

Mortally wounded Oscar Wilber had many witnesses to his last hours, including the famous poet Walt Whitman.

By Mark H. Dunkelman

Exactly who sent Mrs. Sally Wilber the final, tragic word about her son Oscar's death is unknown. But from the time he received his mortal wound until the day he died, friend and foe alike looked after her son and kept her informed of his condition. A compassionate Confederate writing from the battlefield was the first to notify her of Oscar's wound. His regimental comrades, including a cousin, watched over him after his return to Union hands. And during his last days, Oscar Wilber received his consolation from several good Samaritan strangers who visited the wards of Washington's extensive military hospitals, dispensing companionship and kindness to row after row of sick and wounded.

Four of those kind strangers left behind descriptions of their encounters with Oscar Wilber in Washington. Three of them have faded into obscurity. The fourth visitor, a part-time copyist in the Paymaster General's office and freelance contributor to newspapers, is now remembered as a colossus of American literature. Walt Whitman, former printer, newspaper editor and author of *Leaves of Grass*, a slender volume of verses then in its third edition, had rushed to the front after the Battle of Fredericksburg to look after his wounded brother. Profoundly moved by the plight of wounded and sick soldiers, Whitman remained in Washington, spending much of his spare time visiting the capital's crowded hospitals, talking with the broken men, reading to them, writing letters for them and giving them little gifts.

It seems very possible that Whitman wrote the last, sad letter to Sally Wilber notifying her that her son was dead. That final chapter of Oscar's story came a year after he enlisted, a year in which the young soldier voiced cautious optimism that he would



Visiting a dying Union soldier in Washington, D.C., gave Walt Whitman insight into "These hospitals, so different from all others—these thousands, and tens and twenties of thousands of American young men . . ."

survive, while also describing the ominous consequences of the war he had volunteered to fight.

Mother and son parted company in the summer of 1862, when Wilber heeded President Abraham Lincoln's call for 300,000 three-year volunteers. For the previous two years, Sally Wilber—a widow since 1852—had depended on her eldest son, the third of eight children, for the family's support. The household included Oscar's invalid older sister Rosina, a younger sister, three younger brothers and Sally's mother. The family owned and worked a small farm in the town of Humphrey, in Cattaraugus County, N.Y. It was one of several Wilber farms in the valley of Five Mile Run settled by the seven sons of a Revolutionary War

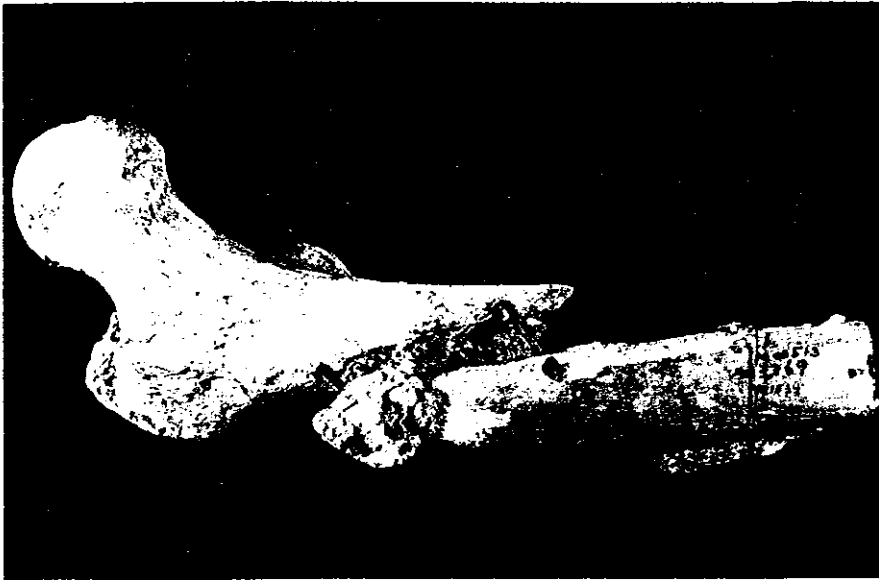
veteran, including Oscar's father Alanson, who came west from Onondaga County, N.Y., in 1830.

Five Wilber cousins left the valley to enroll in the army in August and September of 1862—Oscar, age 21, Charles, 24, Milo, 18, and brothers Darius, 20, and Lyman, 18. Darius and Milo had already volunteered in the neighboring town of Hinsdale when Oscar enrolled there on August 11. Late in September, the Wilbers were mustered in as privates in the newly formed 154th New York Volunteer Infantry, Charles in Company I and the other cousins in Company G.

