

With His Own Eyes

Col. William Colvill, in an 1877 presentation, recalls the actions of the First Minnesota Volunteer Regiment at Bull Run. Part 1.

By Al Zdon

Col. William Colvill, the officer who led the First Minnesota Volunteer Regiment down the gentle slope at Gettysburg to both disaster and fame, wrote at least three accounts of the First Battle of Bull Run, or First Manassas.

The massive *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861-1865*, edited by William Lochren, relies entirely on Colvill's account to tell the story of Bull Run. It was written probably in 1889, and the book was published the following year. Colvill also was asked by the federal government about this time to write accounts of all the major battles the First Minnesota participated in, and he did so. I have never been able to track those accounts down.

The earliest preserved record of Colvill talking about Bull Run was published as a small booklet by the Association of the Survivors of the First Minnesota. It is titled: *Bull Run. Address of Col. Wm. Colvill at the Reunion of the Survivors of the First Minnesota*,



Capt. William Colvill commanded Company F of the First Minnesota Regiment at Bull Run. He later, as a colonel, assumed command of the entire regiment.



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June 21, 1877. It is from that earliest account, some 16 years after the battle, that I will draw from.

In the summer of 1861, both the United States and the Confederacy were massing huge armies, training them, and figuring out what to do with them. The First Minnesota, the first regiment tendered to the Union at the beginning of the war, was part of this massing and training. There was great pressure on the northern generals to use these troops and destroy the cause of the secessionists.

In mid-July, Brigadier General Irvin McDowell marched his federal Army of Northeastern Virginia from camps around the capital, and encountered the enemy about 25 miles west and south of Washington D.C. That encounter became the first large-scale battle between Union and Confederate forces in the Civil War.

Colvill, a former newspaper editor and attorney who at this point of the war was a captain and the commanding officer of Company F, a group of volunteers mainly from Red Wing, began his account with a lengthy description of the area around Bull Run. He spoke of the “interminable forests” and noted that when the sun rose above the thick woods on July 21, it “revealed nothing of its gloomy and silent depths. Of itself this omen was somber and saddening, and the thought that within these depths were thousands of enemies thirsting for our blood made the solemnity awful.” However, “We turn our eyes to the west to the long lines of our soldiers, with uniforms and arms bright and gleaming in the sun and become more cheerful.”

The First Minnesota joined the long columns of Federals and reached Bull Run near the Sudley Church about noontime. “The heat has become intense, and we anticipate our rest and lunch with great pleasure, but now comes the sound of quick cannonading – now sharp volleys of musketry.” The Minnesotans filled their canteens at the stream and marched another quarter mile down the valley where they waited. The sounds of war were all around them.

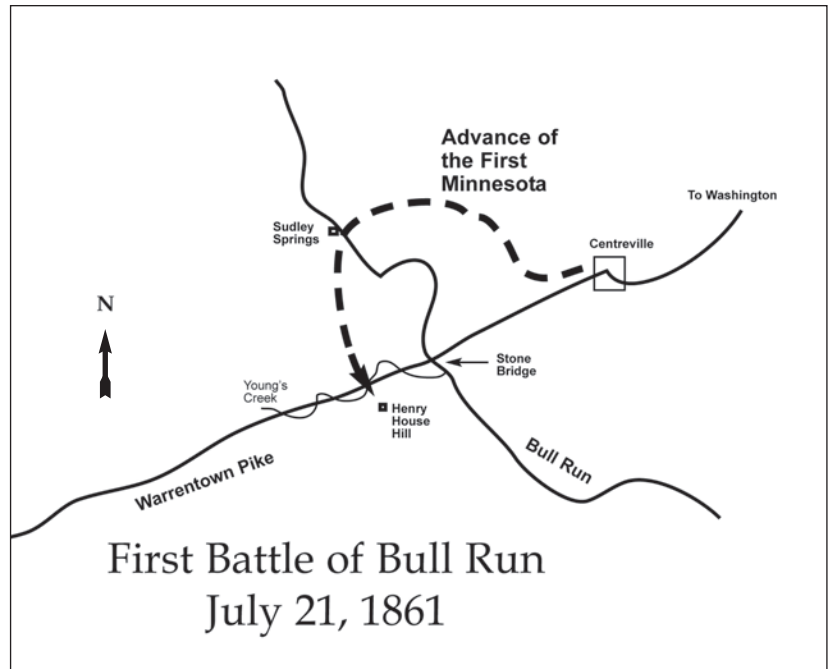
Col. William Gorman, the First Minnesota’s commander, and the men of the regiment think their chance at war might be passing them by. “We are now fuming and fretting, our Colonel fidgety and swearing. ‘We are not going to have a chance at all.’”

