about Rosecrans bypassing to the southwest and northeast. Bragg was faced with the dilemma of exactly how to position his forces. If he guarded the gaps strongly, he lost flexibility and exposed himself on the flanks. If he held his infantry out of the gaps he could react more quickly, but sacrificed a strong defense at the choke points through the Highland Rim. Bragg chose the latter. He placed Polk's Corps on his left (southwest) and Hardee on the right (northeast). Forrest's cavalry corps guarded the Confederate left while Wheeler's Corps guarded the right.

Rosecrans's plan to get past the Highland Rim was to have Granger's Reserve Corps and Stanley's cavalry feint on the Union right, threatening Shelbyville. On the left, Rosecrans sent Crittenden's XXI Corps far around Bragg's right flank. McCook's XX Corps and Thomas's XIV Corps would move through Liberty and Hoover's gaps, respectively, straight toward Hardee's Corps. The mission to secure Hoover's Gap was a division-level mission that Thomas assigned to Reynolds. Wilder's mission was to lead the division movement through Hoover's Gap.²

At 3:00 A.M. 24 June, Wilder began his movement along the Manchester Pike towards Hoover's Gap. The 72d Indiana led the formation, with five companies forward. Twenty-five men from the 17th Indiana and 72d Indiana were ahead of them as an advance guard. As the brigade began its march that morning, rain began to fall. The rain

continued through most of the Tullahoma Campaign, swelling rivers and turning dirt roads into muddy quagmires. Because it was mounted, the brigade outpaced the rest of the infantry, creating a six mile gap by the time it reached the Confederate pickets at 10:00 A.M. The Confederate pickets were from the 1st Kentucky Cavalry Regiment, stationed north of the entrance to Hoover's Gap. The pickets from the 1st Kentucky were well forward of the regiment's fortifications at the mouth of Hoover's Gap. With no Confederate infantry closer than a mile to the southern end of Hoover's Gap, Bragg was practically conceding the ground without a fight. In order to provide an adequate defense of the ground, the 1st Kentucky had to quickly get word back to the infantry alerting it of the Union advance. Ordinarily, cavalry had plenty of time to skirmish with oncoming infantry, then withdraw back to its fortifications. However, Wilder's mounted advance was moving as fast as the Confederate cavalymen, applying constant pressure down the Manchester Pike. With one company on either side of the Manchester Pike, Lieutenant Colonel Kirkpatrick and the advanced guard of the 72d Indiana pressed the Confederate cavalry rapidly through to the southern edge of Hoover's Gap. The Confederate withdrawal became uncontrolled, as the surprised cavalymen had no time to deploy behind their prepared positions.³

The Confederate infantry force positioned to defend Hoover's Gap that day consisted of two infantry brigades in the vicinity of Fairfield, about two miles from the southern end of Hoover's Gap. That Confederate infantry belonged to Major General Alexander P. Stewart's Division of Hardee's Corps. The two brigades were Brigadier General William B. Bate's Brigade, and Brigadier General Bushrod R. Johnson's Brigade. Despite the rout, the scouts of the 1st Kentucky managed to relay word of the

Union advance, which was a primary function of the cavalry.⁴ Elements of the 1st Kentucky reported Wilder's advance to Stewart's headquarters and both of the brigades at Fairfield.⁵ The 1st Kentucky regimental commander, Lieutenant Colonel J. R. Butler, found General Bate, reported the situation to him, and escorted Bate back towards Hoover's Gap. The 1st Kentucky's adjutant found General Johnson's headquarters and likewise reported the situation. These collective reports got the Confederate infantry moving.

Upon reaching the southern end of Hoover's Gap, Wilder deployed the brigade to secure his gains against a Confederate counterattack (figure 3). Initially he was unopposed. He could hear Bate's Brigade forming up in the direction of Fairfield, and the intelligence he had, which was correct, indicated that was where the Confederate infantry was camped. Wilder placed the bulk of the brigade along hills on the western edge of Hoover's Gap. He put the 72d Indiana on the left, with one section of the mountain howitzers. To the right of the 72d Indiana, Wilder put two sections of the Rodmans on a hill in the center of the line, supported by the 123d Illinois. He put the 17th Indiana on the extreme right, and eight companies of the 98th Illinois in reserve. Wilder also kept one section of Rodmans and one section of the mountain howitzers in reserve. The other two companies of the 98th Illinois set up on the east side of the Manchester Pike to secure the brigade's left. Wilder then pushed pickets forward along the Manchester Pike, and also in the direction of Fairfield and the Confederate infantry. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Colonel Kirkpatrick, who had been leading the advance with five companies of the 72d Indiana, entered the town of Beech Grove at the southern end of Hoover's Gap.⁶ Finding nothing to report in

Beech Grove, he rejoined the rest of the brigade, barely making it back before Bate attacked.⁷

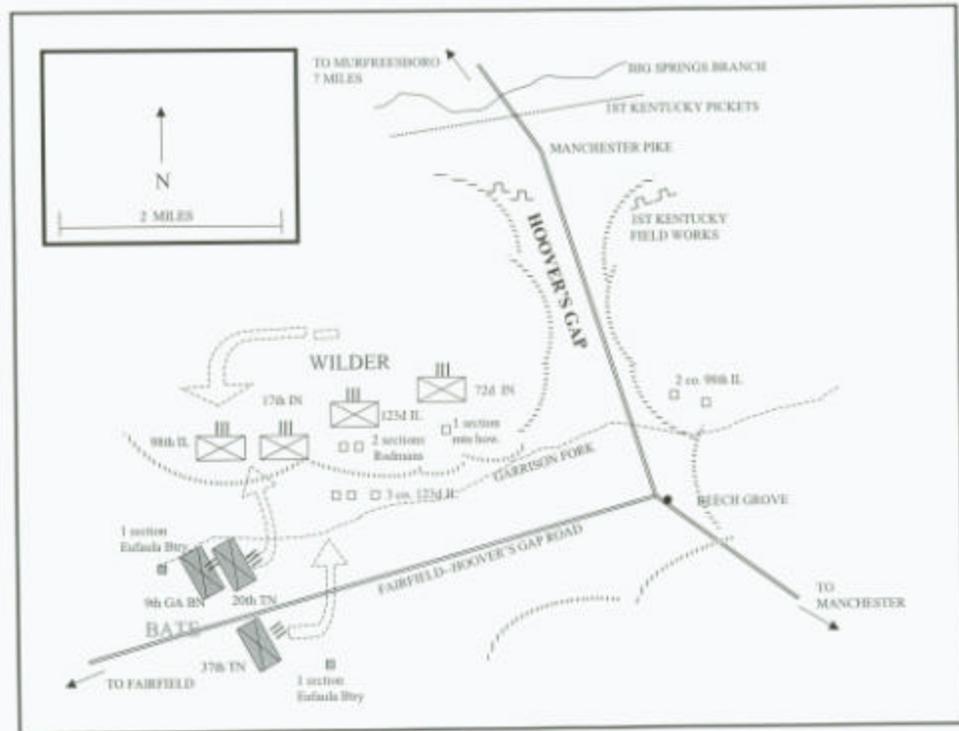


Fig. 3. Hoover's Gap. *Source: OR, vol. 23, pt. 1,*

While Wilder was making his dispositions to defend the gap, General Stewart issued orders to Bate and Johnson. At 2:00 P.M. he ordered Bate to move forward with two regiments. Stewart ordered Johnson to remain where he was, but to prepare to move.⁸

Bate moved towards Hoover's Gap, escorted by the 1st Kentucky Cavalry's Lieutenant Colonel. Bate's direction of advance towards Wilder was perpendicular to the Highland Rim, with the high ground on his left. As he approached Hoover's Gap, the pickets began to skirmish. Both Wilder and Bate perceived a threat to their flank. Wilder, whose general orientation was south, saw the Confederates advancing from his right (west). Bate, who was advancing generally east, saw Wilder's men in the hills on his left front (north). Wilder repositioned the 98th Illinois further down the rim, extending his right. Bate, observing the repositioning, ordered an attack on Wilder's right in an attempt to prevent Wilder from further enhancing his position along the high ground overlooking Bate's advance. Confederate artillerymen killed two of Lilly's men and the horses from one of the mountain howitzers. Lilly's battery returned fire effectively and forced the Confederate artillery to reposition.

Shooting at close range, Wilder's men repulsed Bate's attack. At the same time, Bate attacked the center of Wilder's position with the 37th Georgia. Wilder had previously positioned three companies of the 123d Illinois forward of the lines in a ditch. When Bate's men attacked, they met those companies head on, firing from the safety of the ditch. Lilly supported with double canister, and the 72d Indiana assisted by firing at the attackers from above and to the side. Unable to take the hills, Bate's men fell back. Bate made a second try on Wilder's right, which was also unsuccessful. Bate withdrew and began a counter-battery artillery attack against Lilly's guns. Lilly had a superior position in the hills, and the Confederate firing did no significant damage. Late in the afternoon General Reynolds and the rest of the division caught up with Wilder's brigade. The 17th Indiana and 98th Illinois were relieved of their place on the line and withdrew

to the rear. Colonel Wilder, the battery, the 72d Indiana, and 123d Illinois remained in position. About 6:00 P.M., General Johnson's Confederate brigade had reached the field from Fairfield. By then, most of the fighting was over for the day. Throughout the remaining daylight, some inconsequential artillery skirmishing occurred.

By morning of 25 June, Johnson had relieved Bate. Johnson's men skirmished with the Union soldiers most of the day, but did not make a concerted effort to dislodge them from Hoover's Gap. Both sides were apparently pleased with their respective positions and not inclined to attack. Reynolds's intent was to maintain his position⁹ under orders from General Thomas, and Johnson intended only to prevent further Union advance. Wilder's losses in the action at Hoover's Gap were 14 killed and 47 wounded. Bate's losses were 19 killed and 126 wounded. Johnson's command lost two killed and three wounded. Skirmishing continued through 26 June, when General Stewart ordered Johnson's withdrawal.

Late on 25 June, Bragg withdrew the entire army to Tullahoma. As the Confederates pulled back from Hoover's Gap, Reynolds pushed forward down the Manchester Pike. He sent Wilder's brigade to scout the flanks along the Manchester Pike, covering the division's movement. Wilder reunited with the division at dusk and camped with them six miles north of Manchester. The next morning, 27 June, Reynolds marched his division into Manchester, with Wilder's brigade leading the way. The brigade captured some prisoners, but otherwise the town was unoccupied by any Confederate force.

Although Wilder had been serving under the tactical control of Reynolds thus far in the campaign, Rosecrans gave special orders to Wilder on the twenty-seventh. As he

had in April, the commander of the Army of the Cumberland tasked Wilder with a specific mission supporting the army's advance. At 12:15 P.M. 27 June, Rosecrans told Reynolds to send Wilder behind Bragg and "break the railroad in the rear of Tullahoma". A copy of the message was also sent to Thomas.¹⁰ From 27 June to 2 July, Wilder's brigade was on the move in an attempt to cut off, interdict, and harass the withdrawing Confederate force.

When Wilder left Manchester, Bragg's army was already behind fortifications at Tullahoma. The Elk River, swollen and unfordable from the rains, was at his back, and formed a significant obstacle between his army and Chattanooga. There were two bridges over the river in the area, one at Pelham and the other at Estill Springs (figure 4). The bridge at Estill Springs was Bragg's route of escape. It was a railroad bridge on the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad. If Wilder destroyed it, Bragg's further withdrawal would have been greatly complicated. Rosecrans saw that as an opportunity to trap Bragg and force him into a decisive battle.¹¹ Rosecrans's intent for Wilder was to seriously interdict Bragg's withdrawal, not merely harass it. If the bridge remained intact, Bragg could cross his army over the Elk, and the river would then become an obstacle for the Army of the Cumberland.

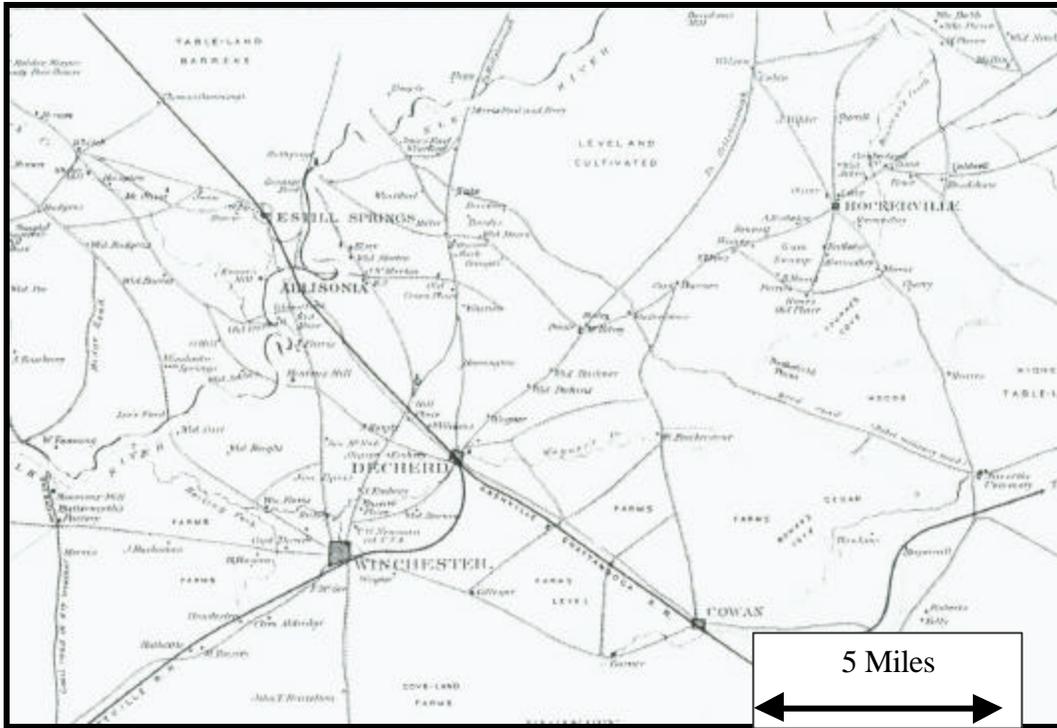


Fig. 4. Estill Springs area. *Source: Davis, Perry, and Kirkley.*

Although Wilder made an attempt to destroy the bridge, it seems clear that he did not fully comprehend Rosecrans's intent for the brigade's operation. His decisions on where and how to execute his orders indicate that although Wilder understood the letter of the order, he missed the spirit of it. Wilder sent Colonel Monroe and the 123d Illinois towards the bridge at Estill Springs with orders to destroy it. But he and the remainder of the brigade headed for Pelham further upstream in an attempt to cross the River there, and then get to the rail lines around Decherd. Arriving at Pelham on 29 June, Wilder met a detachment of Confederate soldiers guarding the bridge, with orders to destroy it if any

Union forces showed up. A detachment from the 98th Illinois saved the bridge, captured two prisoners and 78 mules. Meanwhile, back at Estill Springs, Colonel Monroe and his regiment found a large force guarding the bridge. Monroe assessed his regiment to be too small to attack the massed Confederates, and decided he didn't have a chance of beating them off or destroying the bridge.¹² He fell back and rejoined the rest of the brigade. Wilder had meanwhile pressed on to Decherd late in the evening of 29 June, and Bragg continued the withdrawal unhindered.