Oscar Wilber's own story of his army experiences was told in a series of letters to his mother and uncle, Nathan Wilber, back home in the Five Mile Valley. Oscar had occasionally worked for Nathan in the past, and he was relying on his uncle to handle his financial affairs and look after his mother and family in his absence. In his letters, Oscar described the novel sights the new soldiers saw, and the hopes and fears of a new volunteer.

On October 5, 1862, he wrote from Camp Seward, at

Arlington Heights, Va., describing the regiment's railroad trip from its rendezvous in Jamestown, N.Y., to the seat of war—the stop in Elmira to receive their rifles and accouterments, a short layover in Baltimore, a slow final ride to Washington along the heavily guarded tracks, and the march across the Potomac to their campsite. From Camp Seward, the sandy, rolling countryside was covered with tents, forts and rifle pits as far as Wilber could see, and the soldiers were "as thick as flies." He tried to visit one fort, and although he was not allowed to enter, he saw it housed cannons large enough for a man to crawl into. From its camp, the 154th had a fine view of Washington. "Old Abe has got a very nice house," Wilber thought. But all in all, the area



COURTESY OF MARK DUNKELMAN

The thighbone of Oscar F. Wilber of Company G, 154th New York, smashed at Chancellorsville on May 2, 1863, today resides in the National Museum of Health and Medicine.

looked very desolate, and it seemed like nothing had been raised on the nearby farms since the war began. "I have seen more than I ever knew before," Wilber declared, but "I like Cattaraugus the best."

The 154th made a two-day march to Fairfax Court House and was assigned to the 1st Brigade, 2nd Division, XI Corps of the Army of the Potomac. The men guessed their first battle could not be long off. Corps

commander Maj. Gen. Franz Sigel was regarded as a fighter—he had been "boxing with the Rebels for some time," Wilber noted—and rumors of a move toward Richmond abounded. Captain Matthew B. Cheney of Company G thought his men would have "to fight right along," Wilber noted. With that sobering thought in mind, he asked his uncle "to pray for me and all the rest of the soldiers." He closed his letter

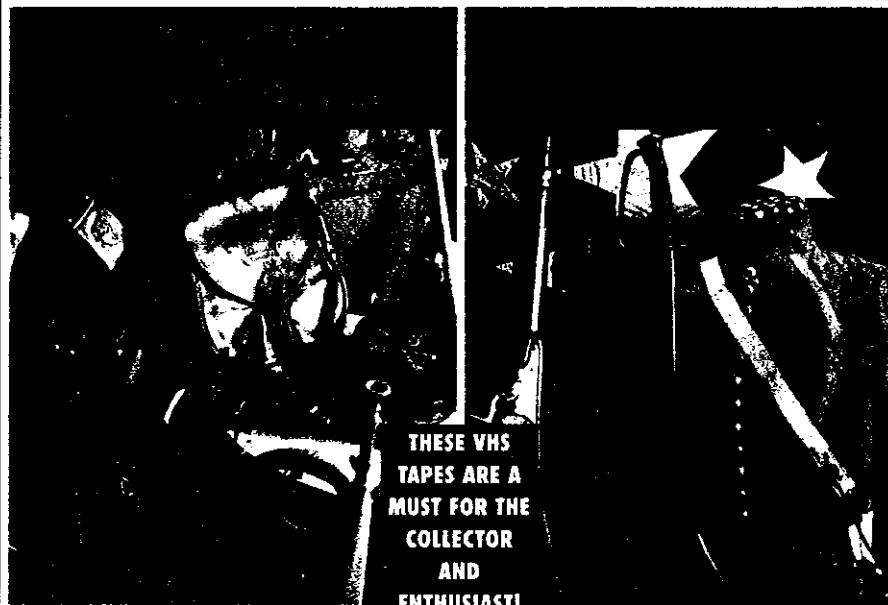
on an upbeat note, saying he thought the war would end by spring, and "I expect to come home yet."

The battlefield had assumed a horrifying reality when Wilber wrote again on November 6. In a move toward Thoroughfare Gap, the regiment had passed over the Bull Run battlefield. Wilbur cataloged the grisly scenes—the many corpses covered with a thin veil of dirt, dead horses, a man's severed head, a dried and shriveled arm, a standing boot holding a leg shot off below the knee, the face of a man peering from the ground where the rain had washed the soil away.

