

## Stalled in Munfordville

Sometimes during the course of the Civil War episodes occurred that would escape the notice of almost all single volume books about the war but nevertheless are interesting on several levels. One such episode happened in Munfordville, Kentucky, and as a result became a turning point in the Confederates' Kentucky campaign.

In 1862, and really throughout much of the rest of the Civil War, maneuvering was an important strategic principle. Many of the commanders tried to outflank the enemy to either checkmate the enemy or to at least reach objectives. And so Braxton Bragg, the Confederate commander in the Western theater, successfully used a couple audacious maneuvers to position his army between the Federal army commanded by Don Carlos Buell and Louisville, Bragg's objective. Another Confederate column was being led by Kirby Smith, who ostensibly was supposed to lend his support to Bragg. Bragg was headed well into Kentucky while Buell was lagging behind. However Bragg's supply lines were being stretched to their limits, forcing Bragg's lead elements to search for provisions captured from Federal garrisons and other outposts.

BGen. James R. Chalmers, the commander of the Gray infantry brigade, on his own initiative decided to strike north against Munfordville, Kentucky, where the Louisville & Nashville Railroad crossed over the Green River. Chalmers considered Munfordville, forty five miles northeast of Bowling Green, Kentucky, to be further north to have much strategic value but he also assumed it was lightly defended.

Indeed Munfordville was defended only by a 4,000 garrison that had been quickly assembled from various sources. Munfordville was commanded by Col. John T. Wilder, an Indiana hard-nosed, aggressive railroad and coal mining businessman,<sup>1</sup> who had arrived at Munfordville only on the previous Sunday, September 8, 1862.

Upon his arrival Wilder immediately began to construct a series of fortifications and artillery placements. Additionally his soldiers cleared the land around and in front of their entrenchments, and in one case burned down a church that might have had the potential to hide approaching Rebels. Wilder also dispatched home guard recruits forward to give advance warning of any

approaching enemy. Given these preparations Wilder had significantly improved the chances of his still relatively small numbers to defend their position, even against superior numbers. Finally Wilder's predecessor had had the foresight to start sending more reinforcements to Munfordville. Essentially Wilder's mission was to hold on until Buell could arrive with his Army of the Ohio.

On the same day when Chalmers decided to advance toward Munfordville a cavalry unit from Smith's army attacked the Munfordville defenses. This Rebel unit was commanded by Col. John S. Scott who was trying to compensate for an earlier failure to seize rail lines near Louisville. After some exchange of gunfire, Scott sent a demand for surrender that Wilder did not hesitate to reject.<sup>2</sup> Scott then found Chalmers to ask for the latter's help in striking Munfordville; Chalmers was all too happy to join in that effort.

Early the next morning of September 14, Chalmers with sixteen hundred men launched another assault – which Bragg later described as being “unauthorized and injudicious”<sup>3</sup> -- against Wilder whose fortifications, along with some short rounds from Rebel artillery, stalled Chalmers' assault. Soon after these Rebel attacks were repulsed – the Union suffered 37 casualties while the Confederates suffered 288 – Chalmers had the audacity to issue yet another demand for surrender. Again Wilder saw no reason to accede.

Failing to force a surrender, Chalmers then requested a truce in order to be able bury his dead. This resulted in one of the most surreal episodes in the Civil War. Because of the shortage of supplies in the Confederate army, Chalmers was compelled to ask Wilder to loan some shovels to dig graves so that the Rebel dead could be buried properly.<sup>4</sup> During this truce the Confederates also withdrew to beyond the range of Federal artillery.

Predictably Bragg was not happy when he learned of Chalmers' misstep at Munfordville. Nevertheless, in order to salvage something from the situation, Bragg, on Sunday evening, September 15, began to move his entire army toward Munfordville where it arrived the next day.

Once more the Confederates sent a demand for surrender, this time without a shot being fired. The Federal authorities in Louisville telegraphed instructions to resist. Wilder, being the pragmatic businessman without any military background, knew it would be futile to resist against such daunting odds. He then took the most unusual step of trying to bargain himself and his relatively small group of defenders out of their predicament.

Wilder then crossed the no-man's land under a flag of truce and was met by MGen. Simon B. Buckner, one of Bragg's division commanders. He had been left "holding the bag" at Fort Donelson when Generals Floyd and Pillow turned over their command to Buckner before escaping from the inevitable surrender to Grant.<sup>5</sup> After Floyd and Pillow departed Buckner had no alternative except to accept Grant's demand for unconditional surrender. Buckner was stunned when Grant, Buckner's friend from West Point who had accepted a loan from Buckner in order to return home when he (Grant) had resigned, refused to follow the custom of negotiating terms of surrender. Buckner had just been exchanged a month ago.

Wilder admitted he had little military background or training but asked if Buckner would help him (Wilder) better understand he should do under the circumstances.<sup>6</sup> Buckner was so impressed by Wilder's approach, and perhaps by his apparent naiveté, that Buckner then began to tutor Wilder about the latter's options. Notwithstanding Grant's earlier Fort Donelson snub,<sup>7</sup> Buckner agreed to give Wilder a tour of the Confederate positions so that Wilder could see first-hand the tremendous odds against the Federals. Wilder observed that Bragg's army had deployed a force of twenty thousand infantrymen together with seventy two pieces of artillery.<sup>8</sup>

Eventually Wilder agreed to surrender but in hopes that Buell would yet arrive to save the day Wilder began to haggle about the details and finer points of such surrender. These negotiations designed to accomplish surrender without bloodshed lasted until late the night of September 17 – paradoxically the same day Antietam resulted in the bloodiest day in American military history. At one point the Munfordville negotiators agreed Wilder's men would march north to the Ohio River after surrendering; but in fact after the formal surrender at 6:00 a.m. on Friday, September 18, Wilder and his 3,500 men -- 600 of whom never had been armed!! – were allowed to march south, being able to join Buell later that evening.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond the unusual circumstances of arranging the surrender of the Federal forces, Munfordville was significant because it had cost Bragg his nerve and momentum, throwing him off his plan to advance directly to Louisville, and because it would be perceived as a missed opportunity to engage Buell, especially if Bragg had been aggressive enough to catch Buell before Wilder had been compelled to surrender.