Finally behind Bragg, the brigade skirmished with a small Confederate force, then destroyed sections of the rail line on the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad and the Branch Line Railroad. The brigade also destroyed the telegraph lines and water tanks, burned the Confederate commissary, and took five prisoners. All of that was a nuisance to Bragg, but it did nothing to trap him north of the Elk River as Rosecrans intended. The prisoners reported that six regiments of infantry were headed their way, so Wilder withdrew towards Pelham late that evening and camped about 2:00 A.M. on 30 June. At daybreak next morning, the brigade headed toward Tracy City and Cowan, intent on disrupting rail lines there as they had the day before. They succeeded in destroying track at several places near Tracy City. Colonel Funkhouser and the 98th Illinois discovered two trains loaded with Confederate troops, one at Tantalum and another at Anderson. Both towns were small rail stops on the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad south of Decherd. Despite the tempting target, Wilder decided to pass on the opportunity to attack the trains. Forrest's cavalry was pressing his pickets near Sewanee and closing in for a fight. Also, Wilder felt that it would be difficult to mass the brigade for an attack because of the poor roads leading to Tantalum and Anderson. Feeling he had properly complied

with his orders to get behind Tullahoma and disrupt the railroads, Wilder fell back through Pelham to Manchester on 2 July.

Bragg withdrew to Chattanooga on 3 July. By 7 July he had his army across the Tennessee River and safely behind the fortifications in Chattanooga. Rosecrans, having pushed nearly a hundred miles, halted his army to wait for supplies to come forward. The Tullahoma campaign was over, and the brigade had its first real test in combat operations. The long awaited trial of the new brigade had come yielding mixed results. The brigade's actions in securing Hoover's Gap earned it admiring accolades from General Thomas and Rosecrans. The mobility of the brigade had a dramatic and decisive part in securing the gap for the breakout and pursuit phase of the Tullahoma Campaign. The Spencers worked marvelously, and gave the brigade a significant firepower advantage against an opponent armed with single-shot muzzle-loading rifles. Yet in the later days of the campaign, Wilder failed to act decisively and missed a chance to trap Bragg and force a decisive battle on Rosecrans's terms.

Wilder's brigade had unquestionably seized a key piece of terrain and defended it at Hoover's Gap. Rosecrans's experiment with mounted infantry had paid off with a successful operation at Hoover's Gap. Wilder's mounted men rapidly overwhelmed the Confederate cavalry stationed there, the rapid advance seized the key pass before the Confederate cavalry could react. Wilder made a good tactical decision to push through the gap and quickly establish a defense, but his success was greatly facilitated by the Confederate force dispositions. Hoover's Gap was poorly defended to begin with. Facing a difficult situation, the Confederates had gambled by not placing infantry directly in the gap as it did further west in Liberty Gap. The 1st Kentucky was going to skirmish and fall

back regardless of what Union element led the column that day, then report to Stewart's infantry. Stewart's men were the backbone of the defense at Hoover's Gap, and their location at Fairfield probably lent as much aid to Wilder's rapid advance and seizure of the gap as did any particular action on Wilder's part. Wilder does, however, deserve much credit for recognizing the southern end of the gap as terrain that needed to be held. His decision to deploy his brigade in anticipation of Bate's attack probably prevented a more difficult seizure by Reynolds later in the day. Wilder assumed some tactical risk by allowing the large gap to develop between his brigade and the rest of Reynolds' division, but it did give him the best defensible ground and a superior position when Bate attacked. Had he waited at the entrance to Hoover's Gap, the 1st Kentucky would have likely sent word early enough for the Confederates to establish a defensive line there, possibly forcing a much more costly effort for Reynolds to take the pass.

The casualty returns for the battle validate the effectiveness of the Spencer rifles. Much of the shooting during on 24 June occurred at less than 100 yards.¹³ Bate's Brigade made three substantial attacks against Wilder's positions. Of the 650 men in Bate's Brigade that were engaged, Wilder's men with their new Spencers killed nineteen¹⁴ and wounded an additional 126 soldiers, By comparison, Wilder's brigade lost 14 killed and 47 wounded, with approximately 1,400 engaged. As with all new combat gear, until it received a "baptism by fire," the Spencer was an untested novelty. Wilder's brigade validated the Spencer at Hoover's Gap as a suitable combat rifle. The repeaters worked just fine, and the men didn't run out of ammunition as General Ripley had hypothesized.

Not everyone was happy with Wilder's performance at Hoover's Gap. Reynolds disapproved of Wilder's rapid rise to his prominent position. Wilder had a habit of

skipping Reynolds in the chain of command, communicating directly with Thomas and Rosecrans. Further, Reynolds saw Wilder's foraging expeditions as unlawful boondoggles. All of that culminated on 24 June with Wilder seemingly running off and leaving the division to grab the glory, as Reynolds saw it. Reynolds was furious that Wilder had allowed the six-mile gap to develop. Seizing the gap was the division's mission, and Wilder had trumped it. Late in the afternoon on 24 June when Reynolds finally caught up to the brigade, he began to berate Wilder for exceeding his authority with the foolish rush through the gap. Thomas and Rosecrans soon came forward and were ecstatic with the ease with which Hoover's Gap was secured, effectively silencing Reynolds. Wilder's decision turned out to be a good one, but Reynolds had some justification for his ire. Wilder took a risk in leaving the division so far behind. Had the Confederate disposition been different, Wilder might have been caught in a fight without any support.

Conceptually, Rosecrans, Thomas, and Reynolds all had a good idea of the appropriate role for Wilder's brigade. It was mobile and possessed a lot of firepower, so it should lead the movement and gain contact with the enemy while the larger dismounted infantry formations advanced and developed the attack. Wilder however did not seem to fully understand that aspect of the mission. His mission was to lead the attack, with no further guidance as to subsequent tasks or for what purpose. It is not clear that Wilder was specifically told what to do when he engaged the enemy, or where to halt his advance. He was simply told to lead the advance. Vague orders were common during the Civil War, often not clearly delineating specific tasks and purposes. If Reynolds had wanted Wilder to stop, it is possible that Wilder did not realize it. Wilder kept going and

hastily set up a defense which turned out to be a very fortuitous decision. Had he waited for the rest of the division to catch up, Stewart would have likely had time to organize a stronger defense of Hoover's Gap.

The analysis of how well Rosecrans, Thomas, and Reynolds employed Wilder's brigade reveals three distinct missions that Wilder performed. First, the brigade worked for Reynolds at Hoover's Gap, which gave Reynolds and Thomas a great tool at their level to seize the gap. To spearhead the advance, the mid-level tactical commanders had a mobile force with enough firepower to win a fight until reinforcements could arrive. As Reynolds continued his advance, he used Wilder to screen the division's flank. Later when Rosecrans pushed the army out from the Highland Rim in pursuit of Bragg, he assumed tactical control of Wilder's brigade for operations in the enemy's rear. Rosecrans took advantage of the mobility of Wilder's brigade to perform tasks supporting the Army of the Cumberland's operation by sending Wilder deep to interdict Bragg's withdrawal. Wilder's brigade was well suited for such independent operations, and Rosecrans's decision to detach him for the mission was an appropriate method of employing the brigade at that point in the campaign.

In performance of the later mission, Wilder missed a key opportunity. The bridge at Estill Springs was significant to Bragg's withdrawal, yet Wilder sent only one regiment to destroy it. Had he gone in force to Estill Springs, he might have succeeded in destroying that bridge over the Elk River, eliminating Bragg's primary escape route. Instead, he was focused on crossing the Elk at Pelham in order to gain access to less significant segments of the railroad. Disruption of the railroad on dry land was vastly easier to repair than destroying a railroad trestle bridge. By taking down the bridge, repair

entailed a major engineering effort to rebuild the bridge, in addition to relaying the track. Another missed opportunity came when Colonel Funkhouser and the 98th Illinois discovered trains at Tantalum and Anderson loaded with Confederate troops. Wilder passed on attacking the trains claiming that the roads leading up the mountains would not support moving his brigade there.¹⁵ General Wheeler held a different opinion, reporting that the roads were in fact suitable for cavalry raiding.¹⁶

Wilder showed that he could maneuver and fight his brigade, but during the Tullahoma Campaign he also revealed that his grasp of the commander's intent was sometimes tenuous. He clearly perceived it well at Hoover's Gap on the first day of the campaign, but later his actions indicate a poor understanding of what Rosecrans needed him to do. There also seems to be some evidence that perhaps Wilder was avoiding a pitched battle when he was the attacker. First, he avoided the situation at Estill Springs, which could have substantially hindered Bragg's withdrawal. Then he shied away from attacking infantry-laden trains at Tantalum and Anderson. When Forrest was pressing him near Cowan, Wilder claimed it was getting dark, he didn't know the terrain, and left the field, passing on a chance to engage the Confederate cavalry. Wilder's hesitation to decisively engage Forrest may indeed have been justified, but it echoes similar themes from the earlier expeditions from Murfreesboro. Perhaps having spent so much time and energy building the brigade to its new stature, Wilder was hesitant to risk decisive engagement for fear of losing what he had worked so hard for.

¹William G. Robertson, *The Battle of Chickamauga* Civil War Series, National Park Service, (Fort Washington, PA: Eastern National, 1995), 2.

²*OR*, vol. 23, pt. 1, 430.

³Bate refers to what he saw of the 1st Kentucky as the “scattered remnants” of the regiment. *OR*, vol. 23, pt. 1, 611. Also, Wilder captured the 1st Kentucky regimental colors, generally an indicator of a regiment’s leaders losing command and control. *OR*, series I, vol 23, pt 1, 458.

⁴This is contradictory to the analysis of Woodworth. His assessment is that the 1st Kentucky failed to adequately report the Union advance, causing a delay in the Confederate response, due to Wilder’s overwhelming attack.

⁵*OR*, vol. 23, pt. 1, 611, and *OR*, series I, vol. 23, pt 1., 602.

⁶Lieutenant Colonel Kirkpatrick stopped at Jacob’s Store there and grabbed some tobacco for the boys.

⁷Benjamin F. McGee, *History of the 72d Indiana Volunteer Infantry* (Lafayette, IN: S. Vater and Company, “The Journal” Printers, 1882), 129.

⁸*OR*, vol. 23, pt. 1, 611, and *OR*, series I, vol. 23, pt. 1, 602.

⁹*OR*, vol. 23, pt. 1, 455.

¹⁰*OR*, vol. 23, pt. 2, 474.

¹¹*OR*, vol. 23, pt. 1, 405.

¹²*OR*, vol. 23, pt. 1, 460.

¹³*OR*, vol. 23, pt. 1, 459.

¹⁴*OR*, vol. 23, pt. 1, 614.

¹⁵*OR*, vol. 23, pt. 1, 461.

¹⁶*OR*, vol. 23, pt. 2, 615.

CHAPTER 3

TULLAHOMA TO CHICKAMAUGA

In the days after the Tullahoma Campaign, Wilder's men settled into camp at Normandy, Tennessee, eight miles north of Tullahoma. After an arduous nine days, the brigade's soldiers needed to rest its horses and themselves. Prior to the Army of the Cumberland starting its move again, Wilder's brigade did a bit of scouting, but mostly enjoyed the rest provided by camp life. The Tullahoma Campaign kept the brigade constantly on the move, and it enjoyed a welcomed break in early July. From mid July to mid August, the brigade refitted and scouted for upgrades to its current mix of horses and mules. Wilder left home sick on 21 July, leaving Colonel Miller in command of the brigade. Wilder was afflicted with chronic diarrhea and left on sick leave several times. His illness was probably symptomatic of a recurrence of typhoid fever that he contracted in 1862.

Two significant things occurred while the brigade was waiting to move again. One was the addition of the 92d Illinois and Colonel Smith D. Atkins to the brigade. Adding the regiment promised to significantly increase Wilder's combat capabilities, if the new regiment could be quickly assimilated into the brigade. The other event was a flap over what General Reynolds called the "disgraceful stealing"¹ and "depredations and outrages"² of the brigade, referring to the liberties Wilder's men took in their foraging. Reynolds's discontent with Wilder's independent proclivity manifested itself in an official reprimand for unauthorized foraging.

Colonel Wilder first came into contact with the 92d Illinois in a combined operation on the Duck River, when his brigade, assisted by the 92d, was repairing a bridge. Prior to July 1863 the 92d Illinois served in Atkins's brigade, Baird's division, of Granger's corps. Wilder was impressed with the regiment and its commander, Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin F. Sheets.³ Wilder and the officers of the 92d discussed the possibility of the 92d joining Wilder's brigade. The 92d and its brigade commander Colonel Smith D. Atkins were not happy in their current place in the Army of the Cumberland. The previous fall, while Atkins was the regimental commander of the 92d, he had a falling out with the corps commander, General Gordon Granger. Atkins was a radical abolitionist⁴, and while in Kentucky the previous fall, he took President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation as a personal mandate to liberate every slave he could. Atkins rounded up local slaves and took them with him, much to the displeasure of the local inhabitants of Kentucky and his fellow officers. The issue came to a head in mid November, when a slave owner named William Hickman sued Atkins in the Fayette Circuit Court to get his "property" back. General Granger forced Atkins to return the slaves, which in Atkins's mind was a horrible injustice. On top of the pressure from the civil authorities and his chain of command, several officers of the brigade cosigned a letter to Atkins requesting that he return the slaves to prevent further embarrassment of the army. In part, the letter said,

Dear Sir: There are several negroes within your lines. The fact of their being so is causing intense excitement, and wounding the feelings of men who are unswerving in their loyalty and patriotism to our common cause. . . . For the good of our common cause, we expect you to turn them out of your lines.⁵

Despite his subsequent rise to brigade command in Granger's corps, Atkins could not wait to leave the corps. He felt alienated and betrayed by Granger, and felt that Granger had sold him out the previous fall. When Wilder suggested the transfer, Atkins got approval from Rosecrans to move the 92d Illinois, with Atkins back in command of the regiment, to Wilder's brigade.⁶ It is surprising that Atkins would relinquish his brigade command, but he later wrote, "I was determined to get out from Granger's command, even if I had to resign from the Army."⁷ The 92d Illinois was armed with the brigade's surplus Spencers, enough to equip three companies of the regiment. Once the 92d Illinois was officially part of the brigade, finding mounts for it became the brigade's priority. The brigade conducted two foraging expeditions, one in early July and one in mid July to round up horses for Atkins's men. Atkins needed to rapidly mount the soldiers of the regiment in order to serve as mounted infantry. It had five weeks to do what the rest of the brigade took four months to accomplish in terms of mounting, equipping, and training.

While Wilder was in Indiana on leave, General Reynolds made known his displeasure with the brigade's foraging activity. On 1 August and again on 10 August, Reynolds issued official reprimands with warnings to Wilder's brigade. The subject of the letters was unsanctioned foraging committed by the brigade. Although the government officially recognized and condoned taking war materials from the local citizenry, General Rosecrans had written instructions to only take private property directly related to the war effort. Quartermasters were to issue receipts for all property received, payable at the end of the war. In reality, soldiers took what they wanted, and the quartermasters rarely issued receipts.⁸ Reynolds officially reprimanded the men of

Wilder's brigade, accusing them of violating the official policy. Based on diary accounts of the foraging, Reynolds was right. In addition to taking horses and food, the soldiers routinely took other personal goods and luxuries such as liquor, tobacco, and jewelry. However, the motivation behind the rebukes was probably spite, especially considering the timing of the reprimands, while Wilder was not present to defend the regiment.