By the time of his next letter, in late November, the 154th had returned to Fairfax Court House from Thoroughfare Gap, and Wilber was getting over a case of the mumps. He had been quite sick, very weak and unable to eat hardtack, but now he was getting "pretty stout" as he recovered. Several of the 154th boys had the mumps, and some were so sick they had to go to the hospital. The surgeons had recommended Wilber go, too, but he told them he wouldn't unless his condition worsened. "I ain't as afraid of being shot as I am of sickness," he admitted to his mother. He estimated that out of nearly 1,000 men at its muster-in, the 154th New York had less than 600 soldiers left for duty.

When he wrote again on December 23, the 154th New York had marched south,

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and Wilber was in sight of Confederate pickets on the opposite bank of the Rappahannock River near Falmouth, Va., where Company G was supporting a battery. Fortunately for the Wilber cousins and their XI Corps comrades, they had arrived in the area too late to take part in the Battle of Fredericksburg, or "General Burnside's slaughter yard," as veteran regiments called the fight. Major General Ambrose E. Burnside's tactics in that disastrous defeat were widely criticized among the rank and file of the Army of the Potomac. It was just plain wrong, the men thought, to advance across open lots to assault the strong Confederate positions. "It is hard work to hit a man if you can't see him," Oscar Wilber wrote, but "if the Rebs would come out fair, we could whip them."

Things were not easy for General Burnside's army in the coming weeks. In January 1863, Wilber described building corduroy roads leading to the Rappahannock in preparation for a move. Events indicated he would soon confront the enemy, Oscar thought. "Well, Mother," he wrote, "if we have got to fight with them we might as well be about it, for I have got sick of it." But a battle was not to be. A few weeks later he described the resulting fruitless campaign, the dismal "Mud March." Out for days and nights in the rain and mud, soaked to the skin under a knapsack that seemed to weigh 60 pounds, the army's pontoons, cannons and teams stuck fast in the mire—it was the worst time that he had ever seen, and Wilber declared with disgust that he would write about it no more.

The 154th moved a few miles to the vicinity of Stafford Court House, where Wilber enjoyed a new winter campsite in the woods, with plenty of logs to built huts, much firewood to burn, and a good source of water. There, the boring routine continued. The men grumbled about not getting paid. "Old Uncle Sam owes me three months' pay," Wilber complained. "I guess he is getting poor for he can't pay off the soldiers." A rare note of homesickness crept into Wilber's letter to his uncle of February 21: "Nathan, I wish I was to your house today, where I could clasp my hands with you and your family. Oh, what a happy day that would be to me!"

In early March, the 154th finally received its pay. Both Darius and Lyman Wilber spent all the money they drew without sending any home, Oscar Wilber noted with a hint of disapproval. He, too, was short of cash, but he sent two-thirds of his pay home to Nathan, for Sally and his sisters and brothers. Times were still dull in camp—"All we have to do is drill and stand on picket," he wrote. He told his little brothers he would rather receive a letter from them "than to have one from old Abe Lincoln." He predicted there would not be much more fighting in Virginia, that the

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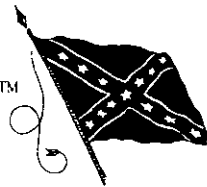
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war would be settled by autumn, and that he would be home by then.

He was very wrong. Wilber's next surviving letter was dated April 28, 1863, from Kelly's Ford on the Rappahannock, where the 154th was poised to lead the way across the river and inaugurate what became the Chancellorsville campaign. "I think that we shall have to fight pretty soon," he admitted. "I think that our men will attack the rebels in two or three days." This time he was right.

Wilber's letter from Kelly's Ford was the last he ever wrote. He never got the chance to write to his mother and uncle and tell them what happened over the next few days—how the 154th New York pushed across the Rappahannock in pontoon boats that evening and secured a bridgehead; how the men looted the riverside plantation of the ford's wealthy namesake the following day, how they woke up on May 1 to find themselves in an isolated clearing in an area aptly named the Wilderness; how a brief movement toward the Confederates that day was halted when Burnside's replacement as commander of the Army of the Potomac, Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker, lost his nerve; or how the regiment returned to the Wilderness clearing and spent the night, the last night Wilbur ever spent as a whole man, before a shell fragment smashed his hip so hard that it broke his thighbone in two during the Battle of Chancellorsville the next day.