The respective Kentucky campaigns of maneuvering continued; for a while Bragg elected to remain in the safety of the Munfordville fortifications in the hopes

that Smith would soon arrive thereby creating a combined force larger than Buell's. On the other hand, Buell continued to advance cautiously, not arriving at Dripping Springs, nineteen miles by road from Cave City, until September 17.<sup>10</sup> Buell's failure to move aggressively enough to have rescued the Munfordville garrison became a source of public scorn in Northern newspapers.<sup>11</sup> However Wilder and his officers were valuable sources of intelligence, especially after Buckner had allowed the former Indiana businessman a full tour of Bragg's army.

At this point logistics, or lack of same, started to dominate the respective strategies; Bragg had few supplies – his men were scavenging green apples to eat while his draft animals were visibly undernourished. Buell realized Bragg would eventually be forced to end his Kentucky incursion and retreat toward his supply base.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile Buell had a good supply base at Nashville – which he was anxious to protect -- and intended to establish a second such base at Louisville. Furthermore, Buell's position at Cave City checked Bragg from resupplying unless Smith should arrive from Bluegrass country or else if Bragg could take Louisville.

As a result of the standoff at Munfordville Bragg decided to veer to the east toward Frankfort where he intended to install a Confederate state government. One of Bragg's objectives had been to enlist recruits from Kentucky, but while Kentuckians were willing to cheer Bragg's army as it marched into towns, the women even kissing and hugging Rebel soldiers as though they were saviors, their men folk were not willing to take up arms for the Rebel cause. Bragg thought he could conscript Kentucky men into the Confederate army he swore in a Confederate sponsored government.<sup>13</sup> Thus Bragg arranged for the installation of a Confederate appointed governor in Frankfort on Saturday, October 4, 1862.<sup>14</sup> In anticipation of a celebrated and gala event, large crowds gathered in Frankfort to witness and to be part of the installation of a Confederate government in what originally was supposed to have been a neutral and slaveholding state. A military parade together with artillery salutes ensued as the Confederate flag was hoisted above the capitol. However no sooner had the Confederate governor been "inaugurated" when the rumble of approaching Federal artillery could be heard. These sounds quickly caused the new governor and his entourage to flee into exile, never to emerge again in Frankfort.<sup>15</sup>

After that attempt did not exactly pan out as intended the armies on October 7, 1862, more or less accidentally met at Perryville in a fierce, bloody battle. The Confederates won a tactical victory but once Bragg realized Buell's Federals still

had vastly superior numbers Bragg decided to let discretion be the better part of valor and started to retreat toward the safety of the mountains in east Tennessee. Buell gave half hearted pursuit before deciding it was futile to continue. Upon behalf of Lincoln, Halleck gave Buell direct orders to continue the pursuit but instead Buell decided to return to Nashville. Buell was relieved as a result of this insubordination, thus for all intents and purposes ending the Civil War career of a general who not so long ago had been considered one of the North's best commanders.

Sometimes Perryville is referred to as the Confederates' High Water mark of the West but in reality perhaps that recognition belongs to the battle that never materialized less than a month earlier at Munfordville.

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<sup>1</sup> Hess, Earl J. *Banners to the Breeze – The Kentucky Campaign, Corinth & Stones River* (2000) Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, pg 62

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pg 64; Wilder replied by writing, "If you wish to avoid further bloodshed keep out of the range of my guns."

<sup>3</sup> Dougherty, Kevin J. *Great Commanders of the Civil War – The Battles of the Civil War* (2008) San Diego: Thunder Bay Press, pg 110.

<sup>4</sup> Hess, *supra*, pg 66.

<sup>5</sup> Buckner should not have been surprised by the perfidy of Pillow and especially Floyd. While governor of Virginia, Floyd's term was characterized by a banking scandal and other financial irregularities. Later when he served as Buchanan's Secretary of War, Floyd distributed a disproportionate share of arms to Southern state militias while transferring rifles and muskets to Federal arsenals in the South where they could easily be seized by Rebels. Floyd also appointed a number Southern sympathizers to key military posts, including David Twiggs to command the large Department of Texas.

<sup>6</sup> Catton, Bruce. *Terrible Swift Sword* Paperback Edition (1963) London: Phoenix Press, pg 412.

<sup>8</sup> Hess, *supra*, pg 67.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, pg 68.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel, Larry J. *Days of Glory: The Army of the Cumberland, 1861-1865* (2004) Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, pg 121.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, pg 122.

<sup>12</sup> Reid, Brian Holden. *America's Civil War – The Operational Battlefield 1861-1863* (2008) New York: Prometheus Books, pg 213.

<sup>13</sup> Hess, *supra*, pg 81.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, pg 82.

<sup>15</sup> Einolf, Christopher J. *George Thomas – Virginian for the Union* (2007) Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, pg 134.