“ ‘Keep cool, Col. Gorman,’ says Gen. Franklin, riding by. ‘You will soon have enough of it.’ ”

The general was right, and a few minutes later the First Minnesota was ordered forward

at the double-quick, across Bull Run, leaving their knapsacks in heaps. They advanced uphill on a bridle path for a mile, out of breath, reaching a field where the Union forces are marshalling. The Minnesotans have been heading due south, and they now cross the Warrentown Pike.

The regiment is given the job of protecting a battery – Ricketts’ – that would advance up Henry House Hill and try to stop two Confederate batteries that are hammering Union troops. “We gaily file across the pike, our banners – each company has one – fluttering. The chaplain rushes to the front, tears the fence away to let us through, and commences his speech. Each company as it passes picks up the sense of it. It is, ‘to remember Minnesota, whose honor is in our keeping.’ It is appreciated and our eyes gleam an answer.”



The First Minnesota marched southwest to Centreville, then north to cross Bull Run as Sudley Springs, and then due south to engage in battle at Henry House Hill, just over the Warrentown Pike. (Author map.)

The regiment drew the enemy’s cannon fire at this point, the shells screaming overhead, and every time one passed by, the men cringed downward. The officers urged the men to stand straight. “ ‘The d——d politest regiment I ever saw,’ says Orderly Maginnis. There is a laugh, and no more ducking.”

The Ricketts Battery, drawn by horses, split the First Minnesota right and left, with Colvill’s company and two others on the right near the woods. The men fired into the woods, but there was no reply. The battery immediately became the target of the two Rebel batteries. “In an instant, his guns are horseless and most of his men killed or wounded.”

The awful confusion of that first battle now brought disaster to the First Minnesota. A line of gray-clad troops came out of the woods and advanced to point-blank range at the center of the Minnesota line. But many of the Union troops that day were also wearing gray. They “fired almost in the faces of our center companies, till then in doubt whether they are friends or not. That fire caused awful destruction. One-third of the four center companies were laid prostrate.”

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The confusion was on both sides. “As I look over the lines of Company F at the enemy, someone touches my right shoulder, and looking up there is a horseman in gray. We have many regiments dressed in gray and I think nothing of it. But he says, ‘Why do you fire on your friends?’ ”

Colvill asked, “ ‘Where do you belong?’ ‘Second Mississippi Brigade.’ ” answered the officer. “ ‘We are the First Minnesota,’ ” said Colvill. The officer was escorted to the rear. The confusion continued as the Minnesotans fired on and chased an Arkansas regiment that was dressed in red shirts, just like the Minnesotans. Parts of Company F, including Colvill, become separated from the regiment in the deep woods, chasing the enemy. Back in the open ground, charges are made and repulsed with the action centering on the guns. And finally there was silence.

“After some time – in the excitement we have not taken note of it – all becomes quiet, the woods are dark and the silence dismal. We think it best to rejoin the regiment.

“We find a few men walking about, piles of dead and four of our guns, black and begrimed with powder, still in the same place and no one with them. They look desolate enough.”

Not long after, Gen. O. B. Wilcox, a brigade commander, and his staff came up to Company F and asked where the enemy was. Colvill led the group of officers back into the woods, taking several prisoners, and then encountered enemy fire. A Confederate officer came charging out of the Rebel position gesturing at the Union forces to quit firing. As it turned out, the Minnesotans were attacking a Rebel field hospital and the officer waving them off was a surgeon.

Returning to report to the general, Colvill could not find him. He found out later that Wilcox had been captured while waiting in the rear. Colvill then joined the rest of Minnesotans who were rallying under Col. Miller, the regiment’s second in command. “His command was disheartened and though the colonel ‘rallied’ incessantly at the top of his voice, was fast stealing away.”