The first word Sally Wilber received about her son's fate was by the hand of a kind Confederate, P.J. Friedrich of the 16th Mississippi, who addressed a letter to her on May 4: "In going over the battlefield, I met your son wounded very seriously. Although an enemy, I could not refuse attending to his wounds, as far as I was able. Your son was struck by a cannonball, breaking his right thigh; the wound I should judge is a mortal one. He was perfectly resigned to his fate, and said God's will be done. He told me to write to you and tell you that he wished you and your daughter should have his land as long as you lived. As I now have the opportunity of sending your son's dying request by some of the prisoners who will soon return north and by this means convey the sad intelligence, I do so knowing that the facts of the matter communicated is better than to live in suspense as regards to the fate of your son."

Despite lying unattended on the battlefield for 10 days while suffering greatly, Wilber somehow clung to life. Finally, he and other badly wounded Union prisoners were released to their own forces, and he was carried to Acquia Creek Hospital, not far from the 154th's Stafford Court House camp. Cousin Milo Wilber visited him there, and late in May he wrote a couple of letters to Sally Wilber at her son's request, instructing her as to how Wilber wanted his affairs settled and bracing her for the in-

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evitable. "Oscar wanted me to tell you that he was willing to die," Milo wrote to his Aunt Sally. "He thought he was prepared to die, and I think he was. He says you must not trouble yourself about him."

On June 12, Wilber dictated a letter to Danford L. Hall, a comrade of the 154th who had been slightly wounded and captured at Chancellorsville. Wilber's leg was badly swollen, Hall informed Sally, but his appetite was good and he otherwise looked first-rate. Hall reiterated Wilber's previous message—that Sally should not trouble herself about him, and that he was reconciled to his fate. "He says you need not think of coming down to see him," Hall wrote, "for it would not do any good." Wilber wanted to see the family, Hall noted; he would see them at home if he recovered, and if not, "he wants you all to meet him in heaven." At the bottom of the last page of Hall's letter, Wilber signed his name in an unsteady hand.

Two days later, on June 14, Wilber began a journey by boat to Washington. On June 16, an individual identified only as C. Baker was at Washington's Sixth Street Wharf, where wounded soldiers were landed, when "a fine, noble looking young man motioned to me to come to him." Wilber told Baker about his condition and asked him to forward some money and a message to Sally. "He told me he thought he could not live but a few days," Baker wrote. "He is reduced quite low & I should not think it strange if he dropped off in a few days."

Later that day, Wilber was admitted to Armory Square Hospital, just east of the turrets of the Smithsonian Institution on Independence Avenue. "When brought to this Hospital he was very much prostrated," surgeon D.W. Bliss later wrote. "[His] stomach became very irritable—constant nausea. He grew gradually worse. No previous history could be obtained from him."

In the humid heat of Washington's summer, Oscar Wilber lay dying. His immediate world was reduced to his narrow iron bed, the whitewashed walls of Ward K's barrackslike pavilion, the comings and goings of surgeons and nurses, the steady approach of death, and the comforting visits of his new friends.

Edwin S. Shaw was one of them. Shaw visited Wilber on June 29 and wrote a letter to Sally for her son, telling her that his wound was not painful much of the time, that his appetite was good, and that he rested well at night. Wilber requested his family to pray for him, told his younger brothers to be good and mind their mother—"if they love their brother that lays here sick and wounded and perhaps never will see him again"—and revealed his reliance on faith during his ordeal. "I thank God, dear Mother, that I can lay here and think of his goodness to me." Shaw wrote, quoting Wilber. "I can lay here and think of the suf-

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PERSONALITY

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ferings of the Savior [and] how he died for me and rose again to show me that [although] a man are of heaven, and I shall dwell with Him."

An employee of the Treasury Department, A.J. Pratt, visited Wilber on the night of July 20 and wrote to Sally the next day. Wilber had little hopes of recovery, Pratt wrote, but he was "entirely willing & prepared" to join God in heaven. "He will have every attention," Pratt assured Sally, "but I cannot hold out much hopes of his recovery. He is growing weaker daily."

On the afternoon of July 22, Walt Whitman made the familiar trip through Washington's streets to Armory Square Hospital, where he weaved his way through rows of beds until he came to Wilber's side. He spent a long time with the young soldier. Whitman noted the suppurating wound and how chronic diarrhea had prostrated Wilber. "I felt that he was even then the same as dying," Whitman wrote that evening. Wilber asked Whitman to read a chapter of the New Testament to him, whatever he chose. Whitman turned to one of the evangelists, and read about the last hours of Jesus, and the crucifixion. "The poor, wasted young man asked me to read the following chapter also, how Christ rose again," Whitman wrote. "I read very slowly, for Oscar was feeble. It pleased him very much, yet the tears were in his eyes."