Reynolds was dissatisfied with Wilder's new notoriety, and if the final days of the Tullahoma Campaign were any indication, Wilder's brigade was going to serve as an army-level independent brigade. Within a few months Reynolds had witnessed one of his brigades gain dramatic firepower and mobility, but he had also witnessed Wilder gaining the attention of higher level commanders. Reynolds's intent is impossible to ascertain, but in a letter written to Wilder from Lieutenant Colonel Jordan, commander of the 17th Indiana and Wilder's close friend, Jordan revealed much about the relationship that existed between Reynolds and Wilder. Writing in regard to the recent reprimand, Jordan wrote, "Old Joe Reynolds is the very same old counterfeit that I always told you he was, and is head over heels into the conspiracy against us."⁹ In relating a conversation that Jordan and Reynolds had regarding the accusations, Jordan wrote that Reynolds produced a letter asserting that the brigade had behaved scandalously. Jordan wrote that Reynolds was openly dissatisfied with Wilder's "practice of skipping Reynolds in communications with the Dept. Head Quarters." He ended the letter by surmising that Reynolds is "determined to raise merry hell with everybody in the brigade." In July the friction was manifesting itself, first with the rebukes, then the detachment of the 92d. Reynolds was no doubt upset that Wilder's brigade was detached from his command after Hoover's

Gap. This trend would continue, and the entire brigade would only serve under Reynolds for three days before Chickamauga.¹⁰

During this period, from the first week of July through mid August, General Rosecrans was preparing for his next move against Bragg. The Tullahoma Campaign was a success for General Rosecrans and the Army of the Cumberland, but his superiors in Washington saw it as an initial move, not a decisive victory. General Halleck, Secretary Stanton, and President Lincoln were anxious to see Rosecrans continue to pursue Bragg, destroy his army, and secure the Union-loyal citizens in east Tennessee. The Army of the Cumberland had covered a lot of ground in the brief Tullahoma campaign, but Bragg's Army was not decisively engaged, nor were the strategic objectives of Chattanooga or east Tennessee secured. In mid August General Burnside and the Army of the Ohio left Lexington, Kentucky headed toward Knoxville to secure east Tennessee.¹¹ To prepare for the second phase of the summer fighting season, Rosecrans set to work building up supplies and planning the next move against the Army of Tennessee.

Rosecrans moved his headquarters to Winchester, with most of the army close by. Bragg had his Army concentrated around Chattanooga. His cavalry was screening the southeast bank of the Tennessee River. Between the two armies were the Cumberland Plateau and the Tennessee River, both were major obstacles for the movement of armies (Figure 5). The Cumberland Plateau was a broad expanse of wooded mountains thirty miles across. The approaches to it were steep, and the terrain did not offer forage. The Sequatchie River cut a valley through the Cumberland Plateau, forming Walden's Ridge on its southeast bank. Lying on the southeast edge of Walden's Ridge, the Tennessee River was also a significant obstacle. It was broad, almost a mile wide at some points. It

was also relatively deep and swift. Although fordable in some areas, the Army of the Cumberland would have to use existing ferries and bridges to cross it. Soldiers might be able to use the fords, but the army's cannons, caissons, and logistic tail of wagons had to use bridges and ferries. Crossing the mountainous terrain and the Tennessee River forced Rosecrans to spread his army out to take advantage of as many routes as possible. Spread out across the mountains, the Army of the Cumberland was vulnerable to attack because it was not concentrated. To safeguard the movement, Rosecrans planned to deceive Bragg of his actual intentions.

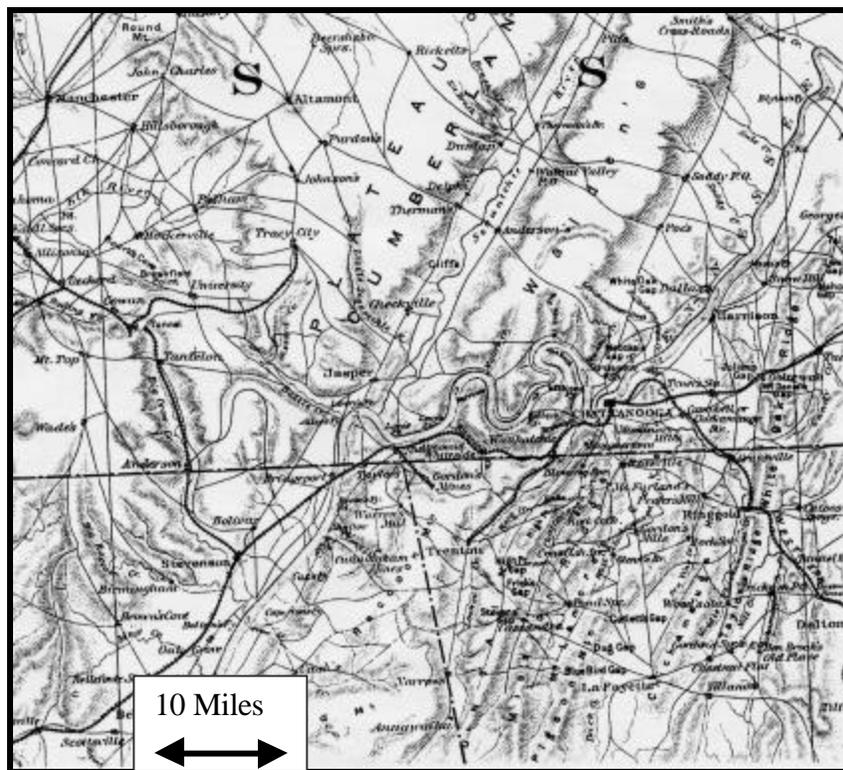


Fig. 5. Terrain surrounding Chattanooga. *Source: Davis, Perry, and Kirkley*

General Bragg didn't know whether Rosecrans would cross the Tennessee north or south of Chattanooga, but as Bragg saw it the most dangerous scenario was for Rosecrans to link up with General Ambrose Burnside's Army of the Ohio to secure east Tennessee. That would cut Bragg's most direct supply and communication link with Virginia, and add strength to the Union forces already threatening his Army of Tennessee. Thus, Bragg felt that Rosecrans would most likely move north of Chattanooga. Bragg's assessment of Rosecrans's intent would drive his actions as commander of the Army of Tennessee for the next several weeks, and would assist Rosecrans in executing his actual plan of attack.

Rosecrans knew that Bragg was very concerned about an Army of the Cumberland-Army of the Ohio link in east Tennessee. Although swinging north of Chattanooga was an option, Rosecrans decided to turn Bragg's opposite flank, crossing the Tennessee to the south of Chattanooga. To keep Bragg guessing, Rosecrans also incorporated a deception plan to confirm in Bragg's mind what he most feared, a crossing north of Chattanooga. This is where Wilder's brigade fit into Rosecrans's plan. While the three corps of the Army of the Cumberland worked their way south of Chattanooga, Wilder's and three other brigades moved independently to the banks of the Tennessee. Their mission was to patrol the river, make as much noise as possible, and feign river crossing operations north of the city. With the plan set, Rosecrans summoned Colonel Wilder to his headquarters on 16 August for orders.

Rosecrans's orders for Wilder on 16 August attached his brigade to General Crittenden's XXI Corps for movement to the Tennessee River and deception operations along the bank north of Chattanooga. Rosecrans ordered Crittenden to spread his

divisions out and initially cross the Cumberland Plateau heading north of Chattanooga, while the other two corps crossed the river below Chattanooga. Once the other corps were safely across the river, the XXI Corps would fall in behind them. In addition to Wilder's brigade, Brigadier General William B. Hazen's and Brigadier General George D. Wagner's infantry brigades, and Colonel Robert H. G. Minty's cavalry brigade joined the operation. General Hazen ostensibly had overall command of the operation from 29 August, but Wilder served independently until he crossed the Tennessee on 9 September. The mission for the four-brigade detachment was to sprint ahead of Crittenden's Corps to the Tennessee River, and visibly show its presence to the Confederate cavalry screening the south bank.

Wilder's brigade moved out from its headquarters on 16 August, ascending the Cumberland Plateau and camping that night at Sewanee, near the Episcopal Church's University of the South. Over the next few days the brigade worked its way towards the Tennessee River, moving through Dunlap in the Sequatchie River valley, reaching Poe's Tavern at the bottom of Walden's Ridge on 20 August. The steep slopes of the Cumberland Plateau and Walden's Ridge challenged the brigade's move, especially the wagons and the battery. Although the rugged, mountainous terrain lacked forage, the soldiers enjoyed the spectacular vistas from the mountains.

At daybreak on 21 August, the brigade headed toward the river to commence its deception. Wilder and Minty split the river into brigade areas of operation. Wilder's brigade took the southern area, from Chattanooga to Sale Creek, and Minty's Cavalry took the northern section from Sale Creek to the mouth of the Hiawasse River. The dismounted soldiers of Wagner and Hazen's brigades were still crossing the mountains.

Wilder split his brigade, sending the 92d and 98th Illinois with one section of the battery to Harrison's Landing, a ferry site ten miles upriver from Chattanooga. The rest of the brigade moved to the north bank of the Tennessee directly across from Chattanooga. The brigade proceeded cautiously at first, a small element approached the river to see what Confederate forces were present. Next, Wilder brought forward his artillery to engage the Confederate gun emplacements in and around Chattanooga. At Harrison's Landing, there wasn't much to see. A section of the battery under Lieutenant Joseph Scott engaged and destroyed a lone gun in a fort on the south bank.

At Chattanooga, Wilder's men encountered some Confederate soldiers on the north bank, seemingly caught unaware of the significant Union force approaching. Four companies of the 123d Illinois captured forty prisoners and a ferry. Two Confederate river boats, the *Dunbar* and *Paint Rock* were tied up at the Chattanooga Wharf¹², providing tempting targets. Wilder's advance also identified several artillery emplacements in and around the city. Captain Lilly came forward with his remaining two sections of the Rodmans, and set them up on high ground about one half mile from the river. His first targets were the riverboats, which were easily sunk. Lilly then directed his firing against the Confederate guns in Chattanooga, an assortment of various howitzers and rifles. The firing continued until 5:00 P.M., when, tired and running low on ammunition, the battery pulled back. Lilly's battery destroyed a few of the Confederate guns. It sustained one casualty from a thirty-two-pound shell that tore through four of the battery's horses and killed a young artilleryman.

Over the next few days Lilly's men constructed protective works for the guns, and continued to shell the Confederate guns and Chattanooga through the duration of the

deception operation. While Lilly's guns were shelling the city, Wilder's infantry patrolled the north banks of the river making as much commotion as possible. The intent of the deception was to give the impression that the bulk of the Army of the Cumberland was just across the river from the Confederate scouts, making preparations to cross the river north of Chattanooga. To that end, Wilder's men creatively undertook their task. They built many campfires at night, dispersed over a broad expanse of the river to portray numerous regimental camps. They also feigned a major boat construction project, by hammering, sawing, and tossing bits of lumber into the river upstream from Chattanooga.¹³ During this time, Wilder's brigade operated from the north bank of the Tennessee at Chattanooga upstream as far as the mouth of Sale Creek, forty miles north. Wagner and Hazen's brigades arrived at the river by 29 August, and their dismounted infantry joined Wilder and Minty in the deception. Wagner operated in the south, with Wilder, and Hazen worked further up river along with Minty's troopers.

The deception operation had the desired effect on General Bragg. He assumed the worst, that the Army of the Cumberland and the Army of the Ohio indeed would join forces in east Tennessee. Bragg interpreted Wilder's commotion as signs of the Army of the Cumberland's preparation for a crossing north of Chattanooga. Meanwhile, Rosecrans was slipping his army over the Cumberland Plateau and crossing the river south of Chattanooga. Bragg had gambled by not keeping some cavalry northwest of the river to report Rosecrans's movements. Although the intelligence would have been invaluable, sustaining cavalry from across the river would have been problematic. The local population along the Cumberland Plateau was predominantly pro-Union, so that part of Tennessee was enemy territory for the Confederates. The mountains offered little

sustenance, and keeping any sizable force supplied from across the Tennessee meant supply trains. Such a large wagon supply train would have been easy prey for Union cavalry. It would have presented a large signature for troops that rely on speed and stealth, and they would have stood a good chance of being cut off from the Army of Tennessee.

Thus Rosecrans's movement over the Cumberland Plateau was undetected by Bragg. On 29 August the XX Corps and XIV Corps were crossing the Tennessee on a twenty-mile front at Shellmound, Caperton's Ferry, and Bridgeport. On 30 August Rosecrans ordered Crittenden's XXI Corps to begin moving towards Shellmound to cross there. By 4 September the river crossing operation was complete and the Army of the Cumberland was on the south side of the Tennessee River. Meanwhile, Wilder's men kept up their work to the north.

One particularly interesting report that Wilder sent to Rosecrans occurred on 25 August. The previous night Wilder captured three Confederate deserters. The information they gave Wilder was that Bragg was in Atlanta, and he was making plans for a retreat.¹⁴ Wilder dutifully relayed this to Rosecrans in that 25 August report. The information gave a picture completely opposite of what Bragg was actually doing. Instead of retreating toward Atlanta, Bragg was simply preparing to withdrawing from the city to more defensible terrain. Unfortunately, Wilder's report probably worsened Rosecrans's fuzzy picture about what Bragg's intent was.

On 5 September Wilder was himself a victim of deception. During the day, the Confederate cavalry across the river had set out pontoon boats, giving the general impression that they were the advance of an attempt to cross the river. Combined with

scattered rifle and artillery firing, Wilder got the general impression that a major advance was about to take place. Throughout the day, Wilder, Wagner, and Hazen exchanged correspondence concerning the impending Confederate river crossing. The pontoon boat activity was just a ruse, and by late evening 5 September, Wilder, Hazen, and Wagner had figured as much, but not before Wilder fired sent reports to Hazen and Rosecrans that the Confederates were getting ready to cross, adding that it was “reliable news.”¹⁵

On 9 September Wilder received orders to cross the river and enter Chattanooga. The brigade forded at Friar’s Island eight miles upriver from the city. The river crossing and movement to Chattanooga occupied the brigade through the 9th and 10th. Crittenden’s XXI Corps meanwhile crossed downstream at Shellmound and marched to Chattanooga, on the army’s left flank. Thomas’s XIV Corps was in McLemore’s Cove between Lookout and Pigeon Mountains. On the army’s right flank, McCook’s XX Corps was twenty miles south at Alpine Georgia.

After Rosecrans got his army across the Tennessee River, the tables were turned on which commander knew where the other one was. Bragg’s scouts kept him informed about the Union breakout across Lookout Mountain, but Rosecrans lost contact with Bragg’s army, and could only assume where he was. The intelligence picture within Rosecrans’s headquarters indicated that Bragg was in full retreat, headed toward Dalton or Rome, Georgia. Bragg dispatched volunteers with the intention that they be captured and render erroneous reports on the movements of the Army of Tennessee. In fact, Bragg was much closer than Rosecrans believed. Bragg had withdrawn his cavalry pickets along the Tennessee River and pulled his army south of Chattanooga. Bragg’s headquarters and

Polk's Corps were located at Lee and Gordon's Mill. Lieutenant General D. H. Hill (who had replaced Hardee) moved his corps to Lafayette.

Unaware of how close Bragg was, Rosecrans accepted some risk in separating his army in order to move out from the river more quickly. Rosecrans wanted to get across the mountains south of the Tennessee through several passes, so each corps was given a separate pass to take. From 9 to 12 September Bragg made two failed attempts to take advantage of Rosecrans dispersion. The first was an attempt to attack the lead division of Thomas' corps while it was separated from the rest of the army in McLemore's Cove on the 10th. Bragg's attack would have dealt a serious blow to the army, but his subordinates failed him and the attack never occurred. The second opportunity came on the 12th when Rosecrans ordered Crittenden's corps to move from Rossville to Lee and Gordon's Mill. Crittenden's movement down the Lafayette Road created the opportunity for Bragg's attack. Again, Bragg's commanders balked, and the attack didn't occur. Bragg's troop movements in preparation for these attacks put Polk's Corps directly in Wilder's path, and nearly surrounded the brigade on the evening of 12 September.

While Bragg was trying to put together his attacks on Rosecrans's separated forces, Wilder's brigade had been probing southeast of Chattanooga ahead of Crittenden's corps. Wilder, still attached to Crittenden, joined the rest of the corps at Chattanooga. Crittenden crossed at Shellmound, then turned north towards the city and rounded the north end of Lookout Mountain. Crittenden's orders were to follow Bragg's route south and keep pressure on the army while the other corps worked their way over Sand and Lookout Mountains to the south. Wilder's brigade took the advance of Crittenden's corps, moving toward Ringgold on 11 September.