A color bearer from a company down the line was borrowed, and the men briefly followed the colors toward the enemy in one last advance, “pushing the enemy back. The color bearer, Sergeant Knight, behaved most gallantly. This flag under which the last stand was made and the last fighting done that day is preserved at Wabasha.”

In Part 2, the Union Forces retreat in disarray, Colvill encounters the enemy and barely escapes with his life, and the First Minnesota marches proudly from the field.

Curator's Notes By Doug Bekke



Work progresses on the museum's new exhibit on "Minnesota's Two Civil Wars," the war between the North and the South and the 1862 war between the white settlers and the Dakota.

The past several months have been devoted to the building of the exhibit's display cases and to the acquisition of artifacts. Providing great help in the cabinet construction were Ken Buettner, Ken Fasching and Merl Fletcher, with occasional help from Doug Thompson, Marge Fletcher, Marty Belland, with SSG Jerry Huntington and some of his fellow soldiers of the Minnesota National Guard lending some much needed muscle when required.

Steve Osman has been busy finding artifacts for the exhibit, which often means having top quality reproductions manufactured. A \$7,000 Legacy Grant from the Minnesota Cultural Arts and Heritage Fund helped greatly in funding Steve's efforts. This fall and winter I will be working on the mannequins, creating limbs and hands in the needed configuration, painting and dressing, and placing in position in the exhibit. We are still many thousands of dollars short in our effort to fully fund this exhibit. This will probably be Minnesota's largest exhibit marking the 150th anniversary of these two important events in Minnesota history. The exhibit is scheduled to open in July 2011.

Changes are also underway in the museum's Vietnam exhibit, where I hope to add several mannequins this winter. If funds become available, it would also be nice to do an expansion of the exhibit on women in the military. This exhibit has not been updated since the mid-1990s. Work on the women's exhibit could not start until after the opening of the Civil War exhibit.

The museum has six wood spoke wheeled pieces of artillery. All sat outside since they were brought back after World War One or after World War Two. Weather, water, and time have not been good to the wooden parts. All need work before they can be exhibited. Two need only scraping, sanding and painting. Two require extensive repairs and will need to have the wheels rebuilt. Two need wheels and hubs built from scratch. This is going to be a difficult and expensive project. We also hope that if we are able to complete this project, we will be able to display the guns in a sheltered situation to protect them from Minnesota's climate.

Extensive work will need to be done on the museum's lighting system sometime in the not to distant future. The national transition away from incandescent bulbs to florescent bulbs poses problems for museums everywhere. All light is destructive to artifacts but florescent bulbs cause fading and are especially destructive. Some bulbs can be shielded with UV blocking tubes but the technology does not yet exist to deal with the destructive UV rays of other bulbs. This is another big and expensive job looming ahead for the museum.

These are just a few of the projects the museum will be dealing with. There is no shortage of work at the museum! Your support is essential to the museum's success.

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Equipment: Gas mask (2) ▪ Helmet, USN ▪ Helmet, US Army ▪ Knife, WWI mess ▪ Parachute ▪ PFD vest, USCG (2) ▪ Stretcher cover, WWII

Miscellaneous: Armband, Infantry (2) ▪ Armband, MP ▪ Barrel bung ▪ Blanket, US Army wool ▪ Blanket, USN ▪ Bonnet (replica), Civil War mourning ▪ Baptismal font ▪ Bible ▪ Booklets ▪ Books ▪ Book, 1946 Fort Snelling ration ▪ Coin, challenge ▪ Collar brass ▪ Costume, ladies Civil War mourning ▪ Documents ▪ Dubbing, mold prevention ▪ Film, reel to reed recruiting ▪ Foot powder ▪ Foot stool, Civil War period ▪ Kit, plastic model (12) ▪ Knife, Misc (6) ▪ Letters ▪ License plate ▪ Magazines ▪ Mannequin (female) ▪ Manuals ▪ Maps ▪ Medals ▪ Mirrors ▪ Newsletters ▪ Photographs ▪ Playing cards ▪ Postcard booklet ▪ Purse, Civil War era ▪ Ribbons ▪ Seasickness preventative ▪ Shaving kit ▪ Shoe dubbing ▪ Shoulder straps, Civil War Staff Captain embroidered (replica) ▪ Sling shot ▪ Slippers ▪ Trench art ▪ Unit crests ▪ Veil, Civil War era (replica)

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