Wilber asked Whitman if he enjoyed religion, and received an equivocal answer: "Perhaps not, my dear, in the way you mean, and yet, maybe, it is the same thing." Wilber replied, "It is my chief reliance." He talked with Whitman about death, and said he did not fear it. "Why, Oscar, don't you think you will get well?" asked Whitman. It was not possible, the young man responded. "He spoke calmly of his condition," Whitman noted, and "behaved very manly and affectionate."

As he was about to leave, Whitman bent and gave Wilber a kiss, which the dying soldier "returned fourfold." Wilber gave Whitman his mother's address. Perhaps that night, after he recorded the encounter, Whitman wrote to Sally Wilber of meeting her son. Or perhaps he wrote to her later, for, he noted, "I had several such interviews with him"—but no letters of Whitman to Mrs. Wilber are known to survive.

Edwin Shaw returned to Wilber's bedside on July 23 and wrote another letter for him, forwarding \$25 to mother from son. Wilber was "quite low," Shaw wrote, "and the chances are against him for getting well. He does not seem to suffer much from pain, yet I can see that he is failing daily." As he had before, Wilber informed his mother that he was willing and prepared to die, to be re-

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lieved from the cares and evil influences of human life.

A few days later, on the evening of July 28, Wilber showed another visitor, A.J. Pratt, a letter from Sally, and asked Pratt to answer it for him. He was "very grateful" for his mother's letter, but was unable to sit up and write himself. The next day, Pratt took a sheet of Treasury Department stationery and sent news of her son to Sally Wilber. Like P.J. Friedrich, Milo Wilber, Danford Hall, C. Baker, Edwin Shaw and Walt Whitman before him, Pratt noted Wilber's religious faith was his solace. "He desires me to say that he is daily growing weaker and feels that his earthly career is drawing to a close," Pratt wrote, "but that his mind is calm and in perfect peace being stayed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who he feels is near to support and comfort him as he passes through the dark valley."

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

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

At 4 p.m. the next day, July 31, 1863, Oscar Wilber died. The cause of death, stated Dr. Bliss, was exhaustion. His body was sent home and laid to rest in Five Mile Cemetery. In August, Sally Wilber was entered on the pension rolls as a dependent mother, at a rate of eight dollars a month.

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

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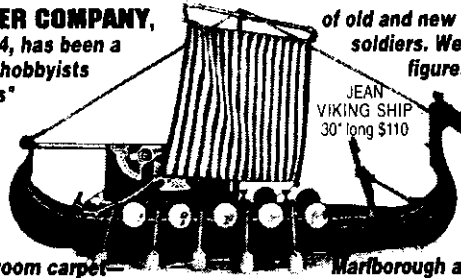
THE TOY SOLDIER COMPANY

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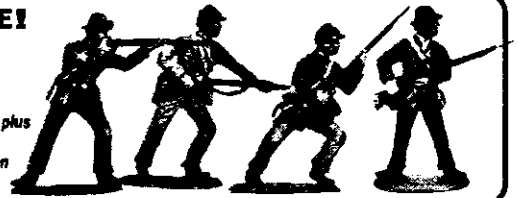
JEAN VIKING SHIP
30" long \$110

of old and new plastic and lead toy soldiers. We offer recast plastic figures as well as original plastics from Britains, Marx, Airfix, Atlantic and more, plus old and new lead soldiers from Britains, Imrie/Risley, Tradition, Marlborough and Leman's. (Figure sets suitable for children over 5. Illustrations below are 54mm and sold unpainted).

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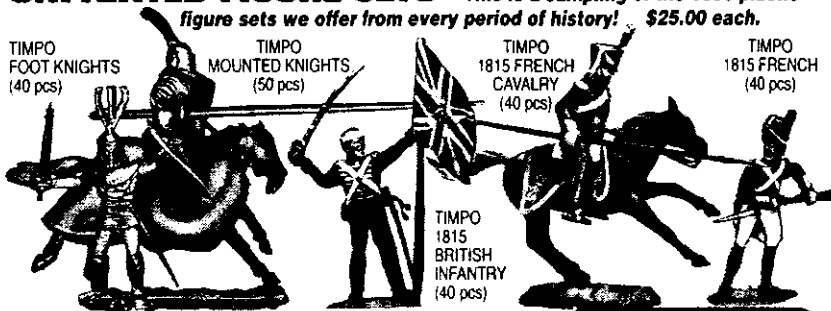
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