The day prior, a detachment from the 123d Illinois captured a bag of Confederate mail at a railroad stop called Tyner's Station, five miles east of Chattanooga. The mailbag was a full of valuable intelligence about Confederate dispositions and Bragg's intent. Amid the letters from Confederate soldiers home to friends and family was information on the location of Bragg's forces, what the army's next move would be, and reports on reinforcements from the Army of Virginia.¹⁶ While the soldiers of the 123d sifted through the mail, the brigade camped at Taylor's Gap. Wilder sent a report to Crittenden's headquarters at 7:00 P.M. indicating that he had captured the mail.¹⁷ After an initial inspection of the mail, Wilder sent another report to Crittenden stating, "I am satisfied from all I can learn from the mail, citizens, deserters, and negroes that Bragg has gone, with his main army, to Rome[Georgia]."¹⁸ The report was completely inaccurate. Bragg was not in Rome, he was concentrating near Lee and Gordon's Mills, about forty miles closer to the Army of the Cumberland than Wilder reported.

Wilder's later (1888,1908) recollections of how he reported the intelligence of the Confederate mail differs significantly from the reports and timeline in the *Official Records*. In Wilder's letter to the Adjutant General in 1888 he described the mail incident as if he captured the mail on 13 September and immediately rendered an accurate report to Crittenden.¹⁹ Again in 1908 Wilder wrote that he captured the mail on the night of 13 September, and that he reported the contents early the next morning.²⁰ Both of the later accounts conflict with Colonel Monroe's *Official Records* report, and with correspondence from Wilder to Crittenden in the *Official Records* and are likely false, written to impart to himself a prescient understanding of the situation.

At dawn 11 September the brigade moved out to Ringgold with the 92d Illinois and a section of mountain howitzers one mile in advance. Prior to reaching Ringgold at 1:00 P.M, the brigade was met by 500 troopers of Scott's Brigade, Pegram's Division, Forrest's Corps of Confederate cavalry, deployed across the road. Scott's left was anchored at the West Branch of Chickamauga Creek, his right against a wooded hill. Scott's forces formed a sort of L-shaped ambush with part of the line perpendicular to Wilder's advance and part of it along the road providing enfilading fire on Wilder's left flank. The 92d dismounted and moved forward. Atkins put F Company, armed with Spencers, on his left flank. He put E Company, also armed with Spencers, forward as skirmishers. Wilder came forward, ordering the 17th Indiana to move through the wooded hills to flank Scott's right, and put a section of the Rodmans into action. As Wilder was forming the brigade for an attack, elements of Brigadier General Horatio Van Cleve's division of Crittenden's corps approached the battle area. Skirmishers of the 8th Kentucky and 51st Ohio at the head of Van Cleve's column joined the engagement, forcing Scott to pull back to Ringgold, leaving thirteen Confederate dead from the engagement. Atkins lost six horses and three men wounded, the only casualties sustained by the brigade.²¹ Total engaged from Wilder's brigade was about one thousand, approximately double Scott's force.

The brigade pushed on through Ringgold, where Atkins and the 92d Illinois departed the brigade. Crittenden had forwarded orders to Wilder to send the 92d Illinois back to Reynolds's division. The rest of the brigade continued south from Ringgold and met Scott's brigade again at Tunnel Hill, between Ringgold and Dalton. Elements of Brigadier General Frank C. Armstrong's Division, Forrest's Cavalry Corps were also on

the field. Scott's cavalymen were again deployed in a skirmish line across the road, with a battery on a hill overlooking the road. Wilder deployed the 17th Indiana, and sent the 123d Illinois around to flank Scott's right. Wilder also brought up a section of the Rodmans and the 72d Indiana, positioning them left of the road. The two sides fought an artillery duel for about a half-hour, after which the Confederate forces again withdrew to the southeast. The brigade camped there that night. During the night, Crittenden ordered Wilder to bring the brigade back to Ringgold, first thing in the morning (12 September).

When the brigade arrived, Crittenden ordered it to meet General Reynolds in Lafayette.²² By mid morning the four regiments and Lilly's battery were moving towards Lafayette. About four miles south of Ringgold on the Ringgold-Lafayette road Confederate cavalry attacked again. This time it was elements of General John Pegram's Division and two regiments of Armstrong's Division, Colonel John R. Hart's 6th Georgia Cavalry Regiment and Colonel E. W. Rucker's 1st Tennessee Legion, composed of the 12th and 16th Tennessee Cavalry Battalions, about 700 in all. Pickets from Pegram's 6th Georgia were waiting near a tannery owned by Arthur I. Leet, in a heavily wooded section of the road. The place was locally known as "Leet's Tanyard." Armstrong's men were on the right side of the road deployed in the wooded hills. The 72d Indiana, leading the column, attacked forward into Pegram's pickets, and also attacked Armstrong's line with four companies. While the fighting developed, Scott's Brigade approached from behind Wilder. As darkness settled in, the firing tapered off. Another Confederate unit, Brigadier General Otho F. Strahl's Brigade, (Cheatham's Division, Polk's Corps) was very close, just across the Pea Vine Creek to Wilder's west. Strahl's Brigade was part of the attack Bragg planned for Polk, and it is possible that Wilder's presence contributed to

Polk's hesitation to attack.²³ Pegram lost fifty killed and wounded, and was forced to withdraw four hundred yards out of contact.²⁴ Casualties in Wilder's brigade were 24 killed and wounded, mostly from the 72d Indiana. During the night, the brigade made its way to Crittenden's headquarters at Lee and Gordon's Mills. The brigade reached Crittenden's headquarters in the pre-dawn hours of 13 September.²⁵ Crittenden had orders for Wilder to report to General Thomas at Pond Springs in McLemore's Cove, which he did the morning of 14 September.

Rosecrans had begun to close up his army on 12 September. McCook was ordered to move north from Alpine, Georgia, Thomas continued to push over Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge, and Crittenden had consolidated at Lee and Gordon's Mills. For the next few days, the brigade camped at Pond Springs. Although it did some reconnaissance, the brigade was primarily resting from the previous five days of non-stop action. Rosecrans ordered Wilder's brigade forward to the West Branch of Chickamauga Creek at Alexander's Bridge on 17 September, to screen the army and report enemy movement.

From the time Wilder left his camp at Decherd on 16 August up to and including his assignment to guard Alexander's Bridge, his missions were well in line with the capabilities of the brigade. Rosecrans was employing his newest fighting force well, if unconventionally. Rosecrans's mission for Wilder's brigade at the Tennessee River was a good match for the capabilities of the brigade. He took advantage of its mobility to quickly get to the river and cover a lot of ground while there. The mounted soldiers of Wilder's brigade could cover more ground than regular infantry, and thus were well suited to the deception operation.

For its part, the brigade executed the mission well, obviously understanding Rosecrans' intent. Wilder's role in the deception along the Tennessee River kept Bragg guessing about where the Army of the Cumberland was, and gave Rosecrans time to maneuver his army south of Chattanooga. Wilder's men were certainly getting proficient in their new role. They were also getting good at their routines and procedures concerning dismounting, order of march, etc. During the skirmishes in and around Ringgold and Leet's Tanyard, the brigade demonstrated effective drills in reacting to the enemy. They quickly transitioned from mounted reconnaissance with scouts forward to dismounting and forming lines of battle.

The assimilation of the 92d Illinois into the brigade also posed challenges for Wilder and his chain of command. The transfer of the brigade occurred during a lull in the action, but not a long enough pause for the regiment to be completely integrated with the brigade. From an equipment standpoint, the 92d was several months behind the rest of the brigade in arming and outfitting for its new role, and it was not fully armed with Spencers prior to the battle of Chickamauga. Further, the regiment joined the brigade after the battle of Hoover's Gap, which was a defining day for the brigade. That battle had such a team-building effect on Wilder's brigade, that some soldiers viewed the 92d as less than full members of the brigade. Whether or not the regiment ever fully integrated with the brigade is very much in question. Corporal W.H. Records of the 72d Indiana wrote in his diary very disparaging comments about the newest members of the brigade.²⁶ He wrote that the men of the 92d lacked "the pride of Indianans" and that Wilder had to pull them from their place in column because of their inability to deal with bushwackers on the Cumberland Plateau. This criticism stands out from generally

favorable praise that members of the brigade had for each other. The criticism, combined with Atkins's interesting past, is also significant in light of the missions assigned to the 92d. It would be detached from the brigade three times in the next thirty days, including the Chickamauga battle. Any concerns about the competence of the 92d should have been allayed in the first action north of Ringgold on 11 September. The regiment was leading the brigade's march column,²⁷ met the enemy and deployed well by all accounts. Atkins demonstrated complete control of the situation, and Wilder called his action a "gallant attack."²⁸

Throughout the deception operation at Chattanooga and reconnaissance near Ringgold, Wilder clearly had some confusion about who exactly he was working for, and in fact on 11 September he asked Rosecrans for clarification. He received conflicting orders from Reynolds and Crittenden, and asked Rosecrans to set him straight. Rosecrans's aide quickly replied that for the time being Wilder should report to Crittenden. Uncertainty on Wilder's part concerning who he should report to and who he was taking orders from would have compounded his efforts to coordinate with other units. Earlier, on 21 August, Wilder sent requests for resupply of artillery fuses and primers directly to Rosecrans. Most of the reporting that Wilder did in late August was direct communication with Rosecrans, occasionally sending reports to both Reynolds and Crittenden, but the impression given is that Wilder thought that he was operating independent of higher command, except for the commander of the Army of the Cumberland.

In the midst of Wilder's confusion over the current chain of command, Wilder may have missed another opportunity to destroy a substantial part of Forrest's cavalry in

the skirmishing around Ringgold. With Van Cleve's division closing in, the Union forces were on the field to give a serious blow to Pegram's Division, if a coordinated attack could have been made. In the first engagement north of Ringgold on the 11th, Neither Van Cleve nor Wilder apparently knew the location of the other, and without that prior knowledge a coordinated attack was impracticable. However, when Scott's force withdrew to Ringgold, an opportunity presented itself during the rest of the day to regain contact and decisively engage the Confederate cavalry force in Ringgold, but neither Wilder nor Van Cleve made any effort to join forces.

A notable failure of Wilder's was his handling of the information from the Confederate mail seized at Tyner's Station. Wilder recognized that the mail likely contained some sort of valuable intelligence, and that getting the bags to Rosecrans headquarters should have been a priority. Instead of doing so, Wilder erroneously reported that Bragg was in Rome, Georgia, after a cursory review of the contents of the Confederate letters. On 10 September, Rosecrans was still uncertain of where Bragg's army was. In his report in the *Official Records*, Rosecrans summarized his understanding of Bragg's location. "Additional information, obtained during the afternoon and the evening of the 10th of September, rendered it certain that his [Bragg] main body had retired by the La Fayette [*sic*] road, but uncertain whether he had gone far."²⁹

Wilder's false report likely reinforced the idea that Bragg was pulling further away, instead of consolidating as he actually was. This is an issue of collection and analysis of enemy information, which is definitely not the expertise of infantry brigades. What Rosecrans would have done with the information is of course speculative, and his visualization of the enemy situation was certainly unclear at best. Getting that

Confederate mail to Rosecrans's headquarters on 10 September could have only helped clarify what the enemy was doing.

¹General Reynolds General Order No. 41, from Richard A. Baumgartner, *Blue Lightning: Wilder's Brigade in the Battle of Chickamauga* (Huntington, WV: Blue Acorn Press, 1997), 63.

²Letter from Henry Jordan to John Wilder, dated 1 August 1863.

³Smith D. Atkins, remarks at Wilder's Brigade reunion, Effingham Illinois, 17 September 1909, 4.

⁴*Ibid.*, 38, 54-55.

⁵*Ibid.*, 54-55.

⁶*Ibid.*, 4.

⁷*Ibid.*, 4.

⁸George S. Wilson, *War Talk in Kansas* (Kansas City, MO: Franklin Hudson Publishing Company, 1904), 57-59.

⁹Letter from Henry Jordan to John Wilder, dated 1 August 1863.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Steven E. Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 53.

¹²John T. Wilder, *Preliminary Movements of the Army of the Cumberland Before the Battle of Chickamauga*, U.S. Army Historical Research Collection, 1909. Rowell page 96 names the second boat *Paint Rock*.

¹³*OR*, vol 30, pt 1, 446.

¹⁴*OR*, vol 30, pt 3 164.

¹⁵*OR*, vol 30, pt 3, 365.

¹⁶J. T. Wilder, letter report to the Adjutant General, 26 November, 1888, (not in the *Official Records*), 2.

¹⁷*OR*, vol 30, pt 3, 512.

¹⁸*OR*, vol 30, pt 3, 513.

¹⁹Wilder, letter report, 2.

²⁰Wilder, "Preliminary Movements", 4.

²¹*OR*, vol 30, pt 3, 454.

²²*OR*, vol 30, pt 3, 445.

²³*OR*, vol 30, pt 1, 79.

²⁴*OR*, vol 30, pt 3, 528.

²⁵Wilder's report in the *OR* indicates his arrival at Lee and Gordon's Mills at midnight, his letter to the Adjutant General in 1888 indicates he arrived at 2:00 A.M. on 13 September.

²⁶Baumgartner, 69.

²⁷Wilder rotated the order of march for the regiments each day. Typically, the lead regiment detached a company well forward as scouts. Once pickets were driven in, the lead regiment would deploy while the others rode up quickly to get into the fight.

²⁸*OR*, vol 30, pt 3, 446.

²⁹*OR*, vol 30, pt 1, 53.

CHAPTER 4

THE BATTLE OF CHICKAMAUGA

When Rosecrans sent Wilder to Alexander's Bridge on 17 September, he was in the process of consolidating the Army of the Cumberland for a fight that he had not expected. Under the mistaken impression that Bragg's army was moving away from Chattanooga, Rosecrans over-extended his army during the break out from the Tennessee River crossing. Spread out over a sixty-mile area from Rossville, Georgia in the north to Alpine, Georgia in the south, Rosecrans hastily prepared to meet Bragg. In order to buy time to consolidate the army, Rosecrans ordered Wilder to guard the bridge over the Chickamauga Creek near the homestead of the Alexander family. The bridge there was known locally as "Alexander's Bridge". Downstream Colonel Minty's Cavalry brigade had a similar mission at Reed's Bridge (figure 6).

Wilder arrived at Alexander's Bridge on the evening of 17 September and made initial dispositions for defending the bridge. It was downhill about 500 yards from the Alexander house, former home to John P. Alexander (figure 7). A dirt lane running from the bridge back to the Lafayette road bisected the terrain on the north (Union) side of the bridge. East of the road was a recently harvested cornfield containing nothing but the short stalks of corn stubble. West of the road was a clear pasture. In the immediate vicinity of the Alexander farm, the Chickamauga Creek was unfordable except for one small ford three-quarters of a mile upstream, known as Smith's Ford. The creek's steep banks were lined with trees and thick underbrush, but generally the north side of the creek provided clear fields of fire to Wilder's men. On the south side the terrain rose

away from the creek with woods east of the Alexander Road and another cut cornfield to the west. The Alexander cabin was on a hill overlooking the fields north of the river, with a small orchard surrounding the cabin and woods behind.¹

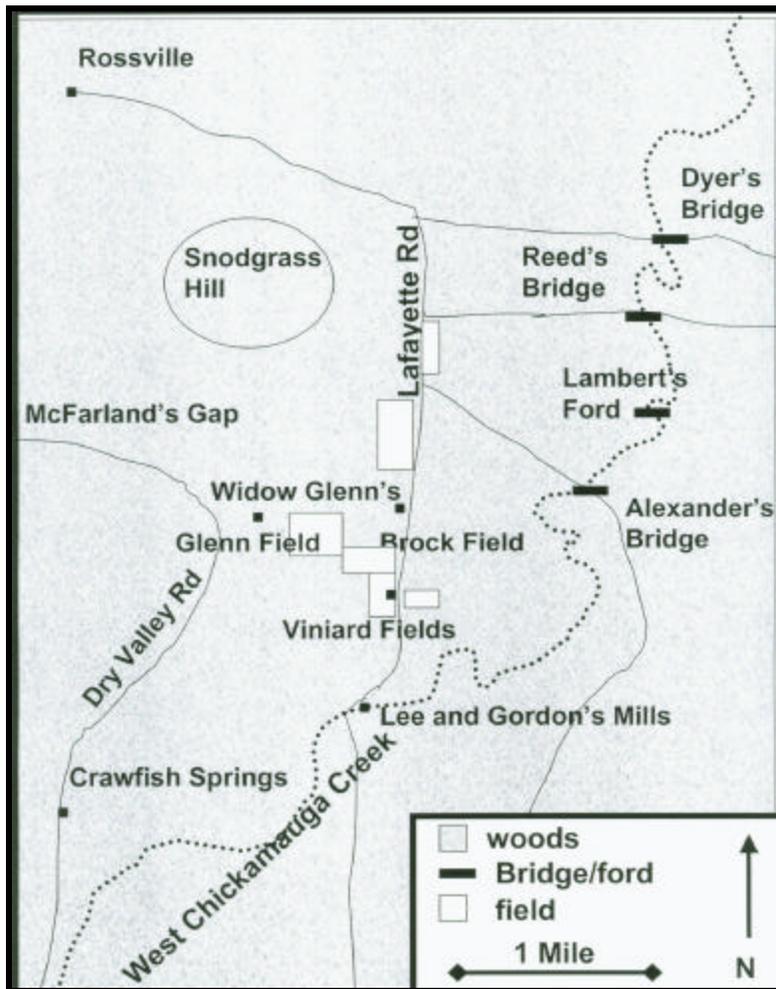


Fig. 6. Chickamauga Battlefield

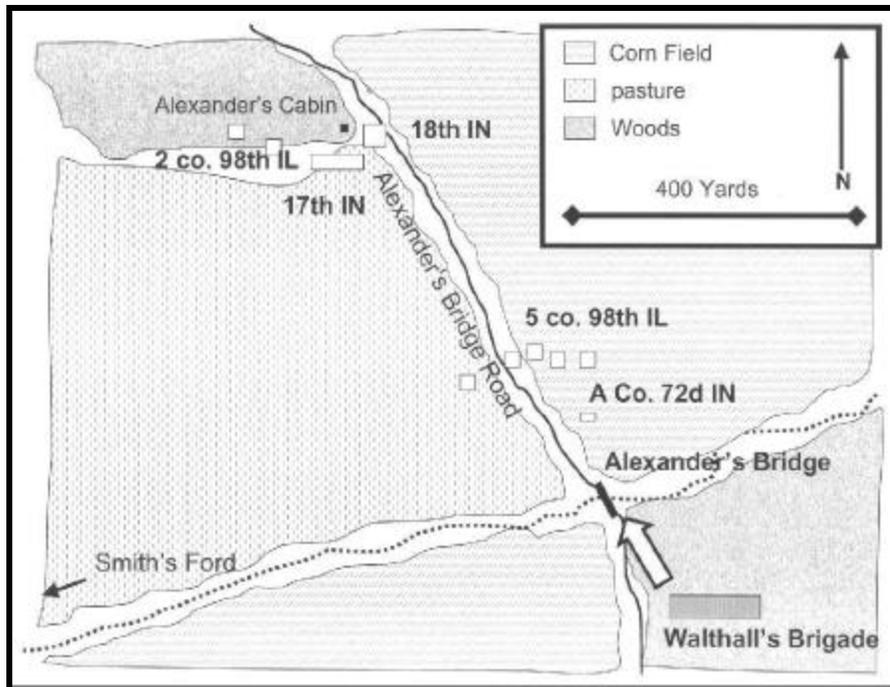


Fig. 7. Alexander's Bridge

Wilder made his brigade headquarters at the cabin with the battery there also. He directed Captain Lilly to make one section of artillery ready from the hill at Alexander's cabin. On the far right, Wilder ordered the 123d Illinois to picket the creek on the north bank, upstream from Smith's Ford. Three companies of the 98th Illinois covered Smith's Ford. Half of the 17th Indiana was deployed as pickets north of the creek. Two companies of the 72d Indiana, A and F, were sent across to the south side of the creek. The rest of the brigade was on the hill around the orchard at Alexander's cabin. The brigade passed the evening of 17 September and morning of 18 September without enemy contact. Bragg's Army was not far away however, and as the day progressed, the

Army of the Tennessee moved closer to contact with Wilder's men at Alexander's Bridge.

Bragg's intent was to move across the Chickamauga Creek at Reed's and Alexander's Bridges, swing rapidly around the Union left flank, and cut Rosecrans's escape route back to Chattanooga. First contact was made in Minty's sector, where General Forrest and General Bushrod Johnson were making progress at Reed's Bridge. Minty, with only three regiments at Reed's Bridge, was not doing well in guarding that important crossing site. He had crossed his force to the far side, and with the creek to his back, he was fighting a delaying action back to the bridge. Johnson's force was pursuing closely, preventing Minty from destroying the bridge in time. Reed's Bridge fell to Johnson's infantry, with Minty trying unsuccessfully to delay the larger force from the Union side of the creek. Realizing the situation was desperate, Minty asked Wilder for reinforcement.

Back at Alexander's Bridge things were quiet. When Wilder received Minty's request, he immediately sent a force to his aid. Wilder ordered the 123d Illinois, seven companies of the 72d Indiana, and a section of the Rodmans to help Minty. This left Wilder with two fifths of his brigade's full strength at Alexander's bridge, only the 98th Illinois, the 17th Indiana, two sections of Rodmans and A and F companies of the 72d Indiana, still on duty on the far side of the creek. The 92d Illinois was still detached with Reynolds, along with the battery's mountain howitzers.

Enemy contact at Alexander's Bridge came shortly after noon on 18 September. Elements of Brigadier General Edward C. Walthall's brigade, General St. John R. Liddell's Division, Major General William H.T. Walker's Reserve Corps burst out of the

woodline on the south side of the creek. The surprised men of A and F companies, caught with the enemy between them and the bridge, swam the creek and climbed the north bank to safety. Walthall's five regiments had had difficulty staying on line as they moved through the woods, which delayed a coordinated attack on the bridge. Lilly quickly got his two remaining sections of the battery into action, temporarily checking the Confederate advance on the bridge, and giving Wilder time to disable the bridge. The Two companies of the 72d Indiana pulled up planks from the bridge sufficient to prevent wagon traffic, and then withdrew to cover. Company A formed a firing line in position close to the bridge, using the bridge boards for cover.

Walthall managed to get a battery in place in the field south of the creek, and a brief artillery skirmish began around 1 P.M. One of the first Confederate shells landed among Lilly's men, its fuse still burning. Private Sidney Speed, an artilleryman with the 18th Indiana, bravely picked up the shell and moved it away from the battery.² By 2:00 P.M., Walthall's infantry had begun to seriously challenge Wilder's skirmishers at the bridge, so Wilder directed Colonel Funkhouser to send half of the 98th Illinois to assist the lone company from the 72d defending the bridge. The battle for the bridge progressed until General Walker directed Walthall downstream to Lambert's Ford³ about 4 P.M. During the three-hour fight, Wilder lost one killed and eight wounded, six Spencer rifles, and thirty-one horses.⁴ Remarkably, A Company, 72d Indiana sustained only two casualties, neither fatal. Walthall's men suffered 105 killed and wounded, noting in his report in the Official Records that the Spencer rifle was responsible for the great discrepancy in casualties.

After Bushrod Johnson crossed at Reed's Bridge, he continued south to secure what ground he could that night. As Johnson's Confederate forces began to envelop Wilder's tenuous position at the Alexander cabin, Wilder withdrew to the southwest. Wilder left the lone company from the 72d Indiana to cover the withdrawal of the brigade. As they left, Colonel Miller sent a runner to Company A instructing them to withdraw. Giving up their position near the bridge, the men ran back up the hill only to find thirty-one of their thirty-seven horses had been shot by the onrushing men of Johnson's Division. To the mounted troops of Company A, that was a disastrous blow. While the rest of the brigade mounted and rode to the East Viniard Field, several of the soldiers of A Company, 72d Indiana wandered in the woods trying to catch up with the brigade and did not rejoin it until the next day.

By 7:00 P.M., Wilder had reached the East Viniard Field and decided to form the brigade at the edge of the woods there. The lead brigade of Van Cleve's division, Colonel George F. Dick's brigade, Crittenden's corps, fresh from Crawfish Springs, joined Wilder on the right. As dusk approached, the men built hasty fighting positions out of fallen timber and fence posts. One final Confederate attack hit the Union line about dusk, concentrated on the 59th Ohio of Dick's brigade. As darkness fell over the battlefield, the men continued to improve their positions, and waited for dawn. Private Petzoldt from the 17th Indiana described his experience that night.

We laid down with our guns beside us. No one was allowed to go to sleep. Every one must be alert, ready to seize his gun and shoot at a moment's warning. Those of us who were lucky enough to have a few crackers in our haversacks ate them, but those who did not had to go without, for no engagement had been expected at this time, and hence no extra rations had been issued. It is hard to stay awake all night fearing every minute that the enemy will be upon you, but when to this is added an empty stomach it doubles the hardship.⁵

Wilder passed the night without further incident. As the brigade lay in the woods behind their hasty fortifications, the men could hear the movements of the Army of the Cumberland behind them.

Over the course of the past few days, Rosecrans's pursuit of a "fleeing" Bragg turned into a meeting engagement, and Rosecrans quickly made dispositions for a defense along the Lafayette--Rossville Road (hereafter Lafayette Road). Rosecrans's headquarters was in a plantation house near Crawfish Springs, a natural spring and source of water for the army. During the night, Rosecrans ordered Thomas's corps north along the Lafayette Road to secure a route back to Chattanooga for the Army. Granger's Reserve Corps was at Rossville, not on the battlefield but holding the Rossville Gap through Missionary Ridge. Crittenden's Corps was moving up the Lafayette Road from Crawfish Springs, and McCook's Corps was still closing in from McLemore's Cove.

On the other side of Chickamauga Creek, Bragg planned to turn Rosecrans's flank the next morning, and cut his army off from Chattanooga. A large portion of Bragg's army was already in the woods on the west side of the creek. Bragg was also receiving reinforcements from the Army of Northern Virginia. Several days earlier, General Robert E. Lee had dispatched General James Longstreet to Bragg's aid. With the rail lines through east Tennessee in Union hands, Longstreet was forced to take a more circuitous southern route to join Bragg. As the battle progressed through 19 September, Longstreet's forces continuously arrived on the field, but Longstreet himself did not arrive until 20 September.

During the night of 18 September, one of Wilder's aides reported that the noise on the road behind them was Thomas's corps moving onto the battlefield. Wilder had not received orders since early on 17 September, so just before dawn he left to find Thomas's headquarters. Thomas directed him to move the brigade to the West Viniard Field, and keep the Lafayette Road open to troops moving from Lee and Gordon's Mills.⁶ The guidance from Thomas put Wilder in a position overlooking the Lafayette Road, three-quarters of a mile from his position during the evening.

By mid morning the brigade was set around the East Viniard Field (figure 8) and began to wait again. The first priority for the men was to try to fortify the position, again using timber, fence rails, and anything else the men could get their hands on. Those who had food ate breakfast, and the brigade enjoyed a mail call around noon. All through the morning the men of Wilder's brigade could hear the sound of battle to the north growing in intensity. Wilder put the majority of the brigade along a wood line facing east towards the Lafayette Road. One section of the battery was at the far north end. Next to it the 98th Illinois extended the line south, followed by the 17th Indiana, the 123d Illinois, and the other two sections of the battery. The 72d Indiana anchored the southern end of the brigade facing north, forming an "L" shape to the brigade's position.

At 2:00 P.M. Brigadier General Jefferson Davis's Division of Crittenden's corps moved across Wilder's front, through the East Viniard Field and into the woods that Wilder had occupied the night before. Wilder watched the formation enter the woods and immediately heard the sounds of an engagement. Colonel Hans Heg's brigade of Davis's division was repulsed by Brigadier General John Gregg's Brigade of Bushrod Johnson's Division, forcing the Union soldiers back out into the Viniard Fields and through

Wilder's position overlooking the Lafayette Road. General Crittenden ordered Wilder to assist in the attacks he was making into the woods east of the road. In response, Wilder sent the 72d Indiana and the 123d Illinois forward. As Crittenden's forces were pushed back, Wilder's two regiments fell back to their original positions on the west field. The road was becoming a quagmire of jumbled units and artillery moving north, trying to get into the fight.

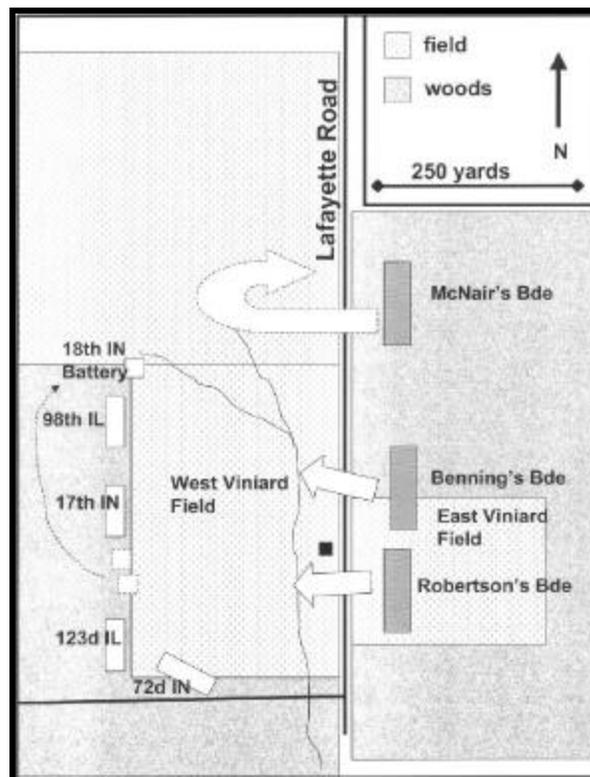


Fig. 8. Viniard Field

To Wilder's north, the Brock Field was unoccupied by Union forces. Penetrating the unguarded section of the Union line, two regiments of Brigadier General Evander McNair's Brigade, Johnson's Division crossed the Lafayette Road into the Brock Field about one hundred yards. Colonel David Coleman led the 39th North Carolina and 25th Arkansas Regiments across the road. Wilder fired on the two regiments with the one section of the battery at the north end of his position, and with the 98th Illinois and 17th Indiana. Coleman's attack was unsupported, and Wilder was engaging him from the left, so Coleman withdrew across the Lafayette Road and into the woods. Following the engagement, Lilly repositioned the other two sections of the battery to the north end of the brigade's position.

Around 4:00 P.M. two Confederate brigades emerged from the woods at the East Viniard Field, directly opposite Wilder's brigade. The two brigades were Brigadier General Jerome Robertson's and Henry Benning's of Major General John B. Hood's Division, part of Longstreet's reinforcements from Virginia. The brigades marched at the double quick across the East Viniard Field, heading straight at Wilder's position. As the Confederate line crossed the Lafayette Road, Wilder's men began firing. The massed fire from the Spencer repeaters and Lilly's cannon immediately stalled the Confederate attack, forcing Robertson's and Benning's brigades to seek cover in a ditch in the West Viniard Field, paralleling the Lafayette Road. The ditch provided good cover, and gave General Roberston a chance to send messengers to bring up some artillery to support the attack. Robertson sent three messengers and eventually went himself to muster artillery support. He managed to find a lone battery, but he was unable to convince the battery

commander to follow him.⁷ As the two Confederate brigades huddled in the ditch, a temporary stalemate existed. The ditch provided protection, so long as the attack didn't continue. Captain Lilly broke the stalemate by repositioning a part of the battery to fire down part of the ditch. Firing double canister, the Rodmans made the Confederate position in the ditch untenable, and they withdrew back across the Lafayette Road to the cover of the woodline. After the battle Wilder told a newspaper journalist "At this point it actually seemed a pity to kill men so. They fell in heaps, and I had it in my head to order the firing to cease to end the awful sight."⁸

As the afternoon wore on, Major General Philip Sheridan arrived on the field and sent a brigade under Colonel Luther Bradley across the Viniard Fields towards the woods. Following a similar course to that of Davis's men earlier, Bradley's brigade immediately made contact with the Confederates in the woods. The fire from the remnant of Benning and Robertson's Brigades wounded Bradley, and drove his brigade back across the Viniard Field. Sheridan's attack concluded the action in that part of the field on 19 September, and Wilder's men settled in for another cold, sleepless night on the battlefield.

The 92d Illinois and the howitzer section rejoined the brigade before dark, and took position on the right of the brigade. The 92d had fought earlier under General Reynolds in action in the Brotherton Field. The regiment came up from Pond Springs on the 19th, and made an attack to assist Colonel Edward King's brigade which was being overwhelmed in the woods just east of the Brotherton Field. The 92d made a temporary stand in the field, but was soon pressed back by four Confederate regiments. King's brigade had fallen back, and Atkins could not find General Reynolds, so he withdrew

from the field and moved to link up with Wilder. In the brief fight at the Brotherton Field Atkins lost twenty-five killed and wounded in addition to losing one of the howitzers.⁹

That night, Wilder attended Rosecrans's meeting to plan the defense for the next day. Rosecrans told Wilder to report to General McCook for orders, his corps having finally arrived. Wilder left the meeting before Rosecrans issued orders to the corps commanders, and thus did not fully know Rosecrans's plan for the next day. McCook's corps anchored the right flank of the Union position, and McCook placed Wilder on his right, the extreme right of the Union forces on the field.¹⁰ Thomas's corps was on the Union left, with essentially the same mission that he had earlier in the day, to hold the left side and protect the road junction leading back to Rossville. Crittenden's corps was in reserve. Bragg's plan for the 20th was to continue to envelop the Army of the Cumberland from the north. Bragg had divided his army into two wings, one in the north commanded by Polk, and one in the south commanded by Longstreet. Longstreet had arrived from Virginia that evening, taking command of troops at night on ground he had not previously seen.

Wilder's brigade spent the night where it fought at the Viniard Field. Fires were not allowed because of the proximity of the Confederate line. During the night a cold front passed over the area, dropping the temperatures unseasonably. The cold air created a fog in the morning that mixed with the heavy smoke from the battle. The cries of the wounded could be heard all night long. Sergeant McGee of the 72d Indiana wrote,

The sun now sinks behind Missionary Ridge; the vast volumes of sulphurous smoke settle down over the battle field, as a pall upon the dead and dying, and it is night--dark, gloomy, and full of horrors. The roar of the battle's bloody storm has ceased, and all is still save the wounded and dying-- these are more horrible and trying to our hearts than was the storm of battle.

McGee also described the dawn:

The sun must have been nearly an hour high, though it was scarcely light where we were, and we wondered why everything was so still behind us. Just then the smoke lifted a little and we could hear some one talking on the hill near the cabin. Looking in that direction we could see the sun about as big as a candle in the dense fog.¹¹

The position that McCook assigned to Wilder was only a few hundred yards from Rosecrans's headquarters at the Widow Glenn's house, and about a half mile from the Viniard Farm where the brigade fought the day before. At dawn on 20 September Wilder moved the brigade to its assigned sector, leaving Colonel Atkins and the 92d Illinois as a rear guard. Atkins was to fall back to the brigade when pressed by the anticipated attack in the morning. The battlefield was quiet in the early morning hours of 20 September. After Wilder placed the regiments in position, the men began to prepare rations for breakfast. The regiments were aligned on a hill running north--south. On the far left the 98th Illinois faced east across the Glenn Fields supporting Lilly's battery. On their right was the 123d Illinois, followed by the 17th Indiana. The 72d Indiana anchored the right of the brigade in the south. Colonel Miller oriented two companies, D and E, facing south to guard the brigade's right flank. Horses were taken to the rear with the number fours holding them.

Further north on the battlefield, units were shifting north toward Thomas's sector as the battle got under way. In response to the Confederate attacks attempting to turn the Union left flank, Rosecrans committed units to reinforce Thomas. At 10:45 A.M., General Rosecrans issued orders that pulled a division out of the Union line, creating a large gap of unguarded ground. The order directed General Thomas J. Wood of

Crittenden's corps to close up on Reynolds. The order was a result of misunderstood communications. Intended to strengthen the Union line, it did the opposite by creating a division-sized hole. Shortly after 11:00 A.M. General Longstreet moved his wing of the Army of Tennessee forward toward the Union line. General Bushrod Johnson's Division attacked into the sector just vacated by General Wood, penetrating the Union line deeply and starting a panic and retreat in that part of the battlefield.

On Johnson's left, Major General Thomas C. Hindman's three brigades attacked the Union right flank. Hindman attacked with two brigades forward and one in support. On the right was General Zachariah Deas's Brigade, on the left Brigadier General Arthur Manigault's, with Brigadier General Patton Anderson in the rear. Deas's attack broke through two brigades of Davis's division, entered the Dyer Field, and then struck Colonel Bernard Laiboldt's brigade of Sheridan's division. General McCook had recently ordered Sheridan to reposition to the north slightly, so as the Confederate attack advanced across the fields west of the Lafayette Road, it caught Sheridan's brigades moving in column formation before they were arranged for a defense of the attack. At the head of Sheridan's column, Laiboldt's brigade was pushed over a ridge on the west edge of the Dyer Field where Sheridan's other two brigades finally stopped Deas's attack. Hindman's left brigade met little or no resistance as it crossed the Brock Field headed towards the Glenn cabin. Watching it all from his position at the Viniard Field, Colonel Atkins mounted his regiment and withdrew towards the rest of the brigade. In his report in the *OR*, Atkins wrote,

At daylight on the 20th was ordered by Colonel Wilder to the right of his brigade. On the withdrawal of his brigade, was ordered to deploy my regiment mounted, and hold the ground he had held until pressed back, when I was to form

on the right of Wilder's brigade. Here I remained until about noon, when the enemy had completely flanked my left and were pressing up in front with their skirmishers, when I fell back, passing around a heavy force of the enemy half a mile in rear of my left. I formed three different times in falling back, and faced the enemy, but could not check his advance, and when I fell back to the position assigned on the right of Wilder's brigade it was to find the brigade already moved away.¹²

During the morning, the 39th Indiana, another Spencer-armed, mounted regiment from McCook's corps moved into position to Wilder's left in the vicinity of the Glenn cabin. McCook had recently ordered Wilder to close up on Sheridan as Sheridan shifted north.¹³ Like Sheridan, Wilder's brigade was partially formed in column as the Confederate attack drove through the open fields below. While Wilder's brigade was repositioning, Manigault's battle line became visible. Seeing Manigault's exposed flank, Wilder immediately reoriented the brigade to attack Manigault. Supported by fire from Lilly's battery and joined by the 39th Indiana, Wilder's brigade checked Manigault's attack and forced it to withdraw back to the Lafayette Road. His counterattack culminating, Wilder ordered the brigade back to the horses for ammo and water. The brigade captured forty-seven prisoners and needed to regroup.¹⁴

Casualties in Wilder's brigade for the attack were five killed, fifteen wounded including Colonel Funkhouser, and two captured. Manigault's casualties during Wilder's counter attack are difficult to ascertain because his brigade was engaged several times on 20 September and only consolidated casualty reports exist. However, from Manigault's report in the *Official Records* it is apparent that Wilder's attack routed Manigault's two left-most regiments, the 34th and 28th Alabama. Most of the captured Confederates

probably came from these two regiments. The 24th lost two company commanders in addition to other casualties.

Back on the high ground, Wilder ordered the men to get water. The 72d Indiana soon discovered that the regiment's "number fours" and the horses were gone, as well as all of Companies D and F that did not participate in the attack. During the attack, a small Confederate cavalry force had overcome them and routed the men and horses. The brigade was then occupied with managing a substantial number of prisoners, finding water to quench their thirst after the charge, and sending scouts to try to locate the 72d Indiana's lost men and horses. Lieutenant Colonel Gates P. Thruston, McCook's Chief of Staff, and a detail from the 39th Indiana took the prisoners to the rear.

Elsewhere on the battlefield the Union line was coming apart. Thomas had consolidated his defense along a "U" shaped line on Snodgrass Hill. The center and right of the Union line had broken from Longstreet's attack, forcing the units there to flee back towards Chattanooga along the Dry Valley Road. Rosecrans and staff were among the first to leave the field; they were pushed back by Johnson's Division as it poured through the gap left by Wood's division. One of the people with Rosecrans's staff was Assistant Secretary of War Charles A. Dana. Dana, former managing editor of the *New York Tribune*, had been travelling with Rosecrans's staff since early September, sent by Secretary Stanton to watch Rosecrans and report on the activities of the army. As the commanding general's headquarters fled to the rear, Dana rode south where he met Wilder near the Glenn cabin.

The meeting between Wilder and Dana is a source of considerable controversy. Most historians have relied heavily on Wilder's latest account, written forty-five years

after the battle. That version of events is suspect, and it is inconsistent with other evidence. The meeting between Wilder and Dana will be examined later in detail, but the facts not in dispute are that the two met, and immediately after Wilder left the battlefield. Following the meeting with Dana, Wilder withdrew down the Dry Valley Road, ostensibly serving as escort to the trains and conglomeration of units leaving the battlefield. At 4:30 P.M. Lieutenant Colonel Thruston met Wilder again, and ordered him to place the brigade in a line from McFarland's Gap (through Missionary Ridge) back towards Lookout Mountain. Wilder was to guard the movement of the army to the rear, and also guard Thomas's right flank.

Accounts of the meeting between Wilder and Dana differ, specifically with regard to what Wilder's next move should have been. Wilder's own accounts of the conversation vary among the three that he wrote. The common fact between them is that Wilder moved his brigade off the field after the meeting with Dana, thus removing the last organized Union unit from that part of the battlefield. Wilder's three accounts of the conversation with Dana are his report in the *Official Records*, his letter to the Adjutant General in 1888, and Wilder's *Preliminary Movements* paper written in 1908. Dana wrote his version of the conversation in an article that was printed in *McClure's Magazine* in 1898. Wilder's contention in his three versions is that he was strongly urged or directly ordered by Dana to leave the battlefield. The tone of Dana's request varies depending on the version, but the trend is that over time, Wilder's accounts leave less and less room for interpretation. In Wilder's report in the *Official Records* written on 10 November, 1863, he wrote that Dana "strongly advised me to fall back and occupy the passes over Lookout Mountain to prevent the rebel occupancy of it." Wilder also wrote that one of Wilder's

staff officers reported that Sheridan was trying to organize his division to go to the aid of Thomas, and that Sheridan advised Wilder to fall back towards Chattanooga.¹⁵ Wilder's letter to the Adjutant General in 1888 was a submission Wilder wanted added to the *Official Records*, but it never was. In it, Wilder asserted that Dana ordered him to "take my command and escort him [Dana] to Chattanooga and then take possession of Lookout Mountain and hold it." In the letter Wilder names the staff officer dispatched to General Sheridan as Lieutenant Smith. However, Wilder wrote in the 1888 letter that he had sent Lieutenant Smith to find Sheridan and ask him to support an attack against Longstreet that Wilder was planning. Lieutenant Smith's reply from Sheridan was an order instructing Wilder to "get out of there."¹⁶ In Wilder's 1908 account, he wrote that after the initial attack he formed the brigade in a square and was moving to again attack Longstreet's advance when Dana halted the attack, and adamantly demanded that Wilder discontinue the attack and fall back to Chattanooga.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, Dana's account of the encounter with Wilder differs significantly from Wilder's. His version is that Wilder asked him for orders, to which Dana replied that he did not have the authority to issue orders, but advised that Wilder go towards Thomas. Dana says he then left for Chattanooga by himself.¹⁸ As time removed Wilder from the battle more and more, three trends emerge in his writing about the Dana incident. First, Dana's request for Wilder to leave became more and more authoritative. Second, Sheridan was credited with additional instructions for Wilder to leave the field. Lastly, what ever Wilder planned to do evolved into an elaborate plan that was already underway when Dana arrived.

As Sergeant George Wilson, 17th Indiana, wrote in 1891, what Wilder could have accomplished had he attacked is speculative. The idea that Wilder had formed a square

and commenced an attack is reminiscent of Napoleonic tactics, and is undoubtedly false. None of the reports of Wilder's regimental commanders mention such an event, even though it would have been a remarkable and noteworthy thing to the Civil War commanders, and almost certainly would have merited inclusion in their official reports. Nor do any diary accounts mention the attack. A more likely scenario is that Colonel Wilder, unsure of the situation but possessing several reports of a routed army, acted according to suggestions from Sheridan and Dana and left the field. Only after Wilder came to understand more of the broader situation could he rewrite his account to give himself plausible deniability that he did anything that could be seen as a tactical error or worse, cowardly.

Wilder's brigade's participation in the battle of Chickamauga is noteworthy as much for what it didn't do as for what it did. At times brilliantly employed and dramatically successful, it was at other times underutilized and virtually forgotten. How the brigade performed across that spectrum was a function of Rosecrans's employment of the brigade, Wilder's individual performance as a commander, and the importance of the Spencer rifles.

Initially during the battle, Rosecrans's orders to Wilder were perfectly matched to the brigade's capabilities. Later on 19 and 20 September, however, Rosecrans seemed to lose track of Wilder's brigade. Consequently, the missions assigned to Wilder on those days were ill-conceived, static afterthoughts. Rosecrans's orders to Wilder on 17 September to secure Alexander's Bridge took advantage of both the brigade's mobility and its firepower. That mission called for Wilder's brigade to move well out in front of the army and prevent the enemy from crossing the Chickamauga there. The mobility of

Wilder's horses combined with the firepower of the Spencer rifles made the mission ideally suited to the brigade, and it accomplished the task fully. When Wilder withdrew from the bridge on 18 September, it was because Bushrod Johnson's men flanked Wilder, not because of Walthall's frontal attacks against the bridge. General Walker's redirection of Walthall's Brigade to Lambert's Ford is a testament to the success of Wilder's defense.

Following Wilder's withdrawal to the Viniard Fields on the night of 18 September, Rosecrans was fully involved with positioning his entire army on the field in preparation for the next day. He understandably had more important concerns than contemplating the employment of a solitary infantry brigade. Unfortunately for Rosecrans, the current command structure had Wilder working as an army-level asset. Wilder's last orders came from Rosecrans, so on the night of 18 September, he likely considered his brigade to still be operating as an independent element of the Army of the Cumberland. On the morning of 19 September, Wilder deferred to Thomas, his corps commander but not necessarily his tactical commander at the time. Thomas's orders for Wilder to occupy the west Viniard Field and keep the road open were perhaps not the ideal mission for Wilder's brigade that day. Rather than take advantage of Wilder's mobility, the mission put Wilder in a static defense. Thomas, like Rosecrans, probably did not give much thought to the order. It was likely the first thought that came to Thomas without a great deal of deliberate consideration.

Similarly, Wilder's mission for 20 September near the Glenn cabin was poorly planned. On the 20th Rosecrans attached Wilder to McCook's corps, a deferment of the tactical question of how to employ Wilder down to a corps commander. As on the 19th, Wilder received static mission orders despite being the most mobile infantry brigade on

the battlefield. McCook's order to Wilder to defend the right flank also lacked foresight, and seems poorly thought through.

Given the missions he had, Wilder's brigade on all three days performed well. Wilder placed his regiments and the battery well, and he successfully combined the fire from the infantry with that of the battery. Combined with a good disposition with respect to terrain, Wilder's brigade won its engagements, both in defense and in the attack.¹⁹ Captain Lilly's battery did exceptional work on all three days. The volunteers of his 18th Indiana Battery could not have done more to contribute to the engagements. Their capability to execute the various artillery drills was unsurpassed by all accounts. The Spencer rifles were again validated as superior infantry weapons, as they had been at Hoover's Gap. They worked virtually without flaw, and the brigade did not needlessly waste the ammunition for its repeaters.

One notable exception to the brigade's performance in battle is that they were plagued by difficulties with the horse-holder concept. The consolidated herd of horses from the brigade must have been a large and tempting target to Confederate soldiers because throughout the battle Wilder's horses were stampeded or shot. At Alexander's Bridge, Company A, 72d Indiana lost virtually all of its horses. Interestingly, the company had left the horses tied up, rather than keep twenty-five percent of the able bodies back holding them. On the 19th Colonel Atkins had similarly elected to tie his horses, but after its fight at the Brotherton Field, The 92d Illinois found that many of Reynolds's dismounted infantry had "borrowed" the horses in the panicked flight from the field. Again on the 20th the horses succumbed to Confederate raiding the rear when

the 72d Indiana temporarily lost all of its horses, despite leaving two full companies to guard them.

Despite winning the battles he was in, Wilder's personal performance at Chickamauga must be criticized in one important area. After he left Alexander's Bridge, Wilder's appreciation for the "big picture" was poor. Wilder's failure to seek guidance from Rosecrans or to offer suggestions for the employment of his brigade on 19 and 20 September reveal an interesting window into Wilder's character. Wilder seemed content when left alone, with or without an appropriate mission. Listening to Thomas's corps moving on the Lafayette Road the night of 18 September, Wilder had no idea what was going on around him. In his report in the *Official Records*, he described sending scouts to find Thomas in the morning, but he apparently did not attempt to contact Rosecrans, much less ride to the headquarters himself. Given the mission to defend the Lafayette Road on the 19th, Wilder must have thought it inconsistent with his capabilities. His horses held in the rear, Wilder was not in a position to influence much beyond the Viniard Fields. The dramatic effect of the Spencers and Lilly's key movements of the battery on 19 September certainly stopped Hood's attack, but they also overshadow the important question of what Wilder should have been doing. Wilder could have questioned his orders, and suggested a mission that would have taken advantage of the brigade's mobility. Instead, he seemed content to have breakfast and mail call while the left side of the Union line was growing more and more heavily engaged.

Confusion and uncertainty are always present on battlefields, and certainly brigade commanders at Chickamauga can be excused for not knowing what was happening all over the battlefield at any given time. What cannot be excused is failure to

at least attempt to understand the situation. Wilder's revisionist writing of the last day of the battle seems to be a cover for what probably became an embarrassing truth--he had left the field with a healthy brigade while a desperate battle was still being fought. Why he would do that is symptomatic of his preference to operate independently and be left alone, a trait totally incongruent with the responsibilities of a commander of men in battle.

¹*Atlas of the battlefields of Chickamauga, Chattanooga and vicinity*. Published under the direction of Daniel S. Lamont and Russell A. Alger, Secretaries of War. Washington, Government. Printing. Office., 1896-7.

²*OR*, vol 30, pt 3, 466, Henry Campbell's diary, Letters published in *The Soldier of Indiana in the War for the Union*, vol. 2, (Indianapolis: Merrill and Company, 1869).

³Also called Byram's Ford.

⁴McGee, 169. *OR*, vol 30, pt 1, 458.

⁵Baumgartner, 125, from Theodore Petzoldt, "My War Story" copy of typed reminiscences, Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park (CCNMP) library, 101.

⁶Wilder, letter report.

⁷Baumgartner, 143.

⁸*Ibid.*, 144.

⁹*OR*, vol. 30, pt. 1, 456.

¹⁰*OR*, vol. 30, pt. 1, 445.

¹¹McGee, 180, 184.

¹²*OR*, vol. 30, pt. 1, 456.

¹³*OR*, vol. 30, pt. 1, 448.

¹⁴*OR*, vol. 30, pt. 2, 291.

¹⁵*OR*, vol. 30, pt. 1, 449.

¹⁶Wilder, letter report.

¹⁷Wilder, *Preliminary Movements*.

¹⁸Baumgartner, 182, from Charles A. Dana, "Reminiscences of Men and Events of the Civil War," part IV, *McClure's Magazine* vol. 10, (February 1898): 352-353.

¹⁹Wilder's performance at Alexander's Bridge should be considered a success although Confederate forces drove him from the field. The forces Rosecrans put at the Chickamauga Creek on 17 September could never have been expected to hold off Bragg's army indefinitely. Rather, Minty and Wilder were expected to buy time for the Union corps to get to the battlefield. Wilder's defense of the bridge delayed its use by the Confederates for at least five hours, judging conservatively. Only when pressed by Johnson's force did Wilder prudently concede his position.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In slightly more than a half a year, Wilder's brigade transformed from a typical volunteer infantry brigade into the most capable brigade in the Army of the Cumberland. During the 1863 campaigns the brigade did a lot of scouting, performed some traditional infantry operations such as attack and defend, and it even conducted a special operation in the feint along the Tennessee River. Wilder's brigade was constantly active, but its actions did not necessarily support Rosecrans's plans. This chapter will analyze how well the leadership in the Army of the Cumberland employed the brigade, what additional contributions the brigade could have made, and why it was not used in an offensive capacity more often. Further, the chapter will examine Colonel Wilder's own performance, and to what extent the new technology enhanced the effectiveness of the brigade.

The leadership of the Army of the Cumberland did not employ Wilder's brigade as effectively as it could have. The analysis of how well the leadership of the army used Wilder's brigade is essentially an analysis of how well Rosecrans used it. Although at times Wilder did not report straight to Rosecrans, the army commander was almost always directly involved in the planning for the brigade. Only rarely was a subordinate commander given complete tactical control over Wilder. Even then, Wilder was often reporting directly to Rosecrans. Rosecrans's original concept for Wilder's brigade was augmentation of his cavalry force, ostensibly to interdict Confederate cavalry raids on his line of supply to Louisville. From the beginning of the transformation however, Wilder

viewed his role as mobile infantry.¹ In fact, he took steps to ensure that his brigade was not confused with cavalry, even to the extent of removing the yellow stripes from the cavalry pants his men wore. That disconnect from the beginning echoes throughout the 1863 campaign season as Wilder's missions span the spectrum from cavalry scouting & raids, through special purpose tasks, to defending against regular infantry attacks. The unfortunate result of the wide array of things that Wilder's brigade could do was that Wilder became increasingly an independent operator, who at times lost sight of the role he played for the commander of the Army of the Cumberland.

During the initial mounting effort in the winter and early spring of 1863, Wilder's brigade naturally was well occupied with foraging for horses. Aside from a necessary function, the men enjoyed roaming the countryside in their foraging expeditions.² It got them out of camp, and provided a new adventure every day. Thus the initial functions of the brigade were self-sustaining scouting missions. As the brigade became more and more fully mounted, Rosecrans put them to work seeking out enemy to the Army's front. The brigade made several probes of the area between the camps of the Army of the Cumberland and the Army of Tennessee. These missions can best be described as raids because the typical outcome was destruction of rail lines, cotton, food stores, etc. Although Confederate cavalry was encountered often in these raids, no decisive engagements ever occurred. Interdicting the cavalry was exactly what Rosecrans wanted, and indeed emphasized in mission orders. Wilder did not see it that way, boasting instead of success determined by numbers of horses seized or supplies destroyed.³

The Tullahoma Campaign marked a transition for Wilder's brigade. Shifting from its cavalry-style raids, the brigade led Reynolds's division in the movement to Hoover's

Gap, which was likely to involve decisive engagement with the enemy. Wilder's role during the morning hours of 24 June was interestingly more similar to a cavalry role than infantry. The brigade led the advance, intended to gain contact with the enemy and report back while the rest of Reynolds's division and Thomas's corps developed the situation.⁴ As the day progressed and the situation rapidly changed, Wilder's brigade established a defense, performing a traditional infantry role. As Bate's Brigade attacked, Wilder defended the hills like regular infantry. Within a few days however, first Reynolds and then Rosecrans put Wilder back into a scouting/raiding role. He spent the remainder of the Tullahoma Campaign working the flanks and rear of the Bragg's army, tearing up rail line and attempting to slow the Confederate withdrawal.

Following the respite after the Tullahoma Campaign, Rosecrans gave Wilder's brigade its most unorthodox mission, that of feigning river crossing operations along the Tennessee River. Along with Minty's, Hazen's, and Wagner's brigades, Wilder operated well out front, semi-independently. Some of the tasks performed were unusual and imaginative, but they were nonetheless crucial to Rosecrans's deception plan for the river crossing. The mission was ideally suited to Wilder. It let him do what he did best, work independently and use his ingenuity. After crossing the river, Wilder's brigade again assumed a scouting role, probing out from Chattanooga. As the two armies drew towards each other at the Chickamauga battlefield, Wilder was again given a cavalry mission, that of guarding forward of the army (Alexander's Bridge) to provide time for Rosecrans to consolidate his army. In the last two days of the battle, Wilder's missions were again normal infantry missions of defend and attack.

Rosecrans wanted to personally direct Wilder's brigade and often did so, but with negative consequences. During lulls in the action, Rosecrans was able to treat the brigade as an independent cavalry unit and issue good orders to Wilder. But Wilder's brigade was too small for Rosecrans to manage when the army got busy. Leaving Wilder under the control of a subordinate corps or division commander probably would have served Rosecrans better, and in fact he did so on at least two occasions. Rosecrans attached the brigade to Crittenden's corps following the Tennessee River crossing, and to McCook's corps on the last day of fighting at Chickamauga. When Rosecrans had Wilder working directly subordinate to him, Wilder was put in a very independent role. That was problematic during the cavalry-style raids that Wilder did, because he was not fulfilling the task given to him by Rosecrans of interdicting the Confederate cavalry. Wilder was not a trained military professional, and perhaps he just didn't understand what the army commander wanted him to do. The tone of Wilder's reports on his raids is one of pride in a job well done, leading to the conclusion that he thought he was doing what he was supposed to do. But Wilder wasn't fighting Confederate cavalry, so in his independence, he was failing Rosecrans, and unfortunately Rosecrans seems to have done little to correct that problem.

The dilemma of what role Wilder's brigade was best suited for was compounded by the command structure within which Wilder operated. As much as the missions changed, the chain of command changed more. Wilder alternately worked directly for Rosecrans, subordinate to his division commander, attached to other corps, or within other command structures as was the case along the Tennessee River in late August/early September. Again, who exactly Wilder worked for was a source of disagreement and

even irritation in Reynolds's case. The result of all of the turmoil in the command and control of Wilder's brigade manifested itself at Chickamauga on 19 and 20 September. When Wilder left Alexander's Bridge, he did not seek new orders. Wilder's last orders came from Rosecrans, but events made direct control by Rosecrans unrealistic. Rosecrans was far too busy to direct the brigade himself, and unfortunately he did not delineate a subsequent command relationship for Wilder until the night of 19 September. Defaulting to his independent character, Wilder remained primarily independent on the last two days of fighting. On 20 September Rosecrans directed Wilder to report to McCook,⁵ theoretically fixing the command and control problem of the previous day. However, McCook had never previously worked with Wilder and probably had no more of an idea as to how best to use the brigade than anybody else did. As a result, McCook stuck Wilder at the end of the line to "hold the flank", an important task, but one that did not take advantage of the mobility of the brigade.⁶

This analysis presupposes that Wilder's brigade could have contributed more during the 1863 campaigns than it did. Indeed, several times during the campaign season Wilder missed opportunities to contribute to Rosecrans's overall plans. While any supposition about what Wilder could have done is speculative, it is possible to weigh Wilder's actions against what his guidance was and make assessments with some certainty. Numerous examples exist to suggest failures on Wilder's part when his actions are analyzed in light of his orders. Specifically, opportunities were lost in never decisively engaging the Confederate cavalry, failing to delay Bragg's withdrawal in the Tullahoma Campaign, and in not properly tasking the brigade at Chickamauga.

Wilder could have more aggressively sought engagement with Confederate cavalry. Wilder rarely had pitched battles with the Confederate cavalry, and he certainly never dealt it a decisive blow. Yet that was the role that prompted the transformation of the brigade in January and February. Rosecrans granted permission for Wilder to mount the brigade in February specifically to deal with what Rosecrans perceived as an inferior cavalry force. The formative experience that led to the mounting was Morgan's raids into Kentucky in December 1862/January 1863, leaving Rosecrans with a desire for more cavalry, and Wilder the idea to mount his infantry. It naturally follows then that once Wilder's brigade was effectively mounted, it would attempt to interdict the Confederate cavalry threatening the Union rear area. That never really occurred despite Rosecrans's concern over his line of supply. Wilder's spring raids were in his mind aimed at attacking Confederate resources, not the Confederate cavalry. Rosecrans's orders for the raid at McMinnville clearly showed his intent to fight and destroy the cavalry, and in fact the order has a tone of impatience for a decisive engagement.

Wilder certainly had ample opportunity to engage Confederate cavalry forces. His reports of the raiding mention numerous encounters with the enemy. Typically as the brigade approached a town it encountered some force stationed to protect whatever supplies were located there. Wilder wrote of repulsing the Confederate cavalry and destroying cotton, rail lines, etc. as if merely forcing the Confederate cavalry to leave was sufficient to meet Rosecrans's intent. On the contrary, failing to engage the forces when he had a chance merely meant that the threat to the Union supply line still existed, and did nothing to ensure that the threat was reduced.

One of the most unfortunate (for the Union) missed opportunities was Wilder's balking at attacking the Confederate river-crossing operation over the Elk River in June. When Bragg withdrew the Army of Tennessee from Tullahoma, he was moving the bulk of the army across the Elk River by the railroad bridge at Estill Springs, Tennessee.⁷ The rain that began on 24 June had continued through the 27th, swelling the river to the extent that it was unfordable, except at key crossing sites. One of those, and the only good option Bragg had, was the railroad bridge at Estill Springs. As Bragg was withdrawing, Rosecrans told Wilder to get in the rear of Bragg's army and disrupt his withdrawal. Rosecrans's orders to Wilder specified destruction of the railroad in Bragg's rear, and by logical extension then that bridge became the key place for Wilder to focus his effort. Disrupting the river crossing at that bridge would have been far more damaging to Bragg than breaking the rail line on dry land. Tearing up rail line over land was an irritant to Bragg, but it never significantly slowed him to the point where he had to change his plan.⁸ His engineers would quickly repair the damaged line and then operations along that section of line would resume. Destroying a key railroad bridge however would necessitate rebuilding a bridge, a very time consuming and difficult task, as Rosecrans learned in September.

Later at Chickamauga, Wilder's brigade again could have contributed more to the Union effort. Wilder's brigade could have given the Army of the Cumberland a mobile reserve to rapidly respond to the changing situation. After leaving Alexander's Bridge however, the brigade was a committed, static force instead. Holding Wilder's brigade in reserve would have allowed Rosecrans or a subordinate commander to use it where needed either to reinforce success or shore up weakness in the line. On both 19 and 20

September there was a need for such flexibility. The Union effort on both days can be described as rapidly trying to adjust a line of defense by shifting units in order to arrange the strongest possible defense (guard the route back to Chattanooga). Of all the units on the field, Wilder's was the most mobile infantry, yet it did less moving around than many dismounted infantry units. If the brigade had been used as a mobile reserve, it could have rapidly attacked when Rosecrans needed it the most.

Throughout the 1863 campaigns the brigade didn't attack often. The attack on Manigault's Brigade on 20 September is really the only time that it did conduct an attack.⁹ This is curious given the brigade's firepower. Logically one could assume that Rosecrans would have tried to use Wilder's firepower in the offense. Two scenarios exist where Wilder could have attacked more. One is seeking engagement with and attacking Confederate cavalry as explained above; the other is putting the brigade into an attack on 19 or 20 September at Chickamauga.

If Wilder's brigade had been kept in reserve at Chickamauga, it would have been available to attack rapidly and reinforce success along the line. However, that would have required a clear command and control structure to identify the time and place for Wilder to attack. Who would have orchestrated such an attack is uncertain because a clear-cut command and control structure was not in place. Wilder theoretically was still working for Rosecrans on 19 September, but Rosecrans was busy maneuvering corps and had no time to ponder an appropriate role for a single brigade. At his council of war on the night of 19 September, Rosecrans potentially corrected the command issue by attaching Wilder to McCook, and in fact the next day Wilder did conduct the attack on Manigault's Brigade. Wilder's attack on Manigault was perhaps not decisive in that it did not

significantly alter the course of events that day. Rosecrans and Thomas however did credit Wilder with delaying Longstreet's attack on Snodgrass Hill,¹⁰ although a more likely explanation for that delay was Longstreet's lack of a plan for subsequent movement after his initial penetration of the Union line. If the attacks in McCook's sector were not decisive, then perhaps Wilder should have been attached to one of the other corps commanders. Thomas was arguably the key to the Union position in that he tenuously held the road junction leading back to Rossville and Chattanooga. Armed with a mobile reserve, Thomas could have perhaps used Wilder to counterattack on 20 September, buying time to reposition other forces or secure the route to the rear.

The majority of the literature on Wilder and his brigade characterize Wilder as an infallible asset to the army, an audacious leader and a brilliant tactician. Samuel C. William's biography *General John T. Wilder* published in 1936 laid a foundation which other historians borrowed from, painting the heroic image of Wilder. Glenn W. Sunderland's *Wilder's Lightning Brigade* published in 1969 continues the theme but imparts to Wilder almost mythic qualities as a great leader. Richard A. Baumgartner's *Blue Lightning* published in 1997 echoes many of the same trends, although it is more critical of Wilder leaving the field at Chickamauga. Some veterans of the brigade wrote histories that also painted Wilder in very complimentary light, such as Atkins's *History of the 92d Illinois*, and W. H. H. Benefiel's *History of the 17th Indiana Volunteers*. Wilder's own paper "Preliminary movements of the Army of the Cumberland" contains a good bit of self-praise through revisionist history. While Wilder certainly does merit credit in many ways, he was more fallible than his biographers claim.

Historians appropriately document Wilder's ingenuity in mounting and arming the brigade. He was unquestionably an innovator with the charisma to get his way. He was also quite capable of maneuvering and fighting his brigade.¹¹ Yet after a few days of riding on a mission, Wilder would often lose his sense of how his brigade fit into Rosecrans's plans. Military commanders must understand the larger plan, and how their actions will fit into that plan. Unity of effort has always been an essential attribute to successful military operations. By synchronizing the effects of all of the pieces of an operation, the combined effects become more decisive. When he was fresh from a break in the action, Wilder demonstrated an ability to see Rosecrans's intent clearly and his decisions supported Rosecrans's overarching objectives. At Hoover's Gap, Wilder keenly perceived the situation once he cleared the defile, and by securing the gap he facilitated the movement of Thomas's corps. At Alexander's Bridge Wilder was again fresh off a few days rest, and his defense of the bridge until late in the afternoon bought Rosecrans valuable time to close in on the battlefield. However, as Wilder led the brigade in extended operations, his ability to support Rosecrans's plan diminished. Three examples of this are Wilder's failure to seize upon the significance of the Confederate river-crossing of the Elk River during the Tullahoma campaign, his delay in reporting the intelligence from the Confederate mail seized at Tyner's Station, and his complacency at Chickamauga.

Wilder had opened the Tullahoma Campaign with a brilliant display of tactical acumen in understanding Rosecrans's intent at Hoover's Gap. After several days of hard riding however, Wilder would let an equally significant opportunity pass him by. Bypassing the bridge at Estill Springs, Wilder overlooked a key place to strike Bragg's

withdrawing army and instead chose a much less significant place to disrupt the rail line. Wilder reconnoitered the Elk River from Estill Springs to Pelham,¹² so he clearly knew where Bragg could cross and where he could not. He also sent a regiment to Estill Springs, the 123d Illinois. When Colonel Monroe reported the heavy Confederate troop concentration at Estill Springs, Wilder told Monroe to pull back and follow the rest of the brigade crossing up river at Pelham, leaving the Confederate river crossing operation unimpeded. Instead of realizing the significance of the Estill Springs choke point, Wilder was intent on crossing the Elk at Pelham in order to get at the railroad between Estill Springs and Cowan, south of the river.

To be sure, interdicting the massed Confederate forces at Estill Springs would have been a much more complex operation than Wilder's chosen course of action. Colonel Monroe's report of a division of infantry on the trains suggested the crossing was heavily guarded, but it also confirmed the strategic value of the crossing site. Wilder did not have soldiers trained in demolition with him, and he may have assessed the destruction of the bridge as beyond his means. However, once Wilder had crossed at Pelham, it is quite likely that with his battery alone he could have destroyed some rail cars full of troops, disrupted the Confederate withdrawal, and at least damaged or weakened the bridge. Instead Wilder chose a much less significant place to disrupt the track. By the letter of Rosecrans's order ("break the railroad in the rear of Tullahoma"), both courses of action accomplish the task, but to drastically different degrees. His chosen course of action merely created an annoyance for Bragg,¹³ not the significant blow of potentially splitting the Army of Tennessee along the banks of the Elk River.

The incident involving the Confederate mailbag that the 123d Illinois seized at Tyner's Station was another occasion when Wilder failed to see how his actions would affect the Army of the Cumberland. Wilder got the mail late on 10 September, after two days spent crossing the Tennessee River. This occurred during a time when the situation was still very unclear. Wilder wrote long after the battle that the various letters in the bag contained enough information to reveal Bragg's plan to reinforce, consolidate, and attack Rosecrans. Wilder wrote that the mail contained "...information that Walker was coming from Jackson, Miss., with ten thousand re-armed Vicksburg prisoners, and that Longstreet was on his way from Virginia with his corps of twenty-three thousand men to aid Bragg in destroying Rosecrans's army."¹⁴ If true, then the information would have been valuable to Rosecrans. Wilder refers to the mail in two pieces of correspondence in the *OR*. In a report to Crittenden dated 7:00 P.M. 10 September he informs Crittenden of the seizure of the mailbag. Only an hour later, after a cursory inspection of the contents, he wrote Crittenden again that the contents of the mail indicated that Bragg was in Rome, Georgia.¹⁵ Rosecrans thought that Bragg was withdrawing to the south, moving away from Chattanooga, when in fact Bragg was consolidated near Gordon's Mills and moving to attack him. Whether or not a more timely report of the information would have altered the course of events is irrelevant; Wilder should have immediately recognized the Confederate mail as valuable intelligence, and sent it by messenger to Rosecrans's headquarters on the 10th. It is not clear that Wilder ever accurately reported the contents of the mail, despite he claims to have done so on 14 September.¹⁶ Rosecrans was still uncertain of Bragg's location, and Wilder was not sent to guard Alexander's Bridge until 17 September.

This blunder occurred after several days of activity. The feint along the Tennessee River was a sustained, low intensity engagement with the Confederate cavalry on the opposite bank, followed by a two-day river crossing for the brigade. The constant level of intensity must have taken a toll on the men, and perhaps especially the man in charge. Whether from fatigue or ignorance, Wilder's oversight of the potential value of the mailbag is indicative that he didn't understand how significant it would have been to Rosecrans. Writing in 1908, Wilder infers that the mailbag was taken just prior to his meeting with Rosecrans on the morning of the 13 September. Other evidence clearly indicates that the mail was obtained by a detachment of the 123d Illinois three days earlier.¹⁷ Wilder's revisionist writing seems to be a recognition of the error in holding the mail so long by retelling the story as if he immediately recognized the value of the intelligence and quickly got word to Rosecrans. Indeed, Wilder seems to have correctly assessed his error in not rapidly forwarding the information.

Wilder's complacency would again surface late on 18 September. As Wilder settled into a defensive position at the East Viniard Field following the fight at Alexander's Bridge, he made no effort to contact Rosecrans's headquarters. Wilder's existing orders were to guard Alexander's Bridge, and that mission had clearly come to an end. As the evening wore on Wilder could hear movements along the Lafayette Road, indicating that Rosecrans had further developed the situation since Wilder last saw him. Not until just before dawn did Wilder attempt to learn the new disposition of the army, and then it was through Thomas, although Wilder's last orders had come directly from Rosecrans with no indication that he ought report back to Thomas.

Tired, hungry, and probably scared, Wilder waited passively for at least eight hours before he sought new orders. Then, instead of going to Rosecrans he sought orders from Thomas. The result of that course of events put Wilder in a static position in the West Viniard Field for the fight on 19 September, a convenient though arguably poor location for Wilder's brigade. The static position at the Viniard Field did not take advantage of Wilder's mobility, which would have been beneficial in the fluid battle lines at Chickamauga. Nor was it a decision based on where best to utilize the firepower of the Spencer rifles. Amidst the daunting effort of consolidating the three corps in the night, Wilder's single brigade was simply, yet quite understandably, forgotten by Rosecrans. Lacking orders, Wilder had a responsibility to report to Rosecrans, Garfield, or someone at the army headquarters for guidance. Rosecrans's headquarters was likely a flurry of activity all through the night, but Wilder surely could have done something to see that his brigade was appropriately employed the following day. Rosecrans might have assigned Wilder to the right flank in a static role as Thomas had, but at least then the order would have come from the army commander.

Wilder had done such a good job at Alexander's Bridge that his complacency later at Chickamauga is curious. Prior to leaving the bridge, Wilder had executed Rosecrans's intent well. He had arrayed his forces to defend the important crossing site, and denied it to the enemy for the better part of a day. Wilder seemingly understood what Rosecrans was trying to do, why he had the mission to guard the bridge, and how that fit into the overall plan. Wilder then executed the mission well, until forced back by overwhelming forces. At that point Wilder's mission was complete; he had finished the job and lacked further guidance. Instead of seeking orders, Wilder got caught up in the

skirmishing that wore on into the evening. Overnight at the Viniard Field Wilder transitioned from a prescient, proactive commander to a distracted subordinate who had lost sight of the big picture.

For the next two days of the battle the trend in Wilder's focus continued. At the West Viniard Field he exhibited skill at deploying the brigade and repositioning to meet the Confederate attacks by Coleman, Robertson, and Benning. However, he made no effort to find Rosecrans and suggest a more appropriate role for the brigade. Wilder seemed content to occupy his defensive position at the Viniard Field, almost oblivious to what the rest of the army was doing. The following day after the attack on Manigault's Brigade, Wilder had lost comprehension of how the battle was taking shape and what Rosecrans's intent was. His account of the meeting with Dana and the preparations for another attack seem more like a cover for an embarrassing blunder than anything else. Wilder got so involved with what was going on in his sector of the battlefield that he lost understanding of the battle around him. Lacking any clear picture of where he could influence the fight, leaving the field seemed like the best thing to do at the time.

Wilder's failures have been lost in the legacy of the brigade and its successes. The synergy of mounting the brigade and arming it with repeating rifles was destined to be influential and significant. What Wilder left for history after his brief nine months of brigade command was the validation of the repeating rifle as an infantry weapon. Wilder had a prescient sense about the Spencer rifle, and he was absolutely right about its value. In every way the rifle was a success. It was robust enough to work in a field environment, it was accurate, and lethal. The army supply system adequately kept the brigade supplied with ammunition, and the soldiers did not waste it as Ripley had feared. Following the

success of Hoover's Gap, the Ordnance Department increased its request for Spencers, and eventually armed several brigades with them by 1865.

Despite its success on the battlefield, the Spencer was not a decisive weapon during the war. Too few were purchased too late to make a real impact to speed the resolution of the war. Had the Ordnance Bureau been more forward looking, the vast industrial capability of the Union could have probably produced sufficient quantities of repeating rifles early in the war. The Spencer was patented in 1861, and the Henry earlier still. Yet the untested technology combined with armories already tooled up to make Springfields kept the Spencer from having a greater role in the Civil War.¹⁸

The other piece of "technology" of the brigade was its horses. Wilder's horses turned out to be much more problematic than anticipated. Scrounging for animals occupied the brigade for months, to the extent that it did little else. Many of the men in the brigade were "equine illiterate," and had to learn basic horsemanship before they could perform mounted maneuvers. The brigade borrowed mounted tactics from the cavalry, but the concept of dismounting and leaving horse holders was never quite mastered by the brigade. During the three days of fighting at Chickamauga, the regiments tried various means of dealing with their mounts while in action, none of which seemed to work well. Whether tied and left unattended or sent to the rear with the "number fours," the horses were often engaged by the enemy and killed or routed. Despite the problems, the horses provided the most dramatic capability enhancement to the brigade. It was the mobility of it that facilitated its successes more than the Spencers.

The study of Wilder's brigade over the course of the 1863 campaigns points to an important lesson for armies as they incorporate new technology. The struggle that the

leadership of the Army of the Cumberland had in implementing Wilder's brigade was not a nineteenth-century struggle, but a timeless one that must be dealt with by all armies in any century. It is essentially a dilemma of incorporating new capability into existing doctrine or standard methods of fighting. Indeed, history is replete with examples of new armies floundering with new technology as they learn to take advantage of advanced weapons or systems. For the Army of the Cumberland, incorporating Wilder's brigade was often awkward and at times ineffectual. Future commanders face the same struggle unless a concerted effort is made to clearly identify doctrinal gaps that new technologies will fill, command and control issues related to the change, and most of all ensuring that the implementation of the new capability facilitates the commander's plan.

¹Samuel C. Williams, *General John T. Wilder* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1936), 16.

²George S. Wilson, "Wilder's Brigade of Mounted Infantry in the Tullahoma-Chickamauga Campaigns," a paper read before the Kansas commandery of the MOLLUS, 4 November, 1891.

³*OR*, vol. 23, pt. 1 201-203.

⁴*Ibid.*, 430, 454.

⁵*OR*, vol. 30, pt. 1, 488.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*OR*, vol. 23, pt. 1, 583.

⁸*Ibid.*, 584.

⁹Although the action at Hoover's Gap initially seems offensive in nature, Wilder's action was more a tactical movement to a defense than an attack. The movement to the gap was unopposed, the movement through the gap was only lightly resisted, and the fight in the afternoon on 24 June was certainly a defense for Wilder.

¹⁰*OR*, vol. 30, pt.1, 444.

¹¹Wilder demonstrated his ability to successfully maneuver and fight the brigade several times throughout the 1863 campaigns including at Hoover's Gap, Alexander's Bridge, and the Viniard Fields.

¹²*OR*, vol. 23, pt. 1, 460.

¹³*Ibid.*, 584.

¹⁴John T. Wilder, "Preliminary Movements of the Army of the Cumberland before the Battle of Chickamauga," a paper read before the Ohio commandery of the Loyal Legion, 4 November, 1908, 4.

¹⁵*OR*, vol. 30, pt. 3, 513.

¹⁶J. T. Wilder, letter report to the Adjutant General, November 26, 1888, (not in the *Official Records*), 2. John T. Wilder, "Preliminary Movements of the Army of the Cumberland before the Battle of Chickamauga," a paper read before the Ohio commandery of the Loyal Legion, November 4, 1908, 4.

¹⁷*OR*, vol. 30, pt. 1, 459, 512-513.

¹⁸Hallahan, 129,133